

{MAY 6 2006}

300 KISSES

Shall we start with the good news or the bad news? As confirmed optimists, let's start with the good news.

To paraphrase an old Hebrew saying: Don't look at the vessel but at what's not in it. Avigdor Liberman is not in the Israeli government.

He made a huge effort to board the ship. He put on an almost liberal mask, ate juicy herring with Yossi Beilin, who called him a nice person. After the elections, Amir Peretz made no mention of Labor's pledge not to sit with him in the cabinet. It seemed that the brutal racist would succeed in achieving legitimacy for his fascist views.

But the brutish wolf did not reckon with the wiliness of the fox. Ehud Olmert twisted the gross braggart around his little finger. At the last moment, Liberman was left on shore, looking on with longing eyes as the ship, bedecked with gay flags, put out to sea without him.

Furious, he threw away his amiable mask, and gave a speech in the Knesset demanding the execution of the Arab deputies who had met with the members of the Palestinian government. After that, even Beilin will not be having breakfast with him any more.

The second piece of good news is that Shaul Mofaz has been removed from the Ministry of Defense. This primitive man, the king of "targeted liquidations", has been thrown from the high tower of Defense into the empty well of Transportation. One can enjoy the cartoon showing Mofaz driving a tank down the streets of Tel-Aviv.

This joy is mixed with deep anxiety. It is difficult to get used to the appellation "Minister of Defense Amir Peretz". Only a few hours before he took the oath of office in the Knesset, soldiers shot an innocent Palestinian taxi driver in the back and killed him. The day before, they had killed "by mistake" a Palestinian woman at her home. From now on, Peretz will bear the responsibility for such acts, which have become part of the daily routine of occupation. He has put himself into an almost impossible position. The next demonstrations we hold will probably have to be against him.

The third item of good news is that this is a civilian government. The four key players (Prime Minister and Ministers of Defense, Finance and Foreign Affairs) are civilians. Undoubtedly, a sign of maturity.

Among the 25 cabinet ministers, there are “only” two generals (Mofaz, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer), both in junior positions. Even the number of Shin-Bet officers in the cabinet (Gideon Ezra, Avi Dichter, Raffi Eytan) is larger than that. But let’s not rejoice too soon: a civilian government may be browbeaten by the might of the generals and feel the urge to prove its military prowess (echoing the song: Anything you can do, I can do better...) Will these civilians dare to act against the advice of the Chief-of-Staff, who takes part in every cabinet meeting and dictates policy in the name of “security”?

In this government, there are no lions. This is a government of foxes, headed by the leader of the pack. With Ariel Sharon, the last of the great figures of the 1948 war is gone. The presence of the pathetic Shimon Peres only underlines this. This is a government of gray party hacks.

There are two glaring holes in it. Olmert made his first major mistake when he did not include a member of the Russian-speaking community in the new cabinet. A million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of them imbued with a rabid racism they brought with them, will now be pushed even further into a corner. This is a great danger. Bad news.

Another community of a million and a quarter is also left outside: the Arab citizens. Like all its predecessors, this government, the 31st in the state’s 58 years of existence, is a Jewish government, not an Israeli one. It doesn’t have a single Arab member. This large community will also be pushed to the margins. Bad news, indeed. All of Olmert’s empty phrases about equality between all citizens cannot cover this up.

So what will top the agenda of the Olmert government? It seems that the most plausible answer is prosaic: its very existence. It is unified by the ardent desire to survive until the end of its four and a half years’ term. (The half is a leftover from the last government).

This was most vividly expressed by the orgy of kisses in the Knesset when the new ministers took the oath of office. Such an outburst of childish happiness is more typical of lottery-winners than ministers called upon to deal with fateful problems.

The Knesset Speaker, Dalia Itzig, the first woman ever to occupy this post, became a Mezuzah, kissed by all the ministers (except for the Orthodox) on her raised podium. Afterwards, the new ministers kissed each other and all the Knesset members they came across, accompanying this with hearty embraces and slaps on the back. If we assume that every minister kissed a dozen persons on average, that makes 300 kisses.

It is difficult to imagine such a scene in any other parliament, not to mention the first Knesset. David Ben-Gurion was no great kisser.

The flag flying from the mast is, of course, the flag of Convergence. That was and is Olmert's main slogan. But one should not hold one's breath waiting for its implementation.

Olmert himself has announced that before the realization, much time should be devoted to dialogue. Dialogue with whom? Well, with the settlers. And with the United States. And with the "international community".

Anyone missing from the list? Only the Palestinians. With them it is not possible (nor necessary) to talk – until they recognize the right of existence of Israel as a Jewish State, accept all past treaties, stop the violence and confiscate the weapons of the organizations. In short, surrender unconditionally. And become members of the Zionist Organization, too, while they are at it. Olmert is patient. He is ready to wait for two years.

During these two years, the United States and the international community are expected to recognize the "permanent" borders that the Olmert government wants to fix "unilaterally", at its pleasure, without the agreement of the Palestinians and without even talking with them.

In the two years, the government will do nothing for peace. On the contrary, it will enlarge the settlement blocs – in order to prepare housing for the settlers who will be moved there, when the time comes, from the isolated settlements. That's to say: first of all the big settlements will be annexed and enlarged, and after that – God willing – some small settlements will be dismantled. According to the plan, all the settlers will remain on the other side of the Green Line. Olmert has already rejected out of hand the suggestion that compensation be paid to the settlers who are willing to come back to Israel now.

And what is the really good news? This government speaks publicly about the "partition of the country" as the "lifeline of Zionism". It speaks of withdrawal from "most of Judea and Samaria" and the dismantling of settlements. That shows a big shift in public opinion.

One of the leading racists in the Knesset, Effi Eytam, shouted that "there is no Jewish majority for withdrawal". He should be sent back to third grade to learn his arithmetic. True, according to the racist-nationalist accounting, there are only 58 Jewish members of the Knesset in favor of withdrawal (28 Jewish members of Kadima, 17 of Labor, 7 Pensioners, 5 Meretz, the 1 Jewish member of Hadash). But against them, only 50 Jewish members oppose withdrawal (Likud, Shas, the Orthodox, the Liberman people

and the National Union). The remaining 12 members are Arabs, who can be presumed to support withdrawal (1 of Kadima, 2 of Labor, 2 Hadash, 3 Balad, 4 of the United Arab Party).

Accordingly, there is not only a large majority in the Knesset (70 against 50) for the partition of the country, but even a “Jewish majority” (58 against 50). That is a geological change in public opinion – a sign of a slow but massive and ongoing process.

Few believe that this government will indeed last for four and a half years. The general guess is that it will fall in two years, when the “convergence” is slated to start. At that time, Shas will probably secede.

Olmert asked us to be patient. Alright, then, let us be patient as we wait for the next elections.