

Analysis

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Washington Watch

It's Israeli policy, stupid

By Dr James J Zogby

Much to the consternation of Western liberals, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has invited Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take the first crack at assembling a new government. Their concern is both misplaced and mistaken. Misplaced, because the odds are slim that Netanyahu will be able to form a government. And mistaken, because their hope that a victory for Benny Gantz would help undo the damage done to Israel's image among Democrats is wishful thinking.

While Gantz's Blue-White party edged out Netanyahu's Likud party, winning 33 seats in the next Knesset as compared with Likud's 32, because Netanyahu's bid to form a government has been supported by a larger number of Knesset Members (55 to Gantz's 54), he was the one tapped to cobble together a governing coalition of 61 Members.

The dysfunctional drama that defines Israeli politics will now be on clear display. As I noted last week, the only way for any government of 61 Knesset Members to be formed will require that either party leaders betray their promises to their voters, or that individual newly elected Members betray their pledges to their leaders.

What might also change the calculus of government formation is if Netanyahu is indicted for corruption and his "faithful" break ranks and either join the opposition or elect a new leader to replace Netanyahu. Even then, they will face the wrath of some voters if in the process of doing so they betray their pledge to remain united with their religious party coalition partners.

If one or another of these betrayals do not occur within a few months, Israel will be headed to yet another election - the third in a year! However, no matter the outcome, whether new elections or a government of betrayal, what's clear from this election is that Israel has moved so far to the right, no one should expect any significant change in Israeli policy toward the occupation or Palestinian human rights. And because it is precisely Israeli policy that is the determinant factor behind the US' deep partisan divide toward Israel, that will not change either.

This being the case, when the New York Times editorializes, as they did below, it's more liberal wishful thinking than fact-based analysis:

"At the same time, elements of the Democratic party have grown increasingly suspicious of Israel, if not hostile to it. Mr. Netanyahu's exit, should it materialize, may halt this dangerous shift and provide a new Israeli government the opportunity to reclaim broad bipartisan support in the United States."

Much the same came from a US-based Democratic pollster who worked for Blue and White when he breathlessly proclaimed that the post-Netanyahu period would be "a tremendous opportunity for Israel to reset its relationship with Democrats."

Before I allow my liberal friends to indulge themselves in more fantasy, it's important for them to consider two critical facts:

First, all of the prospective contenders to the post of Prime Minister share similar approaches to the occupied territories. All will: continue settlement expansion; insist on maintaining control over the Jordan Valley and extending Israeli sovereignty to this area and many of "settlement blocs"; maintain the annexation of what Israeli's refer to as "East Jerusalem"; and keep the stragglers hold over Gaza. In fact, some of the positions of Benny Gantz, "the liberals' hope," are more harsh than those of Netanyahu.

Second, while the Democratic Party's establishment, including the majority of its Congressional delegation, will be inclined to welcome the downfall of Netanyahu for several reasons, the views of the Democrat's voter base are not so wobbly as that of their leaders. "Liberal" Members remain upset at Netanyahu's opposition to Obama's nuclear deal with Iran; his illiberal alliance with Israel's ultra-religious parties whose policies run counter to the more secular views of Reform and non-religious American Jews; and his virtual "marriage" with Donald Trump.

While these matters have contributed to the US partisan divide, the major factors driving Democratic voters attitudes toward Israel have more to do with the very policies that all major parties in Israel will continue to pursue - the very policies that the Democratic establishment appears loathe to condemn (recall that in 2016, the party establishment would not allow mention of "occupation" or "settlements" in the party platform).

In polling we conducted before Trump was even elected, we found among all voters a noticeable downward slide as we measured support for Israel (61 percent), support of Netanyahu (38 percent), and support for Israeli settlements (25 percent).

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute

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A child runs as he visits the Palais Ideal (the "Ideal Palace") created by late French postman Ferdinand Cheval, better known as Facteur Cheval, on Sept 11, 2019 in Hauterives. — AFP

‘Ideal Palace’ still delivers on postman’s dream

With twisted stonework, exotic-looking statues and breathtaking flights of the imagination, it would not look out of place in the hot climes of Southeast Asia or in a surrealist painting. But this is not India or Cambodia but southeast France and this extraordinary edifice was not dreamt up by an ancient mystic or Salvador Dali but over a century ago by a humble French provincial postman.

