RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN ISRAEL

By Michael Freedman

Jewish religious political parties have historically played an important role in Israeli politics. Religious political parties receive on average about 20 percent of the vote. Israel's Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system gives strength to the religious political parties and enabled them a large, often disproportionate, impact on national politics, frequently, determining whether the Israeli coalition tilts to the left or right. Three main political parties represent the diverse religious Jewish communities in Israel: the Jewish Home (Religious Zionism, or "modern Orthodox"), Shas (*Sephardic* Ultra-Orthodox), and United Torah Judaism (*Ashkenazi* Ultra-Orthodox).

However, recent sociological changes such as greater exposure to the internet have led to a decentralization of religious authority in Israel. The decentralization of religious authority in Israel interacts with two major factors, which cause the political fragmentation of the mainstream religious Zionist party and causes the radicalization of the Ultra-Orthodox parties. These factors are voter demand for religiously sanctioned parties and the institutional structure of the religious political party. Notably, the changing fortunes of Israel's religious political parties have serious implications for Israeli democracy.

Religious parties in the Middle East, including Israel, rely heavily on clerics for legitimacy and popular support. Religious leaders tell their followers to vote en-masse for specific parties – and people do so with the expectation that they are fulfilling a religious commandment.[115] Thus, capable religious leadership translates into political power. However, recent developments in mass communications have weakened the authority of religious leaders, with the introduction of religious radio stations, more newspapers, and the internet. In turn, public exposure to the numerous sources of media, online information, and opinions fragment support for religious authorities.[116]

Observers note a similar pattern in Israel where greater exposure to mass media and the internet, among other important sociological changes such as upward social mobility,[117] has had an impact on the nature of religious authority (link). Religious leadership was centralized in the past, and religious parties, especially the ultra-orthodox ones, relied on religious authorities to espouse their politics. For instance, Shas was able to rely on Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef and the Ultra-Orthodox *Ashkenazi* parties relied on one, agreed-upon "great rabbi of the generation" (*Gadol Hador*), such as Rabbi Shach. But, with increased information comes increased choice; today there is no clear religious leader in either of the ultra-orthodox camps. There are many leading rabbis – but no one, centralized figure. Religious communities are more fragmented, have greater competition between religious leaders, and are less united in their choice of a leader.

This decentralization of religious authority has impacted the religious political parties in different ways. Israel's main religious Zionist political party split into the Jewish Home and the New Right in the run-up to the April 2019 elections. Further splits followed with *six* political parties competing for votes from the religious Zionist community. After the April 2019 elections, several smaller parties did not run again, and pragmatic alliances were formed between the different political parties (*Yamina*). This alliance was unstable, and the party split after the September 2019 elections. Only after several months of contentious negotiations did the parties agree to run together for the March 2020 elections (link). They won only 6 seats, with many potential voters moving to other parties such as Netanyahu's Likud party.

Historically, the Ultra-Orthodox parties were comfortable serving in right-wing and left-wing coalitions (including Shas support for Oslo, without which the Oslo Peace Accords would never

have been signed). However, during the 2019 elections, Shas identified strongly with the right-wing parties. In addition, the leadership has made more policy demands in the religion and state realm. These demands alienate potential right-wing partners (such as Avigdor Lieberman's Yirael Beitenu party popular with extreme right wing but secular voters) and are seen as disconnected from the average supporter of the party (link).

Two main factors explain how decentralization of power within religious leadership shapes the contemporary political fortunes and positions of Israel's Jewish religious political parties.

Religious voters' demand for religiously sanctioned parties: Voters for whom a religiously sanctioned party is critical are less likely to move to a secular party, while voters for whom religious sanction is less important are relatively more likely to do so.

The institutional structure of the political party: Some religious political parties include formal institutions run by religious leaders who make decisions for the party (including, for example, the composition of the list or how the party should vote on important decisions), while other parties may affiliate with a religious stream (such as religious Zionism) and defer to religious advisors, but the decision of the latter are informal and non-binding.

The table below maps Israeli political parties

	High voter demand for religious sanction	Low voter demand for religious sanction
Formal religious institutions	United Torah Judaism	Shas
Informal religious institutions	National Union, Otzma Yehudit, Noam	Jewish Home; New Right; Zehut

based on these factors.

