

FORUM

Yosef Goell says that there is no threat to our democracy and ineffective government is the major problem

THIS HAS BEEN a year of democratic hyperbole and nonsense, and it will undoubtedly get worse as we get closer to election day in November.

Labour has followed in the footsteps of the populist Likud and replaced its equivalent of the smoke-filled back room manner of choosing candidates for its Knesset list with a system in which they are chosen partly by the party branches and partly by its 1,300-strong Central Committee.

But does the fact that Ora Namir, Lova Eliav, Shoshana Arbeli-Almoslino and Ra'anan Cohen - vastly different characters identified with different political positions - came out at the top of the panel, while MKs Yitzhak Peretz, Aharon Nahmias and Jacques Amir were bumped, constitute "democratization of the party," as its secretary-general, Uzi Baram, would have us believe?

Not in my semantic book it doesn't, as the similar development in Herut did not necessarily constitute a democratization in that party when it took place several years ago.

What is occurring is a widening of the ruling party oligarchy. Instead of three people deciding on the make-up of the list, the 1,300 Central Committee members have been given that power. Whether what they choose is necessarily better than what the three chose, or whether it stands a better chance of success, remains an open question.

What has happened in our two major parties is still a very far cry from the average voter being given a say in the composition of the list of the party he intends voting for.

Without going into the pros and cons of the proposals for basic electoral reform, I would suggest that such a true democratization could easily be effected by amending the proportional representation aspects of the Knesset elections law to make it possible for the voter to scratch out, add, or rearrange the names of candidates on the list he votes for.

This is a practice that has been in operation in many countries since the introduction of PR in the last century. But the very thought of introducing such a possibility here would be anathema to the oligarchs of our newly "democratized" Labour and Herut.

THE REASON I talk of "democratic hyperbole" is that, contrary to quite a bit of rhetoric with which we have been bombarded during these dramatic and difficult years, a danger to Israel democracy is not one of our major - or even minor - problems.

To be sure, we are far from being a perfect democracy. There is no such animal. And our rule in the territories, which derives from military conquest and continued occupation - justified in the historical circumstances, to my mind - is by definition undemocratic.

But when one considers Israel internally in comparison with the 25-30 or so other democracies in the world, our system is very democratic, judged by the basic rule of democracy that the rulers be chosen by the people, and that the power to rule ultimately derive from the people's periodic choices.

When it comes to the other basic aspect of democracy - the rights of the minority, or minorities - the condition of democratic practice in Israel is more of a mixed bag, as it is in all other working democracies.

Our religious minority has more than its fair share of power, and the slight majority of Israelis who are of Islamic-country

Democratic hyperbole



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origin - the so-called Sephardim, who were previously an under-class - have made a major breakthrough to economic and political power and to social status in the past decade.

The two categories of Israelis who really get the short end of the stick are the slight majority of us who are women, and the Israel-Arab minority.

With regard to the latter group, despite the very many instances of really demeaning anti-Arab discrimination, their relative situation compared with that of the Jewish population is better than that of the mass of blacks in the U.S. compared to whites, and than that of Pakistanis in Britain, and Algerians in France.

Such discrimination, and other real flaws in our democracy, are certainly worthwhile targets for continuing struggle. But the democratic nature of Israel is not our major problem. Ineffective government is, and is becoming increasingly so.

TO COME BACK from the realm of theory to the hard facts of our current election campaign:

As much as it obviously fascinates party activists, the personal make-up of the Labour and Likud lists, immediately below the level of their top leaders, is not likely to have more than a marginal effect on how voters will choose, if one is to judge by previous elections.

Most of them will vote in accordance with their perception of what the top leaders of the different parties stand for.

In this regard, the Likud would seem to enjoy an advantage over Labour in having trapped the latter into fighting the election over the issue of the future of the territories and the Arab-Israeli conflict. On that issue, the Likud's stand is clear; Labour's is divided and confused.

It is of less importance, from an electoral point of view, that the Likud's clear position is totally unrealistic in the light of the realities in the territories and of our relations with the U.S. Its main electoral message plays on the fears of a large part of the electorate, fears that are not allayed by the confused message projected by Labour around these issues.

Labour's main advantage in the past has been its much more impressive performance in domestic affairs. With all his ingrained aversion to dealing with such mundane matters as the economy and the like, Labour's leader Shimon Peres racked up a phenomenal performance of political leadership in the fight against the Likud-induced hyperinflation of the first part of the 1980s.

That was in 1985. Peres's basic aversion to those problems, however, led him and Labour, in the last three years of this androgynous government, to neglect those very areas in which it had been best in the past.

The halting of three-digit inflation was not followed up with a credible policy of economic growth; and our educational, scientific and health systems have been permitted to decline to dangerous levels, due primarily to governmental neglect and mismanagement, for which Labour is as much to blame as the Likud.

There are signs that many of the Labour leaders themselves are resigned to an assessment that they stand little chance of winning against the Likud on the emotion-laden issues of the territories in this year of the *intifada*, waning or not.

LABOUR'S REAL chance lies in fielding a leadership team that can project a credible promise of dealing effectively with the myriad of internal problems that have been neglected while everyone at the top has been mesmerized by the single issue of the territories and the future of the Israel-Arab conflict.

What is glaring by its absence at the present stage is the name of a single potential Labour candidate who can be expected to serve as that party's deputy prime minister for domestic affairs or an all-powerful finance minister - in other words, a person who will perform the functions of domestic and economic czar that Levi Eshkol performed for Ben-Gurion, and Pinhas Sapir did for Eshkol and for Golda.

Ever since the late Ya'acov Levinson rejected proposals that he join the Labour list as a future finance minister in the 1977 elections, Peres and the Labour leadership have failed to present the electorate with a persuasive candidate for such a post, and a policy to deal with the problems that concern nearly all voters in their day-to-day lives.

It is understandable that considerations of internal party politics make it difficult to choose such a shadow economic czar, or even a shadow cabinet, before the elections are over.

But to return to the theme of democratization. Identification of the specific people whom the parties intend to rule us after the elections is the very minimum a democratic electorate can expect and should demand.

I have the feeling that the party that presents itself to the electorate in this regard most openly and most convincingly will also be the party that will win the election.

פוליצה

החלה הרשמת מועמדים לפרס יצירה מטעם ראש הממשלה ע"ש לוי אשכול ז"ל, לשנת תשמ"ט. יחולקו עשרה פרסים, שאותם זכאים לקבל אותם סופרים תושבי ישראל הכותבים בעברית. המלגה ניתנת לשנה אחת ומשולמת לפי משכורת חודשית של מורה כדוגמת מ"א כשיא הוותק, שכיום עומדת על 1,470 שקל נטו.