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When will a politician behave differently?

By Eran Yashiv

Recent political developments have put the issue of official corruption at the center of public debate. Are the behavior patterns of Israeli politicians about to change as a result? One way to answer this question is to examine what Prime Minister Ehud Olmert thinks about his performance, and what we can learn from that about the factors likely to be taken into consideration by his successors.

Olmert, I assume, thinks more or less along these lines: "I didn't do anything unusual compared to others, especially former prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, and former presidents Moshe Katsav and Ezer Weizman. Primary elections and other political activities require fundraising. A senior minister, and certainly a prime minister, deserves to stay at good hotels as a representative of the State of Israel or as a fundraiser for non-profit organizations. And on the positive side, I worked to formulate a peace treaty with both the Palestinians and the Syrians, I conducted a wise and responsible economic policy, I tried to improve state institutions, and even during the Second Lebanon War I acted in accordance with the professional opinions I was given."

When Olmert spoke to foreign leaders he received an impression that his behavior was the norm. When he looked at others he saw similar conduct. Therefore he felt unjustly persecuted by the media and the legal system. If that is indeed the perception of the situation, then Olmert's behavior pattern could be repeated by successive prime ministers, once the media attention dwindles again.

The public's problem with Olmert, and with many other politicians, is that they have the wrong incentives. The existing incentives lead them into behavior that is considered corrupt. Although some politicians act differently, they are a minority in Israeli politics and usually a minority that is eventually forced out (examples: Dan Meridor, Benny Begin, Yossi Beilin). There must be incentives that are clear to everyone, especially to the broad range of the country's politicians.

Like all human beings, politicians are guided, among other things, by considerations similar to those of profit and loss. If there is an opportunity to realize material profit from political office, why not realize it? In addition to pursuing power and honor, politicians are motivated by material considerations, particularly when these complement and reinforce the considerations of power and honor. That is how rulers have behaved throughout history.

When will a politician decide to behave differently? Only if some cost is imposed for certain actions. Society can impose costs in a

variety of ways, including taxes, fines, ousting and imprisonment.

In the present context, the appropriate positive incentive would be to significantly increase salaries for positions of elected office. For example, the prime minister could be paid hundreds of thousands of shekels per month, instead of tens of thousands. This should be done in order to provide a reasonable basis for the demand not to accept favors from various sources.

At the same time, severe prohibitions must be imposed on holding additional jobs and engaging in other income-producing activities. There must be a simple, clear, razor-sharp law defining permissible personal and party contributions. In addition, an effective mechanism must be introduced for the immediate ousting of a politician caught engaging in corruption, a mechanism that does not allow for delaying tactics and evasion of investigation and trial. Similarly, there is a need to formulate clear rules for police investigations that will enable them to be carried out quickly and vigorously.

If all of the rules and regulations governing conduct, worded clearly and simply, are collected into a kind of "leaders' codex" that includes severe punishments for those convicted, I am certain that every politician will make the right calculation. Clear criteria will also facilitate the investigatory, prosecutory and judicial systems. The intention of these laws and mechanisms is not only to prevent the receipt of money in envelopes. The system must be constructed in such a way as to prevent undue influence from various groups on office holders. The right law, including the possibility of enforcement, will weaken the link between big money and government, if it confronts the politician with costs, as well as benefits.

In Israel the laws and mechanisms governing such activities are vague and incomplete, if not nonexistent, perpetuating the failure of the system: Each politician looks at his predecessors and tries to accumulate the greatest possible personal profit, in effect making a simple calculation of cost versus benefit. When the benefit is tangible and clear while the cost is amorphous and malleable, it results in the kind of behavior we have seen. Only by increasing the costs, and clarifying them, can we bring about the change that the public wants.

Now is an opportune moment to implement such a step. The public atmosphere is conducive, and MKs who recommend a legislative change in this spirit will receive widespread public and media support. It could even be on the agenda in the next election. It would be a shame to miss the opportunity.

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