

In Israel : Of Corona and Politics

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Like everywhere in the world the coronavirus pandemic caught us by surprise. During the last week of February we all heard about it but the Government did not take it seriously. It took another fortnight before the first measures were taken : the Government closed its skies to incoming flights and decreed that anyone returning home from a trip abroad should remain at home in total isolation for two weeks. And before too long, all of us especially the elderly, those who have passed the threshold of 65, were ordered to stay home. The elderly population, being considered as the most vulnerable, has been under strict orders not to meet, see or hug family members, children or grandchildren.

So the virus drastically changed our lives. First we were told that the "skies are closed". Then they closed down the coffee houses, the theaters, the sports facilities. No more get togethers, no more work, no more restaurants, bars, music, dance or cinema. No more trips abroad. Just home sweet home. The world had stopped and it was telling us something – perhaps that we had gone too far, too quickly. And we must take a deep breath.

The pandemic did not only catch Israel by surprise, but unprepared. Even though the State Controller had issued a comprehensive report just a few years ago, warning of Israel's lack of critical medical supplies in the face of a possible unexpected epidemic - the Government did not heed, and continued to allocate its budgets to other "worthy" causes, based on its preferential politics. Thus, when the virus started to spread, there was no plan of action, no strategy, no understanding as to who would be better organized to deal with the crisis on a large scale. There was a real lack of the medical supplies necessary for testing and not enough respiratory machines, not enough medical personnel.

But that was not the only virus Israel was suffering from. For the last year and half, this country has been plunged into a political crisis the kind of which we have not experienced before. Faced with a serious personal problem, acting Prime Minister Netanyahu who has been indicted of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, has done everything in his power to avoid justice and retain power. So he plunged the country into three consecutive rounds of national elections, thus practically and effectively paralyzing both the Parliament and the Executive. Netanyahu mobilized people against the very state institutions he is supposed to defend. In all election cycles he lambasted the judicial system and the police for doing their job; he attacked the media, pilloried the intellectuals, delegitimized the representatives of the Arab citizens and incited against them and depicted the left as traitors. During this whole period of time, Israel has lived with a transitional government while the Prime Minister took decisions without consulting the Parliament, thereby continuing to erode our democracy. Thus he decided, without consulting the Parliament, to apply Emergency Regulations which effectively gave him unlimited powers. This meant, inter alia, the permission to listen into the phone of any Israeli citizen.

That political situation was in fact ideal for him, because he could continue to rule, unbridled, and avoid going to court.

The corona crisis benefitted Netanyahu in so many ways, and he used it extensively. His dramatic nightly appearances on national television, giving the impression that he is the only responsible person mastering the situation amounted to a national campaign. Now that the third round of negotiations had given a slight advantage to his adversary, the leader of the "Blue and White" party, Benny Gantz, and negotiations to form a new Government were underway, Netanyahu needed to transform his image into "the father figure", the only experienced leader. His nightly appearances sowing fear and panic among the population were effectively turned into a drama of biblical dimensions. But what also became clear was the unpreparedness of the medical establishment, the lack of coordination and disputes among Ministries, the conflicting daily orders. This is when the Ministry of Defense and the army stepped in, helping mainly in the most densely populated areas. The corona crisis here and elsewhere has underscored the importance of a centralized healthcare system and the State's responsibility for the citizens' health

While the confinement policy had its positive results -compared to other countries we have had fewer victims of the virus- it took its terrible social and economic toll. Hundreds of thousands of people were fired; thousands of small businesses had to close down, with no prospect to ever reopen. Actors, singers, entertainers, the whole industry has been shut down and this for a very long time to come. Over a million and a half Israelis are unemployed and unable to pay their rent and their most elementary bills. Some cannot even buy food anymore. The Government voted an emergency fund, but so far no one has been compensated. The economic crisis is deep and will certainly last long after the virus is gone.

Under those circumstances the civil society mobilized. The corona has brought out the best in us: people have donated money to buy respiratory machines; tens of NGO's have delivered food parcels to the old and needy, and thousands of volunteers are helping with errands those who cannot leave their homes; solidarity has been the order of the day; neighbors help each other, cook for each other.

Politically, the struggle for democracy has also been the order of the day. We all felt cheated and disappointed when the leader of the "Blue and White", whose whole campaign had centered on barring a man indicted under the law with such serious charges from serving as prime minister, decided to join him. A movement called the "Black Flags" was born spontaneously, overnight. It started when 600,000 citizens who participated in a first virtual meeting on the internet, and then demonstrations were organized. We have all been able to overcome the strict orders against public gatherings by keeping a distance from each other, and thousands have turned out in our demonstrations in the past weeks. This struggle will continue.

The coalition agreement signed on the eve of our Holocaust Day is a total shame: in the midst of one of the worst economic crisis the government will number 36 ministers and 16 deputy Ministers (in a country much larger than Israel, Germany, there are only 16 ministers) it gives Netanyahu full immunity against a trial, and is about to amend the existing fundamental laws in order to allow it to function.

With "Blue and White" and the Labor Party having joined this coalition government led by Netanyahu, the Meretz party is the only leftwing Zionist party that has remained true to its values and principles. Together with the United (Arab) List, with whom we cooperate, we will be a determined and fighting opposition.



Demonstration in Israel



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Demonstration in Rabin Square pictured from above