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Israel's social protests: the key to changing everything?

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For the first few weeks of the housing-cum-social protests in Israel, nothing else seemed to matter. For at least a week or two after the "J14" protests began (on July 14, in Tel Aviv), the press happily let it muscle out everything else - Palestinians, Iran, September, democracy barely reached back pages of the papers. The boycott bill (remember the boycott bill?) was quickly overshadowed. A new bill to cement Israel's Jewish identity in a Basic Law - perhaps the most vicious attack yet against the 20% Arab minority - hardly made the same waves. Everything seemed drowned out by a chorus of wonder and amazement at the growing numbers of protesters flooding the streets weekly, including tens of thousands who have demonstrated or set up camps in numerous other cities or towns around the country. Only the crashing global markets seem to have penetrated the euphoria.

People here seem thrilled just to have a change of national discourse. The old issues - the conflict, Jewish Arab tensions, anti-democratic legislation, and global anger at Israel - have for years seemed intractable. They hang around the headlines like a chronic disease, and many have tuned out. A Time Magazine article last September that pointed out peace-fatigue among Israelis created shock waves abroad, but it reflected genuine disenchantment. Now, people are giddy talking about different things, which apparently affect their daily lives much more.

So at first, Israelis clung to the immediate questions that took up all the space. Why is the rent so high? Why are salaries insufficient? Why are taxes high but education, transportation, and basic goods inadequate or unaffordable? The protesters have so far insisted that they can separate their demands from the chronic-disease issues - and that their tender pan-Israeli movement was too fragile to be exposed to the bitter divisiveness of older issues.

But now the mass civic action is increasingly acknowledged as part of the story. People are turning out in greater numbers than ever in Israeli history. The protesters have consciously changed their slogans from "the people want!" (social justice, and various other things) to "the people demand!" Some have called this a resurgence of democracy, the dawn of a new era of citizen solidarity, assertiveness and consciousness. Perhaps most strikingly, Israelis - famous for their fractions and litigious nature - are spontaneously listening to one another.

Could this self-consciousness of people-power and the citizen-led drive to hear from the deeply divided groups in society eventually lead back to the bigger, chronic-disease question, however circuitously?

Will the movement ultimately be forced by its own goals to confront and possibly re-interpret critical issues such in light of the newfound empowerment and social consciousness?

If so, what would those questions such as the conflict, democracy, the Palestinians' September statehood declaration, look like viewed through J14 glasses?

The following analysis is based on observations of how the protest movement is developing. It

reflects both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios (optimism and pessimism are measured relative to the desire for democracy and peace in Israel). It's worth remembering that these are hugely hypothetical - no one, including the protesters, really knows where this will go.

Israeli Society. I'm not the only one who has questioned whether there is any overall shared social vision to these protests, beyond a list of specific policy demands. But a few nascent themes provide some directions. First, the most common rallying cry is for the return or strengthening of the welfare state. By contrast to acrimonious debates in the US, Israel is quite clearly socialist-oriented and seems to have reached its breaking point with the Prime Minister's ideological neo-liberalism and cronyism. While it will maintain a robust global free market based on innovation and technology, we can expect Israel to re-stake its ground squarely within the social-democracy camp.

Israeli Democracy. The convergence of an amazing array of social sectors in the tent camps means that people are at least talking. Animated, sweaty circles of people at all hours of day or night tell the story: Social workers are talking to students; art therapists are talking to hi-tech workers, spiritual religious folks and ultra-orthodox Jews are talking to Tel Aviv hipsters. And starting from the second week or so, Palestinian citizens pitched tents on Rothschild and started talking to everyone else - although I've observed as much arguing as talking. Within a few weeks, settlers and organized right-wing groups claimed a place on the boulevard too, causing more debates - but maybe also some listening.

If the protesters are genuinely committed to all the unity their signs proclaim, they will either acknowledge the claims and grievances of all these participants, who also face housing and cost-of-living problems but in different ways - or they won't acknowledge them. Including a Palestinian citizen as the second speaker at the largest-so-far demonstration gives some indication that they might.

And if they acknowledge those claims, J14 protesters will either realize that they need compromise with one another to achieve at least some shared goals - or they won't. Here's a clear example: to fix Israel's imbalanced economic growth, resources will have to be poured into infrastructure, education and job integration for the Palestinian citizens, and some think that money would have to come out of the defense budget or perhaps costs related to Israel's occupation of the West Bank, among other possibilities - that represents a compromise for right-wing groups. Arabs might have to accept that national service is a route into the job market. Either represents a compromise from some sector.

But if citizens manage to make far-reaching compromises, the movement might conceivably set a precedent for the elites to make much larger national compromises - such as those that will be needed to write a constitution anchoring citizens' rights and a national vision - or it won't. Leaders have never managed to make those compromises in Israel's history so far - but maybe the citizens have something to teach them.

Electoral/political system. If the movement creates such a powerful momentum towards solidarity and compromise that it manages to spur interest in a constitution, other massive changes might be inspired. One of the bigger ones that has been discussed for years is electoral reform. If, as my colleague Dimi Reider thinks, the protests create a consciousness of unity based on shared daily-life causes that transcends sectoral identity, maybe the next step is for the party structure to change to reflect that. Could Israel ever imagine moving from a system of largely sectoral parties - for religious, secular, Palestinian citizens, etc - to purely issue-based parties, where people group themselves based on social and economic needs (and not just policy regarding the territories)?

If that happens, it might finally become urgent for citizens to have a new electoral system, as some

of the protesters have already demanded. A partly-regional system has long been considered, that would make lawmakers more accountable to actual citizen needs. It never generated much social momentum - but maybe this could change. And maybe with less Israelis less enamored of fragmented sectoral representation, there would one day be fewer parties altogether.

The conflict. The plethora of small parties in Israel's governing coalition - often ideologically conflicted or religiously inspired - has made it almost impossible for Israel to push through the painful compromises that an agreement with the Palestinians would require.

A new political system with fewer parties could provide greater political flexibility. Moreover, a far more urgent focus social needs is assumed to require hard re-thinking of the national budget and the expenses caused by the conflict. Combined with a newfound spirit of compromise for the sake of a better life, Israel might just reach the national and political maturity needed to make those compromises.

The problem. If the protests are as deep as they may seem - the changes they might hypothetically bring in the future will be far-reaching and slow. But September is the present. Israelis may be at the start of a new era, but Palestinians feel at the end of their rope. And in Israel today, euphoria is still eating up headlines.

The protests could just as easily drown out policies that will set back peace, as attention focuses on minute policy questions - the national housing law, the privatization of the Israel Lands Administration, free education for the youngest children. The Jewish State bill, the approval of yet another slew of Jewish homes in East Jerusalem, are reminders that the government view the protests as a cover to advance deeply problematic policies.

The worst-case scenario is that to distract attention from J14, the government could allow (or even encourage) physical escalation with the Palestinians, come September. But there's one last option: to distract attention from the social protests, Israel's leader might also create a historic drama of peace.

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P.S.

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