Coda: The Netanyahu Legacy

Ideas change reality. Benjamin Netanyahu is a man of words. He knows how to pitch his voice, adjust his tone, and select his metaphors based on his audience, be it world leaders at a UN conference; his supporters in a market square at a Likud rally; the international economic elite at Davos, or the revisionist Betar family at Jabotinsky’s memorial ceremony. He is also a master of speaking to different audiences at the same time. Where Bolsonaro’s Christian evangelical supporters hear only vivid descriptions of the Great Tribulation and Armageddon, his Israeli followers hear about military and economic cooperation; while the leaders of Yesha hear him speaking about full Jewish sovereignty over the settlements, the ears of the international community prick to the promise of a two-state solution. Netanyahu’s word is a mighty sword. His profound and canny understanding of the political scene has fed into slogans which bring his base out in their masses on election days. He has single-handedly shaped the political discourse in Israel, coining such expressions as “the right-wing bloc,” “the largest party,” “a strong leader,” “the Zionist camps,” “natural partners,” and “the national camp.” He has molded and remolded the political scene as he has seen fit in order to remain at center stage as its most powerful protagonist.

The image bolstering Netanyahu’s nationalist camp was that of a popular alliance poised against the secular elite. He placed a certain brand of Jewishness at the center of what it means to be Israeli against the secular-national narrative and offered his traditionalist supporters national pride, making them part of a ruling majority – the Jewish majority – with himself at its helm. He infiltrated and restructured the public media, inculcating his lackeys into the roles of chief editors, journalists, publicists and developing close relationship with media tycoons. He created a sophisticated echo chamber which propagated his message over and over again, day in and day out. Those outside this echo chamber could only gaze on in amazement. Of the Israel shaped by Mapai and the 1970s, nothing much remained. Likud had already been in power as the dominant ruling party since 1977, decades before Netanyahu came to power. Begin had already forged the alliance between the right and the alienated Mizrahi masses with his anti-elite discourse. The civil service, the police force, and the courts were already long dominated by the nationalist camp and its “natural partners.” Yet the idea of “the other Israel” was working where Netanyahu needed it to work: at the base. The masses in the poor socio-economic strata had their leader – a man who was everything that they were not: a secular, cigar-smoking millionaire, friend of tycoons and world leaders, son of a professor, Ashkenazi, member of an elite commando unit, MIT graduate, and Prime Minister. Still, he spoke their language and provided them with national pride. He gave them someone to hate: the Arabs, the left, the media. He weakened, both the actual and ideological basis of the very welfare state on which his base relied, putting fewer and fewer funds into public schools, health and infrastructure, trusting instead in the market, on the start-up nation, and the trickle-down effect. In the end, his neoliberal pretensions gave way to close relationships with monopolistic tycoons, so much so that the whole Case 4000 is based on his abuse of regulatory power to maintain the monopoly of one tycoon (instead of opening to the free market and benefitting the public) in return for a complete control over his news website. In the words of Elovich to Hefetz, about Netanyahu: “What, he does not understand is that the website is his?”[[1]](#footnote-1) Netanyahu had no political interest in improving the lives of his base. Why would he? If they ever left the periphery and acquired college educations, their voting patterns would certainly change.

Netanyahu’s ministers were even more ambitious then he. One-time backbenchers giving controversial speeches to drum up media coverage, Levin, Ohana, Elkin and Shaked became top ministers, driving structural changes, not just in policies and legislation, but changing the very nature of Israeli democracy itself. Accusing judges for being too “liberal” and loyal only to the rule of law (as if this were something to be ashamed of), they consistently weakened the process of judicial review, and undermined any public critique of the nationalist ideology at the core of their power – that the interests of the individual are subordinate to the interests of the national body as embodied by their government – hence, their introduction of the Basic Law: Nation State; their objection to any override clause, and their determination to appoint conservative legal advisors and judges. The constitutional redesign, the governability ethos and the neoliberal creed eroded the role of the state, the gatekeepers and the public media, and desecrated the idea of professionalism in public life. The intimidation of investigative journalists, of peace-supporting intellectuals, of liberal judges and critical teachers ushered in a culture of fear and terror. Israeli society became divided, polarized and hostile. Between the strong leader and his people, all mediating institutions of democracy have been eroded: first and foremost the Knesset. The idea that the government is immune from criticism because it represents the people and that anyone criticizing it is immediately accused of having “an agenda” has substantially weakened, not just the judicial system, but the Knesset itself. The nationalist camp did not want checks and balances. They wanted complete control. It took the liberal-nationals of the right four electoral cycles to understand that Netanyahu had taken the political system and the state of Israel prisoner. The rise of national-conservatism and populism is an extraordinary tale of how ideology transforms political reality and changes the very rules of the democratic game. Whether the national-conservative camp will remain illiberal, or whether the liberal-national camp which rebelled, in the end, against Netanyahu will reunite with the right, remains to be seen. Whether Israel as a national-conservative democracy is less liberal but still a democracy, or whether national collective rights overriding individual and political rights of the demos distance Israel from the club of democratic states, depends on how political history unfolds. The struggle for reality-changing ideas continues.

1. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/netanyahutrial/LIVE-1.10405455> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)