

STAV SHAFFIR

Israel Is Missing a Strong Left



SI WRITE, protesters fill the streets. Hundreds of thousands of people, from young children to 90-year-old veterans of Israel's War of Independence, are rallying to stop what the government describes as judicial "reform," although it's a revolution that, if successful, would shred Israel's democracy.

The protests have continued for months now, creating scenes Israel has never seen before. Combat pilots violently arrested merely for participation. Police using stun grenades against peaceful protesters in the center of Tel Aviv. So many sectors participating in protests for the first time, after being silent for so many years: businesspeople, tech entrepreneurs, medical doctors, teachers, and many others.

More and more citizens understand that this is a defining moment for our country. The changes Netanyahu and his government desire look similar to what we have recently seen in Hungary and Poland.

They are a ruthless and astonishingly swift attempt to bring our independent Supreme Court under political control and, in parallel, to pass legislation that would bend Israeli democracy to religious rule, threatening the rights of Israeli Arabs, women, and the LGBT community. Only two months from the creation of this government, Israel is in complete chaos.

How did this happen? Just a year ago, politicians of almost every conviction collaborated to create a government that would distance Netanyahu from power and stabilize democracy. To be sure, it was a painful compromise for all. The Left had to put up with Naftali Bennett—once a right-wing extremist who opposed the two-state solution—as prime minister, despite his heading a party that won just six seats. For Bennett’s supporters, collaboration with the Left and with the Arab parties he opposed so strongly was all but unthinkable. But we all saw the growing divisions and the apparent impossibility of political agreement. So it was a moment of hope: Politicians can sometimes do the right thing.

It ended like the slow-motion trainwreck of one’s nightmares. Bennett’s party members dropped out one after the other, following protests and threats to their families. The Left could not resolve its internal rivalries. The Arab parties declined to save the government from collapse (to be fair, they were hardly courted), risking the possibility that Itamar Ben-Gvir, an outspoken racist, would become minister of national security. The government’s achievements were forgotten as Israel went to its fifth election round in three years.

Democracies don’t generally fall apart loudly or at once. It’s a long process, in which people get used to small changes, each of which hardly affects their day-to-day lives—until they suddenly find themselves shorn of basic freedoms, strangers in their own homeland. Here, the process took over a decade. Some would say its roots were always present. After all, when has balancing democracy

for all with the obvious need for a Jewish homeland not been a central tension of Israeli life and a prominent subject of discussion? Now add in conflict with Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, living at different times under different degrees of Israeli control. Is it surprising that, eventually, the “discussion” would arrive at the brink of war?



As in most threatened democracies, one of our main problems is that only one side follows the rules of the democratic game, while the other side is willing to crush it for its own benefit. The settlers, seeking to make a two-state solution impossible, use both legal and illegal strategies. They build illegal outposts and force the government to provide supporting infrastructure in return for political support. They divert money secretly from the state budget to develop the settlements, and they fund NGOs that support their mission. Their religious leadership openly expresses its loathing of democratic institutions: “If you are violent, inconsiderate, and just bring the government to its knees, you will succeed,” said Itzhak Shadmi, head of one of Jerusalem’s municipal committees, insisting on the primacy of their idea of religious values over the human rights of Palestinians. Appalled by Ariel Sharon’s 2005 “disengagement” from the Gaza Strip, the settlement leadership changed strategy: Territorial expansion would now be accompanied by becoming a political power that no government could live without.

Netanyahu did little to oppose disengagement. But much has changed since. Most important, his personal freedom is threatened by the corruption allegations. At various times a supporter or an opponent of a two-state solution, Netanyahu has only one “ideology” now: survival. A year ago, he wouldn’t be photographed with

Ben-Gvir. Today, Ben-Gvir's interest in weakening the justice system dovetails perfectly with his own interests.

Four rounds of voting did not grant Netanyahu a majority. The day following the fifth round in November, he moved quickly to ensure the narrative would be about a clear-cut win: "The majority" of Israelis supported him, and, in the name of that "majority," he would push for reform—the reform he needed.

