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The glue holding Netanyahu's coalition: hatred for liberal values

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Haaretz (Blog)

July 20, 2011 - 12:00am

<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/the-glue-holding-netanyahu-s-...> [1]

July 20, 2011

Article Author(s): Carlo Strenger

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Article Type: Blog

Date: July 20, 2011

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/the-glue-holding-netanyahu-s-...> [1]

The sound and the fury of Israel's anti-boycott law has not yet died down: Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party is reviving its push for a Knesset committee that will investigate "leftist organizations"; for the time being, the initiative to give the Knesset a veto right to reject candidates for the Supreme Court on the basis of their political views has been blocked, but it may well resurface.

Commentators both in Israel and around the world have pointed out that this movement toward the right is endangering Israel's liberal democracy. But maybe it's time to see what stands behind this flood of anti-liberal legislation.

I think that this coalition is genuinely only held together by its hatred of the institutions that continue to represent liberal values in Israel: academia, mainstream culture, a free press, and Israel's - as yet - independent judiciary. Because when you look at the right-wing coalition that currently governs Israel it is remarkably diverse.

The Likud is, at this point, a strange mix of what remains of its classical revisionist ideology and rising populist resentment against old elites that hardly exist anymore.

Paradoxically, it is a party led by Harvard and MIT-educated Benjamin Netanyahu, who is essentially an Israeli version of right-wing Republicanism - indeed, a political movement comprising our government's staunchest supporters on the globe.

Shas represents an ethnically tinged revival of a yearning for tradition. Originally dovish in its foreign policy, it is effectively led by the aging Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who was once creative

and progressive in his halakhic rulings, but has become a cranky racist lashing out at everything from Arabs to secular Jews.

Yisrael Beitenu is a radically secular party: Avigdor Lieberman's most basic belief is that the West has finished his career. He sees autocratic regimes like China and Russia as the wave of the future. He doesn't believe in the values of liberal democracy: For him, these are a recipe for weakness. He believes in strong leadership and he thinks that if Russia can oppress Chechnya, and China can subjugate Tibet, there is no reason why Israel cannot keep the Palestinians down ? even though he has no ideological connection to the West Bank whatsoever.

Then there is the national-religious Jewish Home party that represents the national-religious messianism initiated by Rabbi Zvi-Yehuda Kook, who led the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva for many decades and was the driving force behind the creation of Gush Emunim movement.

And finally there is United Torah Judaism, a party that represents the classical, apolitical ultra-religious constituency that, in its origins, was anti-Zionist.

To this very day, the party does not take on any ministerial posts to show that it doesn't really participate in Israel's political system. But it is still rather fond of using taxpayers' money for its own purposes.

(Readers may forgive me for skipping Barak's new faction, Atzmaut, which has no real ideology except its leader's desire to remain minister of defense.)

What, then, is the common denominator of this coalition, which has become one of the most stable and powerful in Israel's recent history?

To explore the danger that this coalition presents, we can learn some lessons from the Hebrew University, a cornerstone of Israeli liberal thought.

The university's founder and driving force, Reform Rabbi Yehuda Magnes, was a deep believer in universal values and liberal democracy. The Hebrew University produced some of the great researchers on fascism and totalitarianism, such as Israel Prize laureate Zeev Sternhell and the late Yaakov Talmon; many scholars emanating from there believe there is no value in nation states per se.

For these thinkers, the most important lesson of the twentieth century's political history is that politics and the state must never be idealized. They reasoned that the idea that messianism can be realized through political means - whether in its communist or its nationalist form - has only led to horrible suffering and unspeakable inhumanity.

These thinkers were Zionists in the sense that they supported a homeland for the Jews, but they didn't believe that the nation state in general, or Israel in particular, should be made into a goal in itself.

Jews needed a state because of their history of persecution, these thinkers posited. They served the state in various functions, but believed that that Israel must avoid the primal sins of chauvinism and ethnocentrism by all means.

This careful, skeptical version of liberalism that refuses to idealize the state and to see politics as a messianic undertaking was represented in the life-work of the great Jewish-Latvian-

British political philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin, a lifelong friend and supporter of Israel.

Throughout his writings, Berlin emphasized that no infringement of liberty and human rights of the individual could be justified except by the principle of avoiding harm to others. He never stopped pointing out how dangerous is the human yearning for "final solutions" (he used the term deliberately) for all problems.

Behind the current wave of anti-liberal legislation there is primarily a visceral hatred for this lucid, sane and humane version of liberalism.

For liberalism, by its essence, reminds us that human existence is invariably ridden with conflict; that civilization is a treasure that needs to be nourished and needs to adapt to changing circumstances; that there are no final solution to humanity's existential, political and economic problems.

It is, in brief, a political philosophy based on maturity, the recognition of human fallibility and the insistence that our most basic value must not be to inflict gratuitous cruelty on humans and disregard their dignity.

Totalitarianism, whether in its communist or national-fascist forms, was always fed by the hatred of complexity, by the wish that human life be simple and without doubt. It is characterized by what Erich Fromm, in the heydays of totalitarianism, called "Escape from Freedom."

Each of Israel's coalition partners has a different way of escaping freedom: for some it is the idealization of stones; for others it is the sheer love of power; others aim for sanctification of a religious tradition; and for others still, it is ethnocentric nationalism, pure and simple.

Escape from freedom and the hatred of complexity are powerful motivators. This is why the current coalition, incoherent as it is, has already succeeded in inflicting very real damage to Israel's character as a liberal democracy.

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