Is Israeli Democracy in Danger?

Introduction

The Editors

The 2010 Israeli Democracy Index raised a number of serious questions regarding the status and strength of Israeli democracy. We believe it is an appropriate topic to kick off our Forum, which presents essays representing a variety of points of view by eminent Israeli scholars.

On the face of it, eight out of ten Israelis believe that their country should remain a democracy. Yet when they are asked specific questions, a different picture is revealed. Fifty-five percent of Israelis believe that “Israel’s general situation would be much better if there was less consideration of democratic rules and stricter maintenance of law and order” (60 percent of people on the right believe this, as opposed to 50 percent of people with centrist or leftist views).

Democracies are measured by their tolerance of minorities. The data on this issue published in December 2010 reveals that 86 percent of the Jewish public believes that decisions that are fateful for the state must be made by a Jewish majority. Fifty-five percent believe that the state has to allocate greater resources to Jewish communities than Arab communities, and 53 percent even support encouragement of Arab emigration by the state. Two-thirds believe that there should be no Arab ministers in the cabinet, and one-third of the Jews support putting Arabs in detention camps in wartime. Nevertheless, Israelis have a positive self-image of their democracy. Forty-seven percent of the public does not believe that Israel was more democratic in the past than it is today (as opposed to 39 percent who think the opposite).

Other recent events and developments also raise troubling questions. Toward the end of 2010 there were several large demonstrations and rallies in Jerusalem, Bat Yam, and Tel Aviv that featured placards and chants inciting against Arabs, labor migrants, refugees, blacks, and foreigners in general. Had such chants been directed at Jews in any city in the world, they would have drawn swift condemnation from the government of Israel, which would have warned against “rising anti-Semitism.”
Several bills in the Knesset, including an initiative to establish a committee to monitor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in human rights, have also been characterized as transparently political, because only left-wing NGOs—most of which already publish their funding sources—were targeted. It could be maintained that any investigation of this sort would be reprehensible no matter who was targeted.

The controversy over the bill to monitor NGOs, which eventually failed to be adopted, nevertheless sparked a statement by a group of intellectuals who asserted that the bill would have weakened the Knesset’s legitimacy. In the past, only two groups have challenged the sovereign authority of the Knesset: religious circles asserting that rabbinic decisions take priority over decisions of the Knesset, and a small group of rightists who claimed that the Knesset has no authority to make decisions regarding withdrawal from parts of the homeland. The challenge now, this time from leftist intellectuals, raises the question of whether the increasingly strident political debate in Israel has not reached a point where the basis of the democratic system is in danger of being undermined.

The counter-claim is that these moves in the Knesset, the government, and the public sphere do not endanger democracy but, on the contrary, seek to protect it from forces that try to destroy it from within: human rights organizations that defend Palestinian rights at the expense of the rights of Jews; radical organizations that provide information on army officers so that they can be prosecuted in international tribunals; members of Knesset who actively assist terrorist organizations; journalists, primarily at Ha’aretz, who slander the country and help the delegitimization campaign against Israel abroad. Israeli democracy—so goes the claim of those who support restrictions on such activity—must defend itself. Democracy is not suicide.

Other issues in recent years have also been used to justify limits on democracy. The struggle between religious and secular Israelis has intensified recently, on matters that have nothing to do with the occupied territories or security. The recent rabbinical declaration forbidding the rental of homes by Jews to Arab citizens of Israel, the separation of Jewish men and women in public buses, the designation of separate sidewalks for them in residential neighborhoods, along with the separation of Ashkenazi students from Sephardi children in the independent religious schools—all of these actions can be understood as impinging on generally accepted democratic norms.

In other words, is not democracy also challenged by the strengthening of the religious element in the collective Israeli identity? Until now, the Zionist movement and later the State of Israel have been able to contain the tension between the universal and cosmopolitan elements of their identities, on the
one hand, and their particular and Jewish aspects, on the other hand. The definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state is one example of this.

The Democracy Index poll in 2010, like previous surveys, asked Israelis for their stance on this question. The largest group, 43 percent, still wants to continue viewing Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. But 31 percent define the Jewish element as more important, and only 20 percent define the democratic element that way. Perhaps the events of the past two years indicate that for many the decision has already been made?

So what is the state of Israeli democracy? Is it indeed deteriorating? Is it endangered? The editors of the Israel Studies Review submitted these questions to five senior academics from different disciplines, affiliated with different institutions of higher learning in Israel. Their opinions, as could be expected, are divided. Three claim that Israeli democracy is indeed in danger. One argues that Israeli society was never democratic, and another claims that, on the contrary, Israeli democracy is stronger today than in the past.