

A Tragic Truth of Modern Israel

by

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The current coalition negotiations again raise a tragic truth of modern Israel: For quite a while, it has not been possible to govern in the Holy Land. The problem is not only that the head of the country's executive arm is held accountable, but is not given the authority, to build a cabinet with ministers who know something about the realm of their ministries and who also work for him/her. The problem is not only that Knesset members are not elected personally by voters, which ensures the existence of conflicts of interest between those who determine the party lists and those who actually vote for the lists on election day. The problem is not only the absence of fixed terms of office in the executive and legislative branches, which makes political instability structurally inherent in the current system and precludes long-term planning and vision. These are just some of the more visible signs of a centrifugal governmental system in which sectoral demands steadily tear apart what remains of the Zionist dream.

In Israel's current system of government, measures taken to survive politically in the present have a way of determining future reality. For example, it was not possible to remove Israeli citizens from Gaza without paying the political ransom of removing the ultra-Orthodox education stream from the system-wide educational reform that was approved at the time (which has since dissipated in any event because of the lack of governance in the system). Similarly, segments of the population with employment rates so low that they are unparalleled in the western world are represented by politicians who insist on cementing this situation for eternity. They demand an increase in personal subsidies for each child – which have been shown to encourage extremely high birth rates – that are in turn translated into incomes that enable the choice of non-work as a way of life.

Three-quarters of the ultra-Orthodox males and Israeli-Arab females of prime working ages (25-54) are not employed, while the rates of non-employment of their spouses are double western averages. In 1960, only 15 percent of the country's primary school pupils studied in the ultra-Orthodox and Israeli-Arab educational systems. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, in just four years, the 50 percent barrier will be crossed.

If today's youth adopt the work habits of their parents, it should be clear that, in another generation or two, the resultant majority of the country's population will create an untenable financial burden on the minority – who, by no small coincidence, will also be the sole bearers of the national defense burden. And what about the brain drain from Israel, which only accelerates this demographic process? Who is even dealing with this issue?

In the struggle between Left and Right on keeping parts of the Land of Israel and Jerusalem that contain large Palestinian Arab populations, the current political tie-breakers are constraints that mortgage one demographic future – between Zionists and non-Zionists – for another demographic future – between Jews and Arabs.

A political tie-breaker of a totally different magnitude is needed: a political system in which each of the representatives, from the president down to the last of the Knesset members, is elected to fixed terms of office directly by the people. Representatives from different towns and regions will have to start looking out for the education that their constituent's children receive, for jobs and personal security for the people who put them in office, for clean neighborhoods and

environmental concerns in the areas that they come from. The accountability for successes and failures will be personal, with a corresponding political price tag.

When they will have to start dealing with the welfare of those who actually voted them into office, the politicians will have less degrees of freedom to advocate keeping the biblical Land of Israel instead preserving the health of today's State of Israel; less degrees of freedom to be more concerned about Palestinian Arabs in Nablus and Ramallah than about Israeli Arabs in Taibeh and Rahat; and less degrees of freedom to insist on Torah studies as a substitute for, rather than as a complement to, education that facilitates the understanding of modern democracy and provides the tools for working in a global economy.

The total number of seats currently held by the three largest parties – Kadima, Labor and Likud – has already fallen to just half of the Knesset's total (60 MKs in all). In light of the internal demographic changes that are taking place in Israel, the existing political fringes that represent narrow sectoral interests will become the majority in the Knesset in the near future, and the national perspective toward policy-making will have disappeared from the political scene. These fringes will become the primary boulevards – with each one leading toward the termination of the Zionist dream of a first-world democracy that is the national home of the Jewish people.

The time has come for the leaders of Kadima, Labor and Likud to understand that the country has reached the point of no return. Only the leaders of these three parties still have the combined parliamentary ability to put in place a new democratic system of government by the next elections. This will be the ultimate political tie-breaker that will return to the people the ability to salvage their collective future.