The "Ideal Palace" was created by Ferdinand Cheval, known as Facteur Cheval (Postman Cheval), in his home town of Hauterives south of the city of Lyon. Cheval created the monument by hand, picking up stones especially oddly shaped ones on his postal rounds and elsewhere over a period of 33 years from 1879 to 1912. And after finally finishing his life's work, he set about designing and building his own tomb next door. In recent years, the site has attracted tens of thousands of visitors a year as one of the most extraordinary examples of naive art architecture anywhere in the world, a fact that would no doubt delight its creator, who died aged 88 in 1924.

‘Saved from ruin’

But its survival is in no small part due to the novelist Andre Malraux, who exactly half a century ago won protection for the Ideal Palace as a historical monument while serving as culture minister. Malraux defied experts at the time, who denounced the edifice as hideous, to bestow the

protection on the Ideal Palace on September 23, 1969. "The tenacity of Malraux saved the palace from ruin," said Frederic Legros, the palace's current director.

Walking round the edifice, an extraordinary melange of influences from east and west, Legros pointed out inscriptions in the palace by Cheval to guide visitors. "By creating this rock, I wanted to prove what the will can do," one inscription reads. "It is true that there is a dimension to wanting to overcome your social condition," said Legros. "It is this idea that this man, who was very poor, built himself a palace, the perfect palace," he added.

After finishing the Ideal Palace - whose name simply comes from a poem left by a young visitor from Grenoble describing a visit - Cheval embarked on building his own mausoleum. He had originally wanted to be buried in the palace but both the Church and local state authorities made clear this would not be acceptable. Cheval spent the next seven years sculpting his own tomb, another wildly ornate structure, where he is buried. Legros said it was "his masterpiece".

‘A total mixture’

The Ideal Palace contains representations of a mosque, a Hindu temple and a mediaeval castle. It has sculptures portraying figures like the Gallic King Vercingetorix, Roman Emperor Julius Caesar or Greek inventor Archimedes. "It is true that it is a total mixture without any

superiority of one culture over another. Everything is mixed and everything is made equal," said Legros. Cheval, who was born in 1836, began the building when he tripped over a stone with an unusual form. The first stone retains a prominent position to this day. "He discovers these rather exceptional shapes and marvels at what nature can do and this encourages him to throw himself into the Ideal Palace," said Legros.

‘Never saw them’

Cheval, who proudly described himself as a peasant and the son of a peasant, had of course never seen an elephant or a leopard in real life, still less travelled to see oriental temples. A self-taught visionary, Cheval drew his inspiration from postcards or illustrated magazines. "He has never seen them, but he reproduces them anyway in his palace, sometimes with a certain amount of reality because it's the interpretation of an image," said Legros. The fame of the monument grew even during Cheval's lifetime. Pablo Picasso visited the palace with fellow artist Dora Maar, with whom he had a years-long relationship, and his friend the poet Paul Eluard. An all-star biopic directed by prominent French filmmaker Nils Tavernier released in 2018 - "L'Incrovable Histoire du facteur Cheval" (called simply the "Ideal Palace" in English) - further increased interest in his life. According to Legros, last year's visitor numbers of 180,000 was already reached on July 31 this year. — AFP

Climate change threatens peoples, body and soul

When global warming swallows up the postage stamp island of Warraber, forcing its 300 residents to find a new home, "it will not just be the loss of our land, but also a piece of us that is washed away," says Kabay Tamu. Tamu, 28, is likely to see that traumatic transition during his lifetime, according to a landmark UN report on oceans and Earth's frozen regions, released this week. Even before the creeping global waterline covers this low-lying atoll between Australia and Papua New Guinea, it will probably be rendered uninhabitable by a tropical storm engorged by rising seas, or salt-water infiltration.

"We see first-hand the impact of climate change in rising sea level, coastal erosion," Tamu told AFP phone from New York, where he had gone to bear witness as world leaders gathered in a climate summit. "We have a deep connection - culturally, spiritually - with the land that will be lost." Confronted with this grim future, everyone on Warraber - and hundreds of similarly situated tropical islands worldwide - is confronted with a choice.

But for Tamu and his family, "leaving is not an option,"

he said emphatically, noting that his people had lived on this and neighboring islands for thousands of years. "To be taken away is to lose our deep spiritual connection to the land. This is our home." The problem of populations uprooted by global warming is generally framed in terms of logistics, geopolitics and economics: who will accommodate them and who will bear the cost? But there is another dimension that remains largely neglected, said Bina Desai, head of policy and research at the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva.

Cultural and spiritual home

"With sea level rise, we have to recognize that there is no return," she told AFP. "It is a resettlement that is not only physical, but cultural and spiritual as well." For some Pacific islanders, she noted, the thought of leaving without the remains of their ancestors is intolerable. When people's sense of self is interwoven with the soil and sand, the unique trees and birds of their island homelands, "how can they move without disrupting the identity of their culture?" she asked.

