

IS ISRAEL MARCHING TOWARDS AN AUTHORITARIAN CORRUPT DEMOCRACY?

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Research on Latin America has shown that there is an entire spectrum between democracy and dictatorship, but both tend to approach one another when corruption is rampant; as we say in Hebrew, “the fish stinks from its head”. Gradually, the ruling elite has become infected, the rotten fish now smells like perfume. Often but not always, power corrupts, and long term power corrupts even more. In Israel, this situation has been often characterized as the collusion of wealth, government and the media. Over the last two decades, the deterioration of the quality of governance in Israel has spread across many spheres of the ruling elite: the former president has been just early released from years of imprisonment for rape and for sexual abuse; a former prime minister still in prison for bribes, money; a former minister of finance released some years ago for pocketing a cut from the donations to promote group visits to Auschwitz and eleven more indicted; a dozen mayors imprisoned for taking bribes. Nowadays it is the turn of Prime Minister Netanyahu to be at the centre of an investigation.

Our current prime minister is being investigated for corruption on multiple charges; the list includes using influence in billion dollar deals such as the purchase of submarines from Germany, fake receipts, approx. \$200,000 in champagne and cigars; his wife found guilty for mistreating domestic personnel in the official residence. Both parents and son now live a life of luxury, receiving costly gifts from millionaires, from jewelry to Cuban cigars and pink champagne, flights in private jets and vacations with the rich and famous in top hotels - and more than a suspicion that the PM has upgraded his standard of living in many undeclared ways, including in his private villa in Caesarea with a swimming pool charging some maintenance costs at the expense of the taxpayers. Netanyahu is known today as the “Teflon” prime minister - no investigation sticks.

In the past, modesty and transparency was the domain of both the left and the right. From Ben Gurion and Golda Meir in the Labor Party to the more kibbutz based leadership of Mapam to its left; and from Menachem Begin as the leader of Herut/liberal coalition even further to his right the ultra-nationalist wing Yitzhak Shamir. They all understood the ethos of an “exemplary state”- the “propaganda of the deeds” has been an existential priority for a new reborn Jewish state. Paradoxically, General Rabin took a personal decision in the 1970’s to resign as PM because his wife had left \$2,000 in a bank account in the US, from the time he was serving as Ambassador in Washington DC - at time not permitted by Israeli laws. His integrity was at stake and nobody challenged him with allegations when he became for a second time PM in 1992. Much to the contrary, at next year

commemoration of Rabin's assassination assassinated in 1995- by a fanaticized religious Bar Ilan University Law School student- the expressions of his political political enemies such as former PM Yitzhak Shamir related not only the loss of "the best minister of defense" but also stating "he will cherish his modesty and devotion to the country"; others called Rabin as "a man of integrity, honesty, straightness and openness " or as a "a real, decent person who cares for the people". Paradoxically, the same year in a heavily contested election Netanyahu won over Rabin's by default successor, Shimon Peres.

All understood the ethos of an "exemplary state"- the "propaganda of the deeds" - has been an existential priority for a new reborn Jewish state. At present, not all MKs and current parties in government and opposition are or have been corrupt. One with a longstanding clean record is the left-wing Zionist Meretz -one of his components even preceded the creation of Israel. And yet, the stereotype of the "politician" is regarded with disdain, and it has tainted entire institutions.

Transparency International through a complex and fair index has been monitoring corruption for 20 years. Israel in 1996 was honorably ranked as 14th worldwide. But in 2016, Israel has been downgraded to 28th, below Uruguay [21] and the United Arab Emirates [24]. Furthermore, an OECD report in 2016 ranked Israel as the country with the highest rates of poverty among its members. Some 21 percent of Israelis were found to be living under the poverty line – the OECD average is a poverty rate of 11 percent. Furthermore, Israel has the third highest gap between the rich and poor among the world's advanced economies [after USA and Mexico]

Within the current two year budget, there is an allocation of 300 million shekels to be distributed by a handful of coalition MKs. They receive 10 to 80 million shekels to be dispensed with as they wish, as personal gifts to institutions, so that this gesture will generate dependency and the promise of political support in future primaries. At present there is a parliamentary investigation into this matter.

At first glance, military rule over another the Palestinian nation may be perceived by some fellow Jews as a temporary "lesser evil" situation resulting from Arab intransigence. But with close to half a million Jews in what the Israeli Right calls "Judea and Samaria", this policy is full of secret deals and turning a blind eye. "Creeping annexation" through such practices has become the acceptable norm. Blatant bribes involve Ateret Cohanim ,a Jewish settler Association purchasing in East Jerusalem Palestinian hotels and private housing from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate through a Virgin Islands Marketing Corp, managed by a fugitive searched now by the Interpol. Occupation corrupts in many ways, the moment that your party in litigation has no equal rights.

NGOs such as the Movement for the Quality of Governance or the local branch of Transparency International voice their concern. When searching in Google "Israel

corruption” and finding 32,900.000 entries and “Netanyahu corruption” 408,000 entries, it takes more than a detective to provide the full picture. it is incumbent upon us Israelis, the Jews in the Diaspora and the US in particular – those who care about Israel - to differentiate between rotten governance and supporting the people as a whole. An already distinguished “Start-up country” needs badly to become a “Stop corruption country”.

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