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Out of tune

The Israeli Labor Party has failed to find the right tone for modern Israel – and struggles for survival in the upcoming election

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Whenever we speak about the future of the Israeli Labor Party, particularly before and after elections, one question comes up again and again. Is the latest defeat the end of the party, or is it just another crisis?

Time after time, election after election, the party finds itself in a near-death situation, but it somehow manages to struggle on. Many Israelis say the time has come for a new Labor party, but voters still prolong its life. When the time comes to cast their vote, they seem to feel a sudden surge of love for the party that founded the state in 1948.

The signs of an imminent end have resurfaced in the run-up to the 2019 elections, to be held on 9 April. For months, polls have predicted that Labor might not survive this time; the party's chances of entering the Knesset have never looked so slim. After the party conducted its primaries and selected an attractive group of candidates, it saw a slight resurgence in the polls. But where other parties attracted new candidates and fresh faces, Labor struggled to attract a high-profile figure to be number two on its list. At the last minute, just before the lists were submitted to the electoral commission, an army general was selected and members breathed a sigh of relief.

Worse than death

I know how it feels to be part of a party in peril. I was a Labor candidate for the elections of 2009, when polls predicted we would win just six seats. I remember the pain shared by the candidates. Wherever we campaigned, people asked us whether it was worth voting for a party that might not survive the elections. Shimon Peres, the legendary former leader, was heard confessing to a friend that there was nothing worse than political death, not even actual death.

Israelis are preoccupied with the mounting powers of religion and the religious parties.

In those elections, even Ehud Barak, a war hero and the last Labor prime minister, seemed powerless to rescue the party. Eventually, it won 13 seats, its lowest ever score. And the dark clouds still linger. Is it conceivable than an established party could disappear? Does it die of natural causes like other organisms? Only twice in the past 27 years has Labor won the national elections, and this constant decline raises questions. For me, the refusal to adapt to the new Israel is a major cause of the crisis. Generations of voters have found it nearly impossible to speak and understand the language used by the party, whose officials are still using the same words they were using back in the 1950s.

The party has failed to find the right tone for modern Israel and failed to change its course; this has created a serious rift between the party and the new voters. The young generation has demanded a no-nonsense approach with clear answers on how to better citizens' life, and cannot identify with a party that doesn't address them in a clear and coherent way.

As a member, I found it became nearly unbearable to attend party meetings. People would look disinterested after minutes. The speeches sounded so old-fashioned and their content irrelevant to contemporary Israeli life. They were archaic, out of touch and of no relevance to the real world.

No clear view

Unlike other parties, Labor has remained attached to the ideology of the past. On the main issues that divide Israelis, the party has failed to present a fresh and clear view. It lacked the courage to tell Israelis its views on the State of Palestine. Are we for a two-state solution? Are we against it? Likewise on other issues such as the future of Jerusalem and the fate of the Golan Heights. On the principle of land for peace, the party has been vague and adopted contradicting answers to the same question.

Israelis are preoccupied with the mounting powers of religion and the religious parties. What used to be tolerated by secular Israelis is now no longer tolerated. When asked about its position, the party suggested maintaining the status quo, formulated more than 70 years ago by David

Ben Gurion and the ultra-orthodox rabbis. Yet again, it lacked the courage to address a new generation. It offered old arrangements and old compromises to please both sides. To the general public it became clear that Labor wants to keep its options alive for a future coalition with the religious.

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Voters expect solutions to complex daily problems, and Labor has failed to address them. Whereas the right-wing parties offered a *laissez-faire* approach and neoliberal vision, Labor has always looked out for those at the bottom of the social ladder. It vowed to improve the life of the poor and the underprivileged and to work for equality. It promised to find the right balance between social needs and security needs. But when the right-wing parties took over, budgets were transferred from the social agenda to security. It appeared that Israelis were more interested in personal security than in economic equality.

Paying the price

In the past decade, the Israeli economy has improved, especially for the better-off. The right-wing government seemed to suggest that the individual is responsible for their own destiny, regardless of social standing, that anyone can succeed. Under the powerful politics of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Israelis adopted his conservative approach and turned their back on the welfare state.

During the 2019 electoral campaign, Labor has made great efforts to promote the idea of better conditions for those who don't have them. Ironically, in times of growing inequality in which fewer and fewer Israelis can afford the cost of living, socialist ideas have failed to attract new voters. The majority seem to feel that the right-wing economy and the tough stance on security are the right policies. Israelis feel safer than in previous years, and Labor has paid the price for failing to offer new ideas.



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