Weakening of the Religious Zionist Parties

Religious Zionist voters historically placed less importance on religious authority than do typical religious parties in the Middle East. Political leadership would occasionally consult with specific religious leaders, but did not treat their decisions as binding. However, disagreements over several religious issues, including the religious nature of the state, religious gender equality (especially support for female prayer at the Western Wall), support for illegal settlements, and female political leadership, have polarized the community.

These divisions became especially prominent during the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, which was seen by many members of the religious Zionist community as a betrayal by the state to settle the land of Israel.[118] While most community leaders ruled that it was illegal for religious soldiers to disobey orders to evacuate settlements, other leaders called for mass refusal and promised that the expulsion would never happen since it went against the divine will (link).

Reflecting the divisions within the community, religious Zionist political parties then split between a more liberal group that believes their political influence is hampered by the involvement of religious leaders in politics and a more conservative group that believes that political parties need to submit to the authority of religious leaders. The Ultra-Orthodox parties have even campaigned for these religious Zionist voters, with messages such as "Judaism without compromises" (link). In turn, different religious leaders from these two sub-communities endorse different parties. This spread of religious Zionist voters over several parties, including larger parties such as the Likud, lowers the overall electoral strength of the community.

Radicalization of the Ultra-Orthodox Parties

Despite high religious fragmentation, formal religious bodies allow Ultra-Orthodox parties to largely maintain their electoral power, despite divisions within religious streams (e.g.: Lithuanian versus Chasidic). This is due to the

fact that the Ultra-Orthodox parties set up a Rabbinic body which is composed of key leaders from the different streams who settles divisive issues such as the order of the candidate list. Furthermore, the party does not allow for primaries or women to run for political leadership.

In contrast, in local city elections where there is no formal religious body to bridge the gaps, religious disagreements have political consequences. For example, in the most recent municipal elections in Jerusalem, the Ultra-Orthodox parties ran competing lists and publicly backed different candidates for mayor (link). For example, secular Mayor Nir Barkat lost the Jerusalem elections in 2003 and was only successful in 2008 because one ultra-Orthodox Hasidic sect refrained from voting for Barkat's religious competitor.

Yet, this consensus comes at a cost. Rabbinic consensus generally adopts the most *extreme* position in order to avoid a split, which gives extremists great power. [119] For example, several uncompromising and unpopular demands in the religion and state realm, such as the directive to not perform infrastructure work on the Sabbath and to close all grocery stores on the Sabbath, originated from the head of the Gur community. This legislation was ultimately pushed by the ultra-orthodox parties, despite strong internal opposition, in order to prevent a formal split within the political party.

In summary, political parties with formal religious institutions are more likely to survive. These parties are also more likely to be run by Jewish law and are less likely to hold by several democratic norms. The combination of political flux and intransigent demands among Israel's religious political parties leads to less electoral stability and was an important contributing factor to repeat elections in Israel (link). Due to the religious community's large birth rates, these political parties are likely to gain more political power in the future, becomingly increasingly reliant on more extreme political views in order to maintain the peace among religious leaders.

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THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY IN ISRAEL'S SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE

By Meirav Jones and Lihi Ben Shitrit

One week before Israel's second round of general elections in September 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that should he be re-elected, he would act immediately to "apply sovereignty" over the Jordan Valley in the West Bank.[120] The talk of "sovereignty" only intensified with the Trump Administration's "Peace to Prosperity" plan, which was celebrated by the Israeli right (and center) for its endorsement of Israel applying sovereignty over at least 30% of the occupied West Bank, including the Jordan Valley and all Israeli settlements.[121] While the term "sovereignty" rings of legitimacy, "applying sovereignty," or "*hachalat ribonut*," has become the acceptable Hebrew phrase for the annexation of the West Bank without bestowing citizenship on its majority non-Jewish – Arab-Palestinian – residents. In fact, the Hebrew term for sovereignty, *ribonut*, is currently used almost exclusively in this context, raising serious questions about the compatibility of *ribonut* with democracy.

In our ongoing research project, we explore the extent to which *ribonut* has become synonymous in Israeli public discourse with annexation of land and domination. We make two main arguments. First, this now common notion of sovereignty is incompatible with the dominant Western understanding of sovereignty as self-rule and as the highest order of command within a defined territory. Second, even in the Israeli context, the understanding of sovereignty as domination represents a shift from the way sovereignty had been understood since the establishment of the state. We further argue that the current meaning of sovereignty in Hebrew was consciously registered in the Israeli political imagination by a political movement that emerged from the settler

social norms and personal attitudes," *Psychological science* 28, no. 9 (2017): 1334–1344.

