

JESSE FERRIS

# Israel Is Dangerously Polarized



ONE DAY in March 2022, I was on my way to a meeting in Jerusalem when a convoy of armored SUVs sped by, sirens blaring, bearing Naftali Bennett, then Israel's prime minister. As my taxi pulled back into the stream of traffic, I asked the driver what he thought of Bennett's coalition.

The coalition represented everyone in Israeli society, even including the United Arab List and excepting only the ultra-Orthodox. My driver clearly was not ultra-Orthodox.

So I was not prepared for what followed: Calm and level-headed just moments before, the driver was seized with fury. He proceeded to deliver a lengthy stream of expletives punctuated by allegations of treachery and threats of the firing squad. As it happened, by the end of the ride, he had regained his composure to the degree that he

jotted down the name of my upcoming book so he could order it. It was, in some ways, a quintessential Israeli conversation.



Perhaps I should not have been surprised. After five elections in four years, the last decided by a mere 30,000 votes, one does not need a degree in political science to conclude that Israel is divided. Whether the split into pro- and anti-Bibi camps is a healthy manifestation of exuberant pluralism or the symptom of a dangerous and potentially unbridgeable polarization is the million-dollar question.

It might seem that Israel has been here before. The Altalena. German reparations. The Lebanon War. The Oslo Accords. Rabin's assassination. The disengagement from Gaza. All of these were painful episodes of internal strife that belie the fiction of a people ever-united in solidarity against their external foes. And yet something seems different this time. Previous divisions were, for the most part, over policy. The present rift is over who we are.

The unprecedented war of words between Israel's new justice minister, Yariv Levin, and Supreme Court President Justice Esther Hayut reveals more than a rupture between two branches of government. It exposes near-opposite conceptions of democracy itself. At a press conference on January 4, announcing a series of sweeping reforms to the Israeli judiciary, the justice minister lamented that "we go to the polls, we vote, we choose, but time and again, people we did not choose decide for us...this is not democracy!"

In her response one week later, the chief justice, quoting Ze'ev Jabotinsky, reminded her listeners, "Democracy means freedom. A government supported by a majority can also negate freedom. And in a place in which guarantees for individual freedom do not exist — democracy does not exist."

Democracy as majority rule. Democracy as limited government. According to the first view, judicial independence is a hindrance to the will of the people. According to the second, it is the last defense of liberty. This debate is not unique to Israel. But it has serious implications for a nation that still relies on a mobilized citizenry in order to survive in a nasty neighborhood.

More worrying still is that Israel's vociferous debate over judicial reform—in theory a welcome sign of civic engagement—is a red herring. If that's right, the danger of the present moment lies less in the vehemence with which ideologues argue over optimal constitutional arrangements and more in the high-stakes struggle for power that lurks behind. A principled debate over the separation of powers can be settled by compromise. A competition for power may need to be decided by force.

The specifics of the judicial-reform plan are not what animates the protest movement in Israel today. It is the total import of the plan. From former Prime Minister Ehud Barak to former Defense Minister Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon, the more influential leaders of the protest movement contend that the government plan amounts to a coup from above, designed to cement Benjamin Netanyahu's hold on power. Meanwhile, the plan's architects accuse the opposition of fomenting chaos and inciting rebellion in a bid to obtain by force what they failed to achieve at the ballot box.

Ya'alon, a sober ex-general and former leader of Likud, has repeatedly accused Netanyahu of plotting to establish a dictatorship. So, too, has former Minister of Justice Gidon Saar, once thought of as Netanyahu's anointed successor. In a recent TV interview, the former attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, a conservative Netanyahu appointee who subsequently signed his indictment, predicted bloodshed. Knesset member Simcha Rothman, chairman of the Law, Constitution, and Justice Committee of the Knesset, responded that

Mandelblit should be jailed for inciting violence. When the Movement for Quality of Government petitioned the Supreme Court to declare the prime minister “incapacitated”—unfit to serve owing to violations of his conflict-of-interest arrangement—seven coalition leaders issued a statement arguing that the very act of deliberating on this question amounted to an “illegal putsch that was no different than a military coup.” Responding to all of this, President Herzog, usually restrained and statesmanlike, warned on February 12 that Israel is on the verge of “societal and constitutional collapse.”

We live in an age of hyperbole, but with accusations of a coup flying left and right, and hundreds of thousands on the streets, can violence be far away?



Several weeks after that eventful conversation about the previous government, on Memorial Day, Bennett took the stage at a monument to fallen soldiers in Jerusalem and delivered an extraordinary speech before a gathering of bereaved families. He used the solemn occasion to ask how long a Jewish house divided against itself could stand.

“Unfortunately, our people are scarred by the gene of factionalism,” he said. “This is the third time that a sovereign Jewish state exists here in the Land of Israel. The previous two times we failed to make it past the eighth decade. ... What a terrible price we paid: 2,000 years in miserable exile, under pogroms and humiliation and catastrophes—all because we succumbed ... to fraternal hate. Now, praise God, we have been granted a third opportunity. ... My brothers and sisters, there will not be another.”

We prepare to celebrate Israel’s 75th birthday under darkening clouds. Over the last seven and a half decades, Israel, against all odds, has developed a remarkable formula for survival and prosperity in

a dangerous region. That formula is complex, but at its core sits national solidarity around the idea of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. We have proved that we can defeat any external enemy or combination of enemies. If we are to beat the historical odds, and make it to 100 and beyond, we must now prove that we can vanquish the demon within. \*

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