

Israeli Republicanism

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Abstract

This policy paper explains the present-day situation of Israeli republicanism and the possible and desirable directions in which it could develop, against the backdrop of the political-ideological discourse on the concept of “*Mamlakhtiyut*” that took place in Israel during the first decade of its statehood. The republican civic-political ideology termed in Hebrew “*Mamlakhtiyut*,” is an important focus in order to understand Israel’s patterns as a nation-state from its establishment to present times. This ideology deals with state institutions, citizenship, democracy, and law, as well as with the relations between the political community and the individual. It outlines conditions for the establishment and development of the sovereign state and analyzes the “state consciousness” required of its citizens, i.e., the overall perceptions, responsibility, and relations involved in living within a political community. The understanding of this ideology and its centrality in Israeli political culture is important also for understanding current Israeli society and for the delineation of appropriate civil and political developmental directions for it.

* Translated by Elisheva Blusztajn

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Two basic claims are raised in this essay. First, that there was consensus on republicanism among all Jewish groups in Israel. The “struggles over *Mamlakhtiyut*” reflected, in fact, two internal tensions **within** Israeli republicanism itself: social-economic tension between left-wing and right-wing forms of republicanism, and political tensions between its consociational (power-sharing) and majoritarian (pluralist) forms. Second, these two axes of tension pertaining to Israeli republicanism – between social left and right and between political accommodation and decision – are suitable axes for assessing the future developmental directions of Israeli republicanism.

Background

Israeli politics have been in a continuous process of disintegration, the roots of which date back to 1977 and 1990. The result of this process has been fragmentation into small and medium-size parties of superficial identity and the absence of two axis parties entrenched in social-economic interests that could bear the responsibility of rule. An illuminating demonstration of this is the fact that the crushing defeat of the Labor party in the 1977 political turnover (33 seats) would have been considered in the last elections (2009) a sweeping victory for any party concerned. The Kadima party held an early victory celebration after winning 28 seats over the 27 of what would turn out to be the ruling party (the Likud, headed by Netanyahu). The downfall of the Labor party and Meretz in these elections constitutes a severe crisis, though a similar one befell the Likud party in the previous elections (2006), so that in order to figure out the general process it is best to focus on the fact that the “winners” of these two election campaigns are merely medium-size parties.

The public tend to speak of political blocs of right and left (“left” mostly comprising clear adherents of privatization and supremacy of wealth, while imbued with social compassion). However, this refers for the most part to blocs with borders that are hazy, both to the voter and to the post-election observer, and are organized around political issues that are either anachronistic or short-lived, in other words, dependent on fast-changing political situations. Voting under such conditions constitutes a gamble as one has no way of knowing what coalition or policies this would beget.

This continuous crisis is an important part of a general, complex process of de-politicization, of removing from Israelis their ability to decide between clear alternatives and collectively influence their economic and financial lives as well as the foreign and defense policy of the state. However, this weakening of democratic politics undermines one of the most significant achievements of political Zionism as a whole, and should be a source of concern for Zionists of both right and left social thinking. The erosion of Israeli republicanism from the mid-1980s onwards has reached exaggerated levels that threaten the functioning and even the robustness of the State, whatever its social orientation. The process of disintegration of Israeli politics threatens the very ability of effective rule in the State of Israel, whatever the government’s political views.

If we are interested in renewing Israelis’ sense of control over their destiny, their effective political sovereignty, and their ability to shape their own society, we must rearrange our political arena, our political parties, and the laws regulating their activity and connection to the regime and to state institutions. Such comprehensive reforms are essential for the rehabilitation and development of the State’s regulatory capability and with it, restoring sovereignty to its citizens.

Within the Jewish *yishuv* (pre-State Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel), and later in the State of Israel, there emerged quite a developed democratic-republican civil society, which established a democratic law-abiding state, despite the raging bloody national conflict, profound demographic upheavals, social cleavages, and economic hardships. Democracy, the rule of law, and civil and social stability could not have developed without a civic-republican consciousness commonly held by wide strata of the Jewish-Israeli population – left and right, religious and secular, long-time inhabitants and new immigrants. This consciousness, termed in Israeli political discourse as “*Mamlakhtiyut*,” created the basis for the democratic law-abiding government in Israel and also contributed, to a great extent, to social cohesion and the beginnings of the welfare state during the first decade of the State’s establishment, which were also based on the comprehensive civic-republican connection.