[111] Bassan-Nygate and Weiss, "Party Competition and Cooperation Shape Affective Polarization: Evidence from Natural and Survey Experiments in Israel."

[112] Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization."

[113] Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries* (Yale University Press, 2012).

[114] Mia Ashri, "Culture Minister Regev Against the Barbur Gallery: Immediate legislation is required to deny its budget," *Haaretz*, June 2018, https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/art/.premium-1.6153763. Jonathan Lis, "Israel Passes Law Meant to Keep Breaking the Silence Out of Schools," *Haaretz*, July 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-passes-law-targeting-groups-that-support-soldiers-indictment-1.6284735.

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[115] Sharan Grewal et al., "Poverty and Divine Rewards: The Electoral Advantage of Islamist Political Parties," *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 4 (July 8, 2019): 859–74, doi:10.1111/ajps.12447.

[116] Richard A Nielsen, "The Changing Face of Islamic Authority in the Middle East," *Middle East Brief* 99 (2016): 1–8.

[117] Other sociological changes have also contributed to the weakening of religious authority. These include greater socio-economic mobility and more exposure to Israeli society via university and college studies. See Haim Zicherman and Lee Cahaner, "Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Emergence of a Haredi Middle Class in Israel," *The Israel Democracy Institute (Hebrew)*, 2012.

[118] Nadav G. Shelef and Orie Shelef, "Democratic Inclusion and Religious Nationalists in Israel," *Political Science Quarterly* 128, no. 2 (2013): 289–316, doi:10.1002/polq.12038; Michael Freedman, "Fighting from the Pulpit: Religious Leaders and Violent Conflict in Israel," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 10 (2019): 2262–88.

[119] Charles S Liebman, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1983, 75–86; Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, "Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 02 (2012): 225–43, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000135; Barbara F Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 7–39, doi:10.1162/ISEC.

Meirav Jones and Lihi Ben Shitrit Notes

[120] https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/1.7829170

[121] The Israeli Right did not accept the plan as a whole, it rejected the part of the plan that outlined a vision for a limited – and not sovereign – Palestinian State.

[122] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf, pp. 8-9.

[123] Hans Kelsen, "The Principle of Sovereign Equality of States as a Basis for International Organization," Yale Law Journal 53 (1944); Benedict Kingsbury, "Sovereignty and Inequality," *The European Journal of International Law* 9 (1998), 599-625; Jean L. Cohen, "Sovereign Equality vs. Imperial Right: The Battle Over the "New World Order", Constellations 13:4 (2006), 485-505;

[124] First published in 1997 by the Center for Educational Technology, now available online to subscribers that include Israel's colleges and universities, publishing houses, and news outlets: https://www.ravmilim.co.il/naerr.asp

[125] Wikipedia has been studied as a source utilized by both school and college students, alongside other sources of knowledge. Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, "How Today's College Students Use Wikipedia for Course-Related Research," *First Monday* 15:3 (2010); Sook Lim, How and Why do College Students Use Wikipedia?" *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60:11 (2009) 2189-2202. Scholarship on Israel has argued that Wikipedia is a more valuable source of information resource than teachers appreciate. Hagit Meishar-Tal, "Teachers' Use of Wikipedia with their Students," Australian Journal of Teacher Education 40:12 (2005). Further, in Computer Science, Wikipedia is nowadays being used as a resource to recreate natural-language processing, leaning on the vast amount of human knowledge encoded within it. Evgeniy Gabrilovich, Shaul Markovitch, "Wikipedia-based Semantic Interpretation for Natural Language Processing," *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research* 34 (2009), 443-498. Finally, recent studies have found that Wikipedia is legitimated by US news sources, partly by their reliance upon it. Marcus Messner and Jeff South, "Legitimizing Wikipedia," Journalism Practice (2011) 5:2. Wikipedia is thus an important resource for both human and computer learning, as well as for information gathering and wide dissemination, and its content is more significant than might otherwise be assumed.

[126] Wikipedia, "Ribonut" [Hebrew], Accessed April 3, 2020.

