CHAPTER III

THE ORIENTAL FACTOR IN ISRAELI POLITICS

The establishment of the state of Israel led to the strengthening of the political centre and the imposition of new burdens upon it. The society inherited a tradition of political activity from the Yishuv that is not only intensive, but also tends to penetrate into spheres which, in other societies, are considered to be inappropriate for politics. After independence, political power in Israel has for most years stayed firmly in the hands of Jews of East European and American origin or Israeli origin and policies have been influenced by the values held by them.

In addition to suffering from unequal socio-economic conditions from the beginning, the Oriental communities also have suffered from unequal political representation. While they enjoyed all the rights granted to Israeli citizens, very few Sephardim could be found among the ranks of Israeli leaders and crucial positions. In fact, for a long time none were found in important positions as those of Prime Minister, Ministers of Defense, Finance, Education or Foreign Affairs. European pioneers held high political offices partially because Orientals upon their immigration to Israel entered a political system which was alien to them.¹ In many of the countries of the Oriental immigrants there were different political systems and most of these communities arrived

in Israel without their political leaders and without much interaction with modern nation
state based on western political system that Israel was.

Ethnic socio-economic discrimination coupled with other factors has over the
years resulted in a sharp polarisation of voting along ethnic lines in the country --
especially since the major political upheaval of 1977 when the conservative-nationalist
hard-line Likud party, with the support of a majority of Oriental voters, for the first time
took away the premiership from the Labour party. In subsequent elections instances of
ethnic tensions intensified, leading some observers to conclude that ethnic cleavages were
widening and becoming predominant factor in the Israeli political process.2

Social scientists have argued that in Israel, still marked by ethnic boundaries,
there has been a definite co-relation between ethnicity, class and political affiliations. In
this backdrop, this chapter attempts to analyse Israeli political structure, parties and
institutions, political alienation of Oriental communities and their representation in
political system since statehood, consequent or otherwise voting behaