The Arab Minority in Israeli Politics: Between ‘Ethnic Democracy’ and ‘Democratic Integration’

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‘I am sure the world will judge the Jewish state according to how it will behave towards the Arabs.’ – Chaim Weizman, Israel’s first president, 1947 – a year before the foundation of the state.

Introduction

In the first decades of the Israeli state, the Arab minority did not play any meaningful role in Israeli politics. Although it enjoyed formal citizenship, legal equality and the right to vote, it was effectively controlled and neutralised by the Jewish establishment. A regime, in which an ethnic minority has formal democratic rights but is in fact heavily discriminated against and powerless to change the situation is sometimes called ‘ethnic democracy’. Smooha defines ‘ethnic democracy’ as ‘located somewhere in the democratic section of the democracy/non-democracy continuum’.1 Peleg’s ‘ethnic constitutional order’, a ‘regime privileging one ethnic group over all others via law, policies and practices and via the actions of the state’ is a similar concept.2 We argue that Israel was in this sense an ‘ethnic democracy’ or an ‘ethnic constitutional order’ in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. We further argue that in the 1980s and 1990s Israel moved towards ‘democratic integration’, a regime in which the minority has influence and power and is gradually moving away from ‘ethnic democracy’ marginality. We further argue that since 1999 Israel has, once more, moved away from integration. The coming years will tell if this reversal is a temporary episode or a dramatic failure of ‘democratic integration’.

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Up to the late 1970s, Jewish experts on Arab affairs in the ‘Arab Departments’ of the government ministries, the Labour Party and the Histadrut (the Israel Labour Federation) firmly controlled the Arab population. Even in education and religious affairs, where the Arabs possessed a large measure of autonomy, at least in principle, the top decision-makers were almost all Jews. The Jewish establishment could effectively veto decisions concerning the school curriculum, the appointment of teachers in Arab schools and the composition of religious courts.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the rights of Arab citizens were severely curtailed. From 1948 to 1966, the military government in the Arab-populated areas of Israel restricted the freedom of movement and right of association of the Israeli Arabs. All attempts by the Arabs to establish nationwide political organisations to fight for Arab rights were foiled by the government and the security services. As late as 1980 Prime Minister Menachem Begin accepted the ‘professional’ advice of the security services and prohibited the convention of a nationwide Congress of the Arab Masses and in 1984 the General Security Service recommended that Defence Minister Moshe Arens use the Emergency Defense Regulations in order to prevent the establishment of the Progressive List for Peace (PLP), a recommendation disregarded by the more liberal Arens.

The Israeli Arabs were first represented in the Knesset by Maki (The Israeli Communist Party) and, after 1965, by Rakah (the New Communist List) and the ‘Arab Lists’ aligned with Mapai (which became the Israel Labour Party [ILP] in 1968). Both the Communists and the ‘Lists’ condemned the Arabs to political impotence. For the vast majority of Israeli Jews, the Communists were beyond the pale. Their subservience to the USSR, which armed the Arab states and followed a violently anti-Israel policy throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, their declared anti-Zionism and their sympathy for Arab nationalism made them outcasts in Israeli politics. The ‘Arab Lists’ were basically electoral lists created, financed and controlled by Jews. They were typical patronage parties, which gave their support to the dominant Mapai/ILP for personal (e.g. commercial licenses, unification of families) or collective benefits (e.g. electricity, water pipelines, health services or roads). They had no influence on coalition formation, on the government’s ‘Arab policy’ or on foreign affairs. Arab political influence was thus close to nil because the Arab vote went either to Communist outcasts or opportunistic ‘yes-men’ (some Israeli commentators called the Arab notables of the Arab Lists ‘pragmatists’, but pragmatism is connected to empirical liberalism while opportunism is something else).