[127] Wikipedia, "Sovereignty," Accessed April 3, 2020

[128] Adnut was a stated goal of the "Lehi" movement, as articulated in its charter. Lehi was an acronym for *Lohamei Heirut Israel*, or Israel Freedom Fighters. The Lehi's 18-point charter called "Principles of Rebirth", identifies its goal as *adnut* over the entire biblical land of Israel (point 11 on the charter), and redemption (point 4a) ultimately to be marked by the construction of the third temple in Jerusalem (point 18). Conquering the land from non-Jewish inhabitants (using the term kibush, which is currently used for "occupation") is point 10 on the charter. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/18_Principles_of_Rebirth.jpg. The Sovereignty Movement sees itself as conducting a campaign to evade the possibility of dividing the land of Israel and to push for Jewish control over

the entire territory. It is comfortable with redemption, and among its activists are those who work towards the construction of the Third Temple in our times. One member of the steering committee of the movement, Geula Cohen, was herself a member of the Lehi from 1943 until the movement split up, and on the website of the Sovereignty journal she is listed as a Lehi fighter. http://ribonut.co.il/AboutSection.aspx?NewsHomeItemId=3&lang=2

[129] http://www.ribonut.co.il/?lang=1

[130] Exponential rise in the use of the term in news (through google search, April 7,2020) in two-year blocks seen in a preliminary search for ribonut (in Hebrew) on Google under the "News" tab. 2008-2009: 43 mentions, not with the meaning of domination. 2010-2011: 149 articles mentioning ribonut with the meaning of domination; 2012-2013: 289 articles; 2014-2015: 646 articles 2016-2017; 1210 articles. 2018-2019: 5320 articles.

[131] https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/west-bank-annexation-could-move-forward-as-early-as-july-623802.

[132] Brown, Wendy. *Walled states, waning sovereignty*. MIT Press, 2017.

Hermann Notes

[133] Hermann, T. et. al., 2019. The Israeli Democracy Index 2019. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute

[134] For the Israeli Voice surveys entire data set see (idi.org.il).

[135] By the Economist Intelligence Unit political participation index Israel scores

[136] This trichotomy is hardly relevant for the Israeli Arab citizens as they put themselves almost totally on the Left.

[137] The three blocs are very different in size: about 55-60% identify with the Right, about 15% with the Left and 25-30% with the Center.

[138] When the two surveys were conducted the Deal of the Century was not yet on the table and relations with the Palestinians were hardly on the agenda of any party as the matter seemed dead ended.

Marc Lynch Notes

[139] Marc Lynch, "Is There An Islamist Advantage At War?" APSA MENA Politics Newsletter 2(1), available at https://apsamena.org/2019/04/16/is-there-an-islamist-advantage-at-war/

[140] Steven Brooke, Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

[141] Elizabeth R. Nugent, After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transitions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Khalil Al-Anani Notes

[142] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

[143] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

[144] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers Co, 1971)

[145] Roger Petersen, "Emotions as the Residue of Lived Experience.", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Volume 50, Issue 4, October 2017, pp. 932-935.

[146] See for example, Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, Francesca Polletta, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); G.E. Marcus, "Emotions in Politics.", *American Political Science Review,* 2000 3:1, 221-250, and Roger Petersen, "Emotions as the Residue of Lived Experience.", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Volume 50, Issue 4, October 2017, pp. 932-935.

[147] Interview, August 24, 2017

[148] Interview, August 24, 2017

[149] Interview, August 24, 2017

[150] Mustafa Menshawy, *Leaving the Brotherhood: Self, Society, and the State*, (New York: *Palgrave Macmillan, 2019*)

[151] Interview, November 12, 2017

[152] Mada Masr, 9/9/2019 at https://madamasr.com/en/2019/09/09/feature/politics/in-a-letter-from-prison-jailed-muslim-brotherhood-youth-call-on-prominent-public-figures-to-mediate-with-authorities-to-secure-their-release/

Steven Brooke Notes

[153] Steven Brooke, *Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage,* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong, "Is There an Islamist Political Advantage?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17 (2014), pgs. 187-206; Tarek Masoud, *Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). Thomas Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani ,"Testing Islam's Political Advantage: Evidence from Indonesia," *American Journal of Political Science*, 56:3 (2014), pgs. 584-600.

[154] Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Columbian Civil War,* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil* War, (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War,* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

[155] Steven Brooke, "From Medicine to Mobilization: Social Service Provision and the Islamist Political Advantage," *Perspectives on Politics*, 15:1 (2017), pgs. 42-61.

[156] Melani Cammett and Aytuğ Şaşmaz, "Political Context, Organizational Mission, and the Quality of Social Services: Insights from the Health Sector in Lebanon," *World Development*, 98 (2017), pgs. 120-132.

Nicholas J. Lotito Notes

[157] The combined data include 352 groups, of which 38 (11%).