Actually, Netanyahu's Likud Party won only 23 percent of the vote. His coalition was utterly dependent on the ultra-Orthodox parties and the ultra-extreme Ben-Gvir, a dedicated follower of Meir Kahane, who was banned from parliament by both Right and Left 40 years ago for inciting racism. Ben-Gvir himself has been convicted of eight charges, including supporting terrorist organizations. This time, in a campaign that targeted young voters and focused on security, he blurred his controversial past and gained unprecedented support. He could demand of Netanyahu whatever he wanted, including control of the police.

The gap between a Netanyahu coalition and an anti-Netanyahu coalition was 30,000 votes. The results would have been entirely different had it not been for the Left's failure to come together. In a situation in which Israel's four-seat threshold determines the result, elections are won by coalition-building beforehand. Netanyahu dedicated his efforts to making sure his coalition wouldn't lose a seat. On the center-Left, the opposite happened: Labor and Meretz stubbornly refused to unite.

In all the other rounds, whether they would unite was a source of drama and anxiety. Every time, however, something saved them at the last minute—at one point, I gave up my own seat in parliament to guarantee the union under a new name ("The Democratic Union"). In the fifth round, competing separately, Meretz failed to pass the threshold. Labor just made it, with the low-

est-ever result of what used to be the founding party of Israel.

About a quarter of a million votes that would have denied Netanyahu a majority were lost. All of this was predictable and preventable, making the failure genuinely traumatic. So concludes the tragedy of the Left: 20 years of drifting away from its public, holding on to a famous history instead of focusing on the future.



A union, many of us thought, would be a fresh start: the construction of a democratic camp fighting for peace, equality, and liberal values. Such a fresh start was urgently needed. Netanyahu's presentation of a distorted image of the Left—unpatriotic, anti-Jewish—succeeded because, as his victim, the Left offered an apology that, with repetition, came to seem like an admission of guilt. Steadily, the Left abandoned its values as new leaders sought to get closer to the Right, to become “legitimate.” Instead of fighting, the Left folded its ideological tents, giving up on a two-state solution, trading its social values for neoliberal rhetoric, barely challenging the status quo. Nature abhors a political vacuum, so centrist parties emerged—parties that positioned themselves as almost nonpolitical, a bridge between the radicalized (they claimed) of both Left and Right. They offered liberal-democratic values but avoided clear ideological commitments, targeting an old-Left constituency that despaired of its leadership's failures. They succeeded. As a result, the Right did indeed radicalize—but the Left simply disappeared.

Today, Netanyahu, for the first time, has almost everything he has sought since his loss to Ehud Barak in 1999. He controls parliament and most of the media; his third target, the justice system, is on the verge of a takeover. But the price he paid was not part of the plan. Trapped in the hands of Ben-Gvir and his like, he knows he needs to

comply with their every caprice, including the dimming of the jewel in Israel's democratic crown: the military. This trap will only deepen, risking Netanyahu's government and legacy.

It is time for the opposition to do what it has been avoiding: restart. The protesters have no defined leadership, but everyone sees that they are Israel's real leaders today. The courage of Israel's civil society, a hundred steps ahead of its political leadership, is inspiring. There are good, decent politicians in the leadership of the Left, but the lack of a shared strategy and political infrastructure makes them impotent. For years, they have been invested in responding to the Right's narrative rather than in building their own ideological outposts. Most damningly, they have lacked pride in their values and the courage that goes with it — the ideological spark that would prove to their potential supporters that they are willing to fight for them.

The Left must build a new ideological structure that is fully democratic and entirely transparent. It must reach out to younger Israelis — Arabs as well as Jews — to rebuild the trust it has squandered. It must develop the courage to talk about the issues the media now mock — subjects as old as peace and as new as climate. Leaders do not follow the crowd. They convince it of the power and potential of their ideas. This simple fact has been forgotten, and it must be revived.



I'm not delusional: This crisis might mean the end of everything we believed in for so long. Many Israelis may decide they can no longer live here. But I'm also an optimist. And for the very many who believe this is our only home, there's no other option. The courage of Israeli society pouring into the streets — its will to fight and its

obvious willingness to sacrifice for the future—convincing me that we can create a Jewish and democratic future of which we may once again be proud. *

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