

THE TEMPTATION OF TRIBALISM

Following the assassination of Rabin, Israel's turbulence has become visible for all to see. Michael Warschawski explores ways forwards

It may sound paradoxical, and even blasphemous, but the assassination of the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, was an expression of the process of normalisation of Israeli society. 'The state will no longer be what it was,' was the sad lamentation of politicians and opinion-makers in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. It would have been more accurate to say: 'The state is no longer what it was, as the assassination so harshly but conclusively demonstrates'. In other words, to Yigal Amir belongs the distinction not of having broken the first taboo, but one of the last: a Jew killed the elected leader of the nation. The violation of this taboo brings with it the demise of a number of sacred cows, including the unity of the nation and the sanctity of the Shabak (the Israeli security services).

The fact is that the unity of the people long ago ceased to be a reality; all that remains of it is nostalgia, distorted vision and myth. Not only the Bar-Lev Line fell on the Jewish Day of Atonement, 1973: so too did the uncritical attitude towards the Zionist project, its myths and taboos, its rules and norms of behaviour. Very few Israelis understood this at that time, although they spoke about the 'negligence' of army, intelligence and governmental leaders. A mere three-and-a-half years later, the Labour movement's fifty-year hegemony came to an abrupt end with the inauguration of a Likud-led governmental coalition. Yet it took another six years and the invasion of Lebanon for the depth of the split to be manifested in profound fissures in the Israeli national consensus.

Our journal has always emphasised the challenge to the consensus that emanated from the more progressive end of the political spectrum: the refusal to serve in Lebanon and the occupied territories, the recognition of the national rights of the Palestinian people and of the PLO as their representative, the decreasing desire to serve in elite combat units and even in the army, the new historians who challenged the accepted narrative of Zionist history, etc.. All these phenomena were signs of the cracking of the old Zionist consensus, evidence of the weakening of the national unity that had been a reality for years and was one of the main characteristics of Israeli society.

However, the right wing of the Israeli political

spectrum was also infected by the spirit of revolt against fundamental elements of the consensus. Specifically, a new hierarchy of loyalties crystallised among broad circles of the far right: one which placed the 'Land of Israel' and/or the religion of Israel above unconditional loyalty to the state.

In religious-Zionist circles, especially amongst *Gush Emunim*, a kind of reactionary post-Zionism has arisen in recent years, contesting some of the old taboos of Zionism, especially the primacy of the state and its (intra-Jewish 'democratic') norms, which had facilitated the political stability so essential to the state in its formative period. The existence of an alternative system of values - something which never existed on the Zionist Left - brought with it a new possibility, however small, of the outbreak of a 'civil war'; of the classification of the prime minister as a traitor, and of his assassination. One can learn a lot from a brief examination of the term 'traitor'.

From the point of view of the old Zionist consensus, the combination of the words 'prime minister' and 'traitor' were a contradiction in terms, for the government was seen as the ultimate guardian of the nation's interest and well-being, indeed of its very existence. A traitor was someone who challenged this view. Only the birth of a competing value system allows one to call the prime minister a traitor.

This polarisation of left and right is a cause of Rabin's assassination, and

not, as some would have it, an effect. In the face of such polarization one would hope that the left would define its own hierarchy of universal, democratic values, of the sanctity of human life and of the equality of all peoples - and wage a struggle not only against the messianic, fundamentalist terrorists, but also against the more 'respectable' right-wing forces, which spawn and legitimise fundamentalism. What happened was exactly the opposite: since Rabin's assassination, the entire Zionist camp is attempting to reunite, to recreate a consensual discourse and a feeling of tribal national unity, despite or perhaps precisely because of the death of the leader.

The politicians, and the media, especially the electronic media, are hastening to reproduce a consensus bolstering the ruling establishment and

'If Israel wishes to avoid a future in which Jewish fundamentalism leads inevitably to a total confrontation with the Arab world, an alternate system of values which rejects the spirit of tribalism must become the basis for a new consensus'

grounded in 'legitimate' political discourse. They are scurrying to distance themselves from the weeds that grow on the dark side of the garden and to demonstrate a renewed almost monolithic political discourse.

In fact, the wild rhetoric of the right shows that the national consensus is shaky, and that there are deep divisions on substantive issues. The erosion of the national consensus began during the war in Lebanon and intensified during the Intifada. But as deep as the divisions may be, they are only partial, and are perceived by most Israelis as an undesirable, temporary phenomenon which in no way negates the underlying national consensus. Hence, their constant search for events that can be used to paper over the fissures, restore national unity and return to the warm embrace of the consensus. The Gulf War was used in this way; and after every attack accompanied by heavy casualties, a similar attempt is made.

One can therefore understand the efforts of the government, especially its more 'dovish' wing, to include the religious parties and the secular right-wing party, Tsomet, in the governing coalition. These parties contributed quite a bit to the recent delegitimation of the government. But even after the assassination the government did not take the opportunity presented by the deep public shock and the crises of the right to combat the discourse of fundamentalism, the attack on democratic values and the lenient attitude towards anti-Arab terrorism. Instead it has chosen to woo the right in the name of the 'unity of the people' and 'preventing a civil war'.

In a grand effort to walk this wayward path, leaders of Peace Now recently held a dialogue meeting with the head of the Yesha settlers' Council, the Settlers' only major organisation in the country which refused even to pay lip service to contemplating its past sins in the wake of Rabin's assassination. Given the policy of forbearance adopted by the left, it is not surprising that the settler leaders managed to put the Peace Now representatives on the defensive. As Ha'aretz reported: 'Nissan Slomiansky of the Yesha Council noted that Amos Oz, Yossi Sarid and Yair Tsaban wrote, when they were in the opposition, adamant articles in which they asserted that if it was ever decided to transfer the Arabs, the Left would refuse to carry out the orders. 'You have red lines you will not cross, and so do we, with regard to the evacuation of settlements. It is important that each side recognise the other side's red lines', he emphasised.

It is doubtful that such a conciliatory peace camp will be able to counter fundamentalist terrorism, which is likely to become more prominent within the hard-core right in the next decade. More likely, the political centre, composed of traditional Zionist parties representing Zionism's past and not Israel's future in the 21st century of

the New World Order, will face the fundamentalist Right alone. If Israel wishes to avoid a future in which Jewish fundamentalism leads inevitably to a total confrontation with the Arab world, an alternate system of values which rejects the spirit of tribalism must become the basis for a new consensus. The proponents of such an alternative must not shrink before the spectre of 'civil war', for such a 'war' would be one between light and darkness, life and death. The current leaders of the peace camp, imbued with racism, cannot generate such an alternative. Perhaps, however, a new spirit will arise among the remarkable young people who have mobilised in recent weeks, spurred out of their silence by the shock of Rabin's assassination. These youth have already demonstrated more than once that they are no longer enchained by the myths that paralyse their elders.

● Reprinted with kind permission from *News from Within*, vol XI, no 12, December 1995, published by the Alternative Information Centre, POB 31417, Jerusalem, Israel.



Ben-Gurion declares Israel's independence in 1948. Today its national consensus seems irretrievably broken