The problem is not unique to island cultures. "The Saami people belong to Sapmi, and Sapmi belongs to the Saami," said Jennie Staffansson, a member of the Saami Council in Sweden, referring to the cultural region in northern Scandinavia historically inhabited by her people. Climate change is already devastating the Saami homelands, where snow cover is thinning or melting, and the reindeer upon which so many livelihoods depend are in trouble.

"It is heartbreaking to watch the animals struggle," she told AFP by email. "And it is going to get worse because of other people's unwillingness to change. If we lose the reindeer, we lose a huge part of our culture." On the other side of the Arctic Ocean, things are not much better in Alaska and Canada. "The Inuit communities want to maintain their way of life," said Dalee Sambo Dorough from the Inuit Circumpolar Council in Canada, which represents some 160,000 indigenous people.

‘Our people are strong’

"We depend on the sea ice in the same way that the marine mammals depend on it," she said via Skype. "Hunting is still vital to our culture." And if things get so difficult that the only option left is to relocate? "Out of the question - the Arctic is our homeland," she said. Yes, she acknowledged, villages already falling into the sea due to crumbling permafrost and storm surges need to be moved. "But I know that our people are very strong," she said. "We've managed to survive the Arctic by adapting, so we have that capacity."

The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) report on oceans and the cryosphere warns of threats to the "cultural identity of Arctic inhabitants," especially indigenous peoples, who number approximately four million. But these are not the only cultures menaced by global warming and rising seas, noted Anders Levermann, a professor at the Potsdam Institute of Climate Impact Research in Germany and a top expert on Antarctica. — AFP

Going underground in Slovenia ... to prepare for outer space

In Slovenia's dramatically beautiful Karst region, six astronauts have been put through their paces for future missions - not in a flashy futuristic space centre but deep underground in the area's network of cold, dark and muddy caves. This Wednesday they emerged blinking into the light after swapping their space suits for caving gear and spending six full days underground in the UNESCO-listed Skocjan cave system. All in all they completed six weeks of training organized by the European Space Agency's (ESA) CAVES program.

But why were they heading underground? "Living in a cave is very similar to living in space, mentally. Actually, I thought it was much harder than living in space," 43-year-old Japanese astronaut Takuya Onishi told AFP. Onishi's harsh tone is unsurprising given temperatures in the cave fluctuate between six and 10 degrees, not to mention 100-percent humidity and the fact the participants only had the light of their head lamps to guide them. "Caves are a fantastic alien world. You actually live in an environment which is terrifyingly difficult, different and risky," said Loredana Bessone of the CAVES program.



Astronauts pose for a photo during a meeting with journalists at the end of a six-day training organized by the European Space Agency's (ESA) CAVES program in the Divaska cave, southern Slovenia, on Sept 26, 2019. — AFP

‘Cavenauts’

This was the sixth time the program had been run, but the first outing in Slovenia's caves. After two weeks of learning about speleology, or cave exploration, the "cavenauts" are dispatched to explore and map the underground maze, gathering scientific material and relying on teamwork to solve various problems. The experiments include monitoring life in the caves such as microscopic organisms as well as assessing atmospheric conditions.

"The main goal for the astronauts is to work together as a team and achieve a mission in a very complex envi-

ronment, to prepare better for an analogous situation, which is space," the head of the programme's science component Francesco Sauro said. One of the astronauts, Germany's Alexander Gerst, told AFP about the feeling of complete isolation from the world outside in the silent darkness. You feel "deprived of all sensual input, out of your comfort zone", said 43-year-old, who has already completed two missions on the International Space Station. Onishi and Gerst were joined by colleagues from the United States, Canada and Russia.

‘Our planet is special’

NASA's Jeanette Epps admitted that when it came time to finally leave, she was "kind of sad" despite the cold, slippery conditions which had been made more dangerous by rainy weather. "But then I looked up and... it was beautiful," she said. "Just the smell alone and the sunlight on your face, I didn't realise how different I felt being in the cave." 48-year-old Epps said. Onishi had slightly prosaic concerns once he was "back on the ground". "Honestly speaking I was a little timid because I didn't know how badly I smelled after six days of life in a cave," he said. "So, when I saw people on the ground of course I was happy to see them but I tried to be far from them," Onishi said, laughing.

Despite the hygiene concerns, he said the program had been unique in the opportunities for learning non-technical skills needed for space voyages. Bessone agrees and says astronauts from all over the world are queuing up to participate in the program and that few others can create an experience so valuable in preparing for conditions in space. "We're coming back next year!" she said. — AFP