The concept embodied in Israeli “*Mamlakhtiyut*” is well explained by the political theory referred to in the scientific research of the last forty years as “republicanism.” This doctrine views the existence of a developed public sphere as conditional for the significant and sovereign life of the individual, and therefore emphasizes the importance of participation in the political-public sphere and the development of civic consciousness and responsibility. *Mamlakhtiyut* is in fact an Israeli form of democratic republicanism, and its various manifestations are ultimately variations of a republican worldview shared by most Israelis.

This essay examines the central manifestations of the Israeli republican ideology from its inception up to the present, against the backdrop of its roots in the *yishuv*, in order to indicate that the civic-ideologic infrastructure, common to Israeli society, can assist in the present-day rehabilitation of *Mamlakhtiyut*. First and foremost,

Mamlakhtiyut contains the roots of Israeli civil strength, thus it can explain the robustness – against all odds – of democracy, the rule of law, and social stability in Israel. A careful examination of the historical foundations of this robustness, while keeping in mind the extreme changes that have occurred over the last decade, may assist in lifting Israeli *Mamlakhtiyut* from its current crisis.

Furthermore, the beginnings of *Mamlakhtiyut* are a constitutive part of Israeli history, not only in its political-institutional meaning, but also culturally: the discourse, symbols, and civic culture that developed within it are a well of notions, civil-political ideologies, and symbols that serve Israeli society up to present times, and are part and parcel of Israeli identity, besides cultural-national and religious components. Israel is a republican democracy no less than it is a Jewish society.

Main Findings

The Zionist and Israeli civil discourse was from inception vibrant and diverse and reflected a deeply-rooted self-definition of Israeli political society, common to all the significant groups within it: left and right, secular and religious. The principles of this self-definition, a sort of national identity card at least in reference to the political content of identity, are strong commitment to democracy, to the rule of law, to civic values, and to a concept of Israeli republicanism emphasizing that Israel is in fact the national state of the Jewish people, comprising all its unique culture, identity, needs, and tensions. These principles still have a valid place in the world of most Israelis.

From the shifts in the ideology of *Mamlakhtiyut* within its Zionist sources in the first decade of the State, it appears that

while there was a debate over *Mamlakhtiyut*, more importantly, it served as the common and significant platform on which profound ideological disputes were discussed. It thus served as an essential common denominator for the main protagonists struggling then over the shaping of the new political society.

At the end of the 1970s and 1980s, *Mamlakhtiyut* lost its status as common denominator and defining arena for the boundaries of the main debate within society due to the link of the “*Mamlakhti* state” with “the welfare state” and with the Keynesian monetary order prevailing in the world from the end of the Second World War and up until the mid-1970s. *Mamlakhtiyut* seemed exclusively associated with an old-world order from which one must be extricated. The leaders of the privatization revolution seemed to be adopting a non-republican ideology, especially as they were basing themselves on the sectoralization of Israeli society. But the second stage of the privatization revolution, taking place around the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, exposed the fact that its proponents, in fact, upheld a right-wing republican ideology. The disputes over judicialization, appropriate relations between wealth and power, economic centralization, and the role of the executive authority in monitoring and regulating society and the economy, were mostly arguments over the redefinition of *Mamlakhtiyut* in a period of right-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* hegemony.

Beyond the weakening of organized labor and the detrimental impact on wide social groups within Israeli society, the harsh results of the process of the rise of right-wing *Mamlakhtiyut*, has been the considerable weakening of the effectiveness of governmental rule in Israel and the accommodative power of the political parties, as well as the transfer of considerable political power into the hands of private wealth and professional elite groups formally belonging to

government authorities. This last, in some ways actually facilitates the weakening of *Mamlakhtiyut*. Among the professional elite groups one can mention the jurists (whose process of ascent has been described at times as “judicialization”), economists, and executives. These elites range from the public to the private sectors, gradually becoming decisive factors in the shaping of public policy in Israel while circumventing the governmental processes of a power-sharing democracy. The considerable involvement of the courts, legal advisors and Ministry of Finance personnel in the shaping of social policy in Israel are the more blatant examples – but not the only ones – of this situation. The result is deviation from consociational government democracy towards “decisive, enlightened ‘republicanism,’” whose decisions lean towards the interests of private wealth. This refers to a republicanism that still maintains the set of political perceptions developed by the West in modern times, and yet is less democratic and less republican by nature, as it further reduces the individual’s ability to influence the shaping of the public arena.

Now, with such a weakened republican democratic political system, a mighty dispute has arisen between those who wish to maintain the relatively new power gained by the professional systems and those who wish to rebalance the power pendulum in favor of the elected political authorities. This argument is being held after private wealth has already gained substantial influence both among the elected political authorities and the professional elite groups. The obvious axes of discussion required due to the consolidation of the new power relations should run along the similar axes outlined here for the assessment of *Mamlakhtiyut* in the early days of the State: politics of decision versus consociational politics; left-wing vs. right-wing *Mamlakhtiyut*; sectoral vs. regulatory-*Mamlakhti* tendencies; centralized vs. decentralized political and economic power.

Recommendations

The political and constitutional debates held in the last few years over the appropriate bases for the Israeli nation state, the patterns of the new Israeli civil culture, and the place of the state in society and the economy, given the trends of multiculturalism and globalization on the one hand, and the privatization processes and global economic crisis on the other, must take into consideration the years-long Israeli commitment to the republican tradition, and must revert to using the civic-*mamlakhti*, Israeli language and terms developed in Israel over the years. The concepts of analysis brought here – *Mamlakhtiyut* as Zionist republicanism, consociational vs. majoritarian *Mamlakhtiyut*, left-wing vs. right-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* – can enrich and deepen the contemporary public discussion on civil and social-economic issues. The suggestions brought here for contending with the contemporary crisis of *Mamlakhtiyut* by introducing in-depth radical changes to the political arena and developing regulatory republicanism are examples of such steps.

The consolidation of the privatization revolution at the end of the 1990s enables contemporary Israeli leadership to end its battle against the “large state,” as the state no longer threatens the hegemony of the market mechanisms in shaping current-day Israeli economy and society, and there seems to be no foreseeable possibility for the renewal of the Zionist Labor movement’s version of republicanism in Israel. Therefore, the consolidation of the privatization revolution enables Israel’s political leadership to go back and develop a social-economic right-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* ideology, as opposed to the left-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* characterizing the State’s first two decades. This possible development would reflect inversely, and under totally different historical circumstances, the arguments at

the State's foundation over the economic-social characteristics of *Mamlakhtiyut*.

There are three apparent possibilities for the future development of Israeli republicanism: The first, its decline as part of the worldwide trend of the potential decline of nation states as the focus of control and collective national identity. The vitality of Israeli republicanism leaves hope that this possibility is not realized. Moreover, as has been discovered by the global economic crisis, the fact that the particularistic state is inevitably a regulatory and controlling factor put an end, to a great extent, to the post-national, that is post-republican, predications that were widely accepted prior to the crisis.

Second, although highly improbable politically, is the renewal and updating of left-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* as in the school of the Zionist Labor movement. Yet, there is no doubt that left-wing *Mamlakhtiyut* still reverberates in Israeli political culture. The proposals brought here could serve as an opening for its rehabilitation as an oppositional voice necessary for the rejuvenation and healing of the spirit of Israeli republicanism.

The third possibility for the continued development of Israeli republicanism is structural reforms for rehabilitating the prestige and functioning of the arena of the political parties and the Israeli system of government after the crisis of privatization. The authors of this policy paper deem the desired change to come through the advance of the bases of majoritarian politics, developing foundations of participatory politics, and rehabilitating and developing the regulatory functioning of the state within the economy, society, and politics. These reforms could be based on a right-wing social-economic republican ideology, which accepts the market dominance

within society but grants the state an important regulatory role and strives to protect it and the universalistic interests and values it represents in the face of unchecked control of private wealth.