

{MARCH 20 2004}

BRAVO, AMIGOS!

A Prime Minister is waging war. The great majority of the people oppose the war. The majority vote for the Prime Minister.

Absurd? Well, that was the situation in Spain. It also applies, more or less, in Israel. But here the similarity ends.

The Spanish people have thrown their Prime Minister out. The Israeli people go on supporting their Prime Minister.

The Spaniards, in their innocence, believe that if a Prime Minister does the opposite of what the great majority of the people want, he has to go. They think that this is what democracy is all about. In Israel, such a thing is unthinkable.

And that is not the only difference.

Of course, the Spanish people arrived at this conclusion under the influence of the big terrorist attack in Madrid. The Spanish reaction was very different from the usual Israeli one.

After the terrorist onslaught, the Spanish asked themselves: why did they do it? What caused this murderous attack on us? The logical answer was: the Prime Minister's policy has brought this on us. The conclusion: Let's find another one.

In Israel, such a question cannot arise. What brought the terrorist attacks on us? What sort of a question is that? The reason for terrorism is the inborn murderous character of the Arabs. It has, of course, nothing at all to do with the policy of our Prime Minister.

When a terrorist outrage happens here, logic flies out of the window. Instead of thinking and asking questions, people shout "Death to the Arabs", demand bloody revenge and gather around the Prime Minister.

Another difference: the Spaniards got angry. The Prime Minister lied to them. He exploited the outrage for his election campaign. When he already knew that all the signs pointed to Islamic fanatics, he pretended in public that the attack was perpetrated by the Basque ETA organization. He hoped to garner the votes of those Spaniards who oppose an independent Basque homeland. But the voters understood that this was a lie and did not like it. The Prime Minister is lying to us? To hell with him.

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In Israel, when the Prime Minister lies, the public remains apathetic. The Prime Minister has lied to us again? So what? Isn't he always lying? Nothing to get upset about.

One can only envy the Spanish. After a horrible civil war, after decades of an oppressive dictatorship, in spite of domestic splits and many terrorist attacks, what a healthy reaction! What strong democratic instincts!

(By the way: some 500 years ago, half a million Jews were expelled from Spain. In the last decades, almost all the "Sephardim" - Sepharad is the Hebrew name for Spain ? came to Israel. The great majority of them support Ariel Sharon. Why do the "Spanish" Jews in Israel react differently from the Spanish people back home?)

There is another difference between Spain and Israel, and it may be the decisive one.

Last year I visited Spain. Some days before I arrived, the Prime Minister's party had won an impressive victory in the local elections. The opposition Socialist Party was lying flat out. Everybody spoke of it with contempt, some with pain. The party was in ruins, perhaps beyond redemption.

And then it happened: the party replaced its old leaders with an energetic, fresh one, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. With a lot of luck, this man has now led his party power.

When the Spanish people were fed up with their Prime Minister, they knew that there was a reasonable alternative. They could throw the ruling party out because there was another party ready to move in.

In Israel, these conditions do not apply. Our leading opposition party, Labor, is also a shambles, but there is no sign of recovery. Quite the contrary.

It is headed by a pathetic person who would make a deal with the devil for a place in Sharon's government. Its other old leaders, all of them certified failures, are already quarrelling about the chairs that Sharon may allot them, should he be so kind as to invite them into his cabinet.

The Israeli situation is surreal: according to all opinion polls, a large part of the public is fed up with the war, the bloody cycle of suicide bombings and targeted assassinations, the settlements and the settlers. They want a solution and are ready to pay the necessary price ? the end of the occupation, a Palestinian state, the dismantling of the settlements, a reasonable compromise about Jerusalem, withdrawal to the vicinity of the Green Line. They want to shift our national resources from occupation and war to economic growth, education and social welfare.

So how does this translate into political realities? It doesn't. There is no serious political force able to offer an alternative leadership.

In Spain that was a temporary situation, which corrected itself in a natural way. In Israel, this situation seems to be permanent.

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Therefore, one can not only envy the Spanish, but also learn from them. The political ball is round. It can turn suddenly. What seems to be impossible can become possible if there are good people around, who can convert good intentions into political reality.

I hope that this will happen here, too. True, some people are already standing in line to replace Tony Blair and George W. Bush. What has happened to Jose Maria Aznar in Spain must happen to them, and I hope that it will. Then, with a lot of courage and a lot of luck, the turn of the fourth in the queue will come, and Ariel Sharon, another man of blood and lies, will be turned out.

In the meantime we salute our friends at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea. Bravo, amigos!