

My lesson from Thomas Friedman's critique of Israel: in a democracy, politicians can't shun dirt



by Lev Tsitrin

According to the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman's lengthy overview of the current Middle East's trends, "[From Tel Aviv to Riyadh](#)," all is doom and gloom in Israel. While the Saudis chose to "overhaul all of its public schools and university curriculums to develop a work force of men and women who can compete in a post-oil age ... all with the aim of "instilling technological proficiency alongside critical thinking, problem solving and analytical capabilities" to align the Saudi education system "with competitive international standards,"

in Israel “the new government budget includes an unprecedented increment in allocations to the settlers and ultra-Orthodox, including full funding of schools [that do] not teach English, science and math. This budgetary increment alone is more than Israel invests each year in higher education altogether – or 14 years of complete funding for the Technion, Israel’s M.I.T.” – which is “completely nuts.” Plus, the country is being torn apart by the proposed Supreme Court overhaul that is also perceived as serving the ultra-Orthodox, the opposition to it being “spearheaded by a coalition of Israel’s most elite technologists and war fighters.”

Those trends indeed don’t look right – but Thomas Friedman does not ask the question of “why are they pursued?” leaving us to think that there is something wrong with Israel, *per se*.

I beg to differ, and I would explain the same facts very differently.

When it comes to Saudis, it’s crystal-clear – the country is an absolute monarchy, so everything is done according to its ruler’s wish and vision – and if “the iron-fisted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman” decided that “oil will not be there forever,” so “competitiveness has to come from other places and our sources of growth have to diversify if we are going to make the economy more resilient and unlock the full potential of the society,” including letting the women drive and work – who is to say “no”?

It is more than a “little more” complicated in Israel. The Israeli prime minister is no Saudi king – and has to get an agreement from other parties represented in the Knesset in order to even form a government. And when I said, “get an agreement,” I meant “buy an agreement” – because political parties represent different populations, and want their interests accommodated in return for their support. The price varies, of course (the story goes that, to push through the ultimately-disastrous Oslo agreements, the then-Prime Minister

Rabin needed one more vote – which he obtained by promising one of the resisters a chauffeured car. How not to recall Shakespeare’s Richard’s heartfelt cry – “my kingdom for a horse!”) – but it can be rather high.

Here in the US, it is less open – but in Israel, the horse-trading is done in full view. You want to be a prime minister? Why not? We’ll support you! How much will you pay? What will be the budget allocations for our priorities? What will be there for us in new legislative initiatives? Which cabinet positions will we take? We are here for you, Mr. Aspiring Prime Minister – but you have to pay us off!

Israel’s present government is a textbook example of this spoils system – the system of wringing the goodies in exchange for support – and it came about because Netanyahu finds himself isolated: the parties whose policies align with his Likud’s adamantly refuse to sit in the government with him. Admittedly, Netanyahu is no saint – he is a politician with plenty of dirty tricks (that include broken promises) in his toolbox, and he has been formally indicted on several charges – but what’s the use of high-mindedness in a political system designed to benefit those who sit in the government, not those who are in the opposition?

So, if Israelis are unhappy with current legislative priorities and the budget – well, they got this in return for the lofty high-mindedness of the politicians from the parties that refuse to sit in government with Netanyahu. The religious parties were less squeamish and managed to wring massive concessions out of the cornered Netanyahu: a budget that is “nuts,” and the legislative priorities that include the Supreme Court reform. Those could have been avoided if the parties that are more aligned with Netanyahu agreed to sacrifice some of their principled cleanness.

And oddly, they are not terribly principled, either. While claiming to protect “the rule of law” in their protests

against the Supreme Court reform, they don't particularly care about the rule of law: if they did, they would have kept in mind its cornerstone: the presumption of innocence – and known that by refusing to join Netanyahu's government because he was under indictment, they presumed him guilty, before the court said so. Not a very law-respecting move, I'm afraid!

This same desire of so many politicians to keep their hands clean by shunning Netanyahu served Israel rather poorly during the Trump administration, when Israel was unable to form a stable government after four or so elections in a row, thwarting Trump's peace plan that gave Israel advantageous borders, and making him remark that "it is a very strange system" after Netanyahu could not form a government even though his natural partners were in a clear majority – though Trump, the master deal-maker, managed to turn this lemon into the lemonade of the Abraham Accords.

To Thomas Friedman's regular readers, his long column was a yet another dig at Israel. While I do not care for his conclusions, his facts seem to be mostly sound – and those, to my mind, illustrate the opposite of what he is trying to say. To my mind, the lesson is that politics is inherently a dirty business – and without participating in it (and getting one's hand dirty in the process), one won't achieve any results. In America, they say that if you want something, you should vote. In Israel, it seems, the same idea translates into – if you want to get what you want, join the government – even if that means getting your hands a little dirty. Politics is a dirty business, and if you want to stay clean, stay away from it, and – of necessity – let those who don't mind getting dirty, set the agenda – and steer the budget to their priorities, not yours.

Bottom line – Israelis who march in protest against the Supreme Court change, and against the budget, bark up the wrong tree. They should be protesting against the politicians for whom they voted – and who refuse to sit in the government,

wasting that vote and thwarting democracy as a result – all to keep their hands clean of the very politics that drives the democratic process.