Israel: From Tribal Politics to a Territorial Democracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The State of Israel is in a political crisis that reflects deep social rifts. At the Herzliya Conference in 2015, then-president Reuven Rivlin noted that demographic processes had created a new Israeli order in which four main tribes—secular, religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab—are increasingly hostile to one another. The concept of tribalism has long applied to the history of the Jewish people. How can the modern State of Israel emerge from this political chasm?

Changing the electoral system is only one step toward correcting the deep fissures in Israeli society, but it is essential in view of the seriousness of the societal crisis. After seven decades of political independence, it is time for electoral reform. Israel must move in a new direction.

Israeli society has been divided since the establishment of the State. However, rifts that once overlapped have become deep divisions in which the groups do not share values. As a result, Israel has become a deeply divided society. The profound inter-sectoral hostility the country witnessed since the first 2019 elections, and even during the COVID-19 crisis, which should have brought about national unity, does not augur well for the country’s stable perpetuation.

The current electoral system was set up even before the establishment of the State of Israel in order to mobilize all of Jewish society. During the “state on the way” period, the leadership sought to adopt an electoral system that would represent everyone in the Yishuv. The structure and functioning of the Jewish “Kehillah-in-exile,” which had to find ways of dealing with problems of authority without resorting to coercion, were based on recruitment that represented all members of the community.
When this method was adopted after independence, it served a pluralistic society that had been tasked from birth with finding ways to cope with existential threats. Since then, government leaders have endeavored to build coalitions as broadly as possible beyond the bare minimum required to govern in a democratic society. This “politics of consent” ensured that there was almost always a religious party in government. Correspondingly, during the rule of the socialist Mapai party, an effort was made to include the bourgeois sector in government. Most of the crises back then were against the backdrop of religion and state. Still, Israeli governments of the period were relatively stable, and in times of emergency, solid coalition governments were formed.

In contrast, more homogeneous governments suffered from instability. The most prominent example was the second Rabin government, which, after the departure of Shas, was based on Labor and Meretz. Toward that government’s end, the state was on the verge of civil war. The Likud government that was formed in 2015, which was based solely on right-wing and religious parties, was ostensibly stable, but was followed after its 2019 dissolution by a political crisis that manifested in four non-conclusive elections. While the current Bennett-Lapid government is an attempt at a broad heterogeneous coalition, it holds only a slim majority, and no party from the Netanyahu camp is ready to join it.

Israel needs a system of government that can ease the rifts. A return to the so-called “politics of consent” does not seem a plausible way of overcoming the deep national divisions.

One possible solution is the introduction of a territorial element into the electoral system. The rationale would be to divert some of voters’ tribal interests from clannish commitments toward their area of residence. While representatives would continue to represent ideological commitments, they would also be committed to promoting transportation, education, sports, and employment on the regional level. In so doing, they would mitigate the perception of the “other” from within the same constituency as an enemy with whom it is impossible to cooperate.

The working assumption is that a Member of Knesset (MK) elected as representing a particular constituency would seek to safeguard the interests of all his or her constituents from the region. He or she would be less beholden to party leaders, which would promote the selection of independent candidates. A personal connection between the electorate and their chosen officials would strengthen the Knesset’s position at both the public and national levels. The goal is to move from politics built entirely on identity to politics with a territorial component.
It would not be feasible in Israel to switch to a fully regional system. The transition would be too sharp and is not suitable for Israeli society. A mixed regional electoral system should therefore be adopted. The most realistic option is a proportional regional system in which Knesset members are elected directly by their constituencies. Another possible mixed regional system could be one in which half the Knesset seats are chosen by the constituencies, with the number of seats derived from the size of the voting population. The remaining half would be chosen proportionally on a national basis.

No sector has anything to fear from change. Representatives of the various “tribes” in society would have to compete in their constituencies to represent their regions.

A transition to an electoral system based at least in part on territorial foundations may not cure all the ills of a tribal society, but it will at least take Israel out of a system of government that reflects its societal divisions and in the process perpetuates them.

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