

A new quality of protest The hot summer of 2011 changed Israel's political agenda

Tamar Hermann

In Summer 2011, the fairly numb and sweaty Israeli domestic political scene was dramatically shaken up by a massive wave of grassroots protest. The focus of this eruption of public unrest was mainly socioeconomic: In the beginning, participants in the various manifestations of discontent protested against the rising cost of rent, gas, and basic food items. Later on, with the increase in number of groups participating and their respective interests, the protest adopted a more extensively abstract slogan – the demand for “social justice,” which could bring almost every Israeli on board.

The huge wave of protest, which drove hundreds of thousands of Israelis to the streets (mainly in Tel Aviv but also in other cities and towns), was not really unexpected: already months before there were strong indications of growing civil dissatisfaction and indignation about the Netanyahu government's social and economic ideology and policies. Yet, because most protest endeavors in the past relating to social and economic matters failed to take off, the rapid emergence, huge numbers of participants and intensity of this eruption was indeed shocking and disturbing to some, and highly encouraging and gladdening to many more in Israel. Almost six months after the disappearance of the street protests, it is already possible to begin identifying the causes and development of the summer protest wave. Did it really phase out with no achievements, as some argue? Or is it just hibernating after significant changes in the Israeli political arena?

Who and what started the summer protest? External influence would most probably include the economic protest in Greece, Spain, the USA, the UK and also the Arab Spring, following the theory that massive protest is “contaminating” and that spillover is very common in global protest waves. However, in this case internal factors seem to be more influential. As is widely known, in macro-economic terms, Israel is in superb condition compared to many Western countries. Because of its very carefully planned economic policies in the last decade, it

was only marginally hit by the ongoing global economic financial crisis. The Israeli currency is stable and unemployment is relatively low.

On the other hand, Israel's moving away — under the guidance of Benjamin Netanyahu, first as its Minister of Finance and then as its Prime Minister — from a classical social-democratic orientation in the direction of a gradual adoption of neo-liberal theories and policies contributed to the growing economic gap between the haves and the have-nots. In fact, today Israel is second only to the US in terms of the gap between the rich and the poor, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. This development has been accelerated by the gradual and intentional withdrawal of the state in recent years from many social service domains — mainly health, education and public housing. Israel has also experienced severe cuts in social budgets in recent years, widely perceived as an unfair allocation of resources.

Yet, paradoxically, both the initiators and leaders of the summer protest (many of them students or young professionals in their late twenties), and most of their followers were not of the “have-nots” but belonged to the dissatisfied middle class. For a number of years, the Israeli middle class feels that they contribute much to the state and get very little in return, while others, for example the lightly taxed moneyed set and the poor, yet heavily subsidized ultra-orthodox minority (around 9 percent of the Israeli population) are contributing little but get a lot from the state. The prevalent self-perception of the middle class, which is supported by facts, is that they are heavily taxed, serve in the military reserve forces years into adult life, and yet receive almost no repayment from the state. Thus, because of rising prices and declining state-provided services they must work extremely hard compared to citizens in other OECD countries in order to maintain a reasonable standard of life and a future of promise for themselves and their children. Although the immediate targets of protest at the time were the cost of specific items (gas, food, rent), with the assistance of

many volunteering academics, socially oriented economists and political activists, the broader picture came forward quite quickly — these costs were just the tip of the iceberg of an unjust socioeconomic system, the foundations of which had to be targeted in order to bring about sustainable transformation. It should be noted however that the demands put forward by the summer protest leaders and followers (many of them Netanyahu's voters) were rather self-centered. In other words, as observed by protesters of weaker socioeconomic strata, their problems and concerns were not properly and forcefully addressed in the context of the campaign.

The government was quick to respond by nominating an expert committee, headed by a much respected economics professor, Manuel Trajtenberg of Tel Aviv University School of Economics, who also served as the Head of the Economic Council. Correctly sensing the national climate of opinion, the committee adopted a transparent mode of operation, including a strong component of public participation. The more radical leaders of the protest immediately branded this government move as hopeless if the idea was to change the system from scratch, based on the argument that an appointed committee would never take the revolutionary position necessary. They also denounced the public participation element as manipulative. The more moderate leaders, however, mainly the chairperson of the Students' Union, were less critical and thought that the committee should be given a chance.

Internal division within the leaders cadre, great frustration of the weaker groups who felt marginalized in the context of the protest as well, the fact that summer came to an end, the academic year started and the Jewish high holidays came about in September halted the street protest. When the Trajtenberg committee's extensive yet relatively mild (alternatively: responsible) report was released in late September, it was met by loud outcries by those who were highly skeptical about it in the first

place and now took the "we told you so" position. Others were more positive but doubtful that the government would adopt them as they were. This double skepticism proved right as indeed the recommendations part of the report was cut to pieces, with only a few seconded by government implementation decisions. Obviously the protest demand for a new socioeconomic system or a new social contract was not met, nor was there much more social justice now in Israel.

Nevertheless, the protest enjoyed several accomplishments that should not be overlooked: First, for the first time in Israel's 64-year history, a massive socioeconomic protest campaign succeeded in taking off. In the past, only security and peacemaking issues appealed enough to the citizenry to make them leave their living rooms and go to the streets. This greater awareness of socioeconomic shortcomings in the Israeli system is reflected today in various public opinion polls where priority is given to such topics and are now of greater or at least equal importance to security issues in terms of citizens' favored state goals and also of potential voter criteria.

Second, it seems that, as of today, practically all Israeli political parties and leaders are much more aware of the need to put forward a clear, publicly acceptable and responsible socioeconomic agenda, not only a security-related one, and that their ability to do so is tantamount to their respective success or failure in the next elections.

Last but not least, this summer experience has clearly politically activated Israeli society, which in the past, despite its relatively strong political awareness, became rather passive, watching the news and expressing disgust toward politics and politicians. It seems that now, the Israeli public is more aware than before the protest of the fact that if the "good guys" stay at home, the "bad" ones will take over the positions of power and make critical national decisions based on their ideological references and interests.



(Foto: privat)

Tamar Hermann is professor at the Department of Sociology, Political Science and Communication of the Open University of Israel and academic director of the Israel Democracy Institute. Earlier this year, she was a guest of the WZB Democracy Research unit to discuss problems of measuring democracy.

tamarhe@gmail.com