

The Real Political Big Bang

by

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We do not require the Likud's recent celebration of "democracy" to understand that instability is a structural feature of Israel's system of government. It is a system in which the prime minister must appoint his primary political rivals (be they from his own party or from other parties) to key cabinet posts in order to survive – with all of the inherent implications that this has on his subsequent ability to govern. It is a system with built-in volatility that serves as an incentive for internal and external blackmail and threats. It is a system that puts the elected officials at the mercy of their parties' central committees rather than making them accountable to the public that voted them into office. Given the existing circumstances and incentives, the political system has great difficulty in addressing Israeli society's multitude of existential problems – be they security-related or the delicate thread that holds together the country's socio-economic fabric.

As a result, signs of a rift between the government and large sections of the public have begun to appear – a rift that is steadily deteriorating the foundations of Israeli democracy. Since the structure of Israel's political system is inherently unstable, the solution to the problem must be structural in nature. Visionary leaders with long-term perspectives are not enough. It is necessary to provide them with the basic conditions for governance: creation of fundamental systemic stability and restoration of the balance between the executive and the legislative branches.

When the objective is to bring stability to the system, the process must be implemented in the most direct manner possible and not in the customary patchwork that passes for policy. For example, the head of state and members of the legislature must each be elected directly by constituents for fixed terms of office.

Israel's coalitional form of government needs to be replaced by a presidential system. Today, Israel has a president, a prime minister, and 21 cabinet ministers for 19 ministries, of which 17 ministries have an incumbent minister. In order to eliminate duplication, simplify and streamline the process of implementing policy, and reduce public expenditure, the posts of prime-minister and president should be abolished and replaced with the single post of president – who will be directly elected, together with a vice-president – to a fixed term of four years.

The time has come to reduce the number of ministries to ten: the Ministries of Economy and Employment, Social Affairs, Education, Infrastructure, Environmental Affairs, Interior, Defense, Foreign Affairs, Justice and Finance. None of the ten ministers will serve as members of Knesset (MK's). Each will be appointed by the president according to their professional qualifications. After gaining approval from the Knesset, the ministers will work for the president, who will have the right to fire them if they fail to meet his expectations.

The number of MK's should be reduced from 120 to 90, which is approximately the current number of incumbent MK's who are not ministers or deputy ministers. Rather than being elected by members of their respective party's central committees or chosen by some other party mechanism, all MK's will be directly by the voters – and their accountability will be determined accordingly.

A team of internationally recognized experts should be appointed to formulate a proposal for the new electoral system. One possibility might be along the following lines: 30 MK's will be elected to fixed two-year terms from 30 districts. Each region will comprise approximately 225,000 residents and be represented by one MK. 30 MK's will be elected to fixed four-year terms from three regions – the Galilee, the Negev and the Center – according to the relative weight of the region's population, with additional weight given to the Galilee and the Negev. The final 30 MK's will be elected to fixed six-year terms on a national basis.

Elections will be held every two years, with all the district MK's, half the regional MK's and a third of the national MK's up for election in each round, thereby ensuring continuity.

As part of a system of checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches, the president will have the right to veto any law that conflicts with his overall policy. The president will be able to use a line-item veto for rejecting specific sections of a law while passing the remaining sections, or he can veto the entire law. On the other hand, the presidential veto may be overridden by a majority of 46 MK's (of the 90 who will serve in the restructured Knesset) and the legislation will become law despite the president's opposition.

Rather than focusing on treating the symptoms – by raising the minimum percentage of votes that a party needs to get elected, by implementing other maneuvers to prevent “hostile” takeovers of party's central committees, or by other patchwork actions – the time has come for Israel to deal with the primary sources of the problems that afflict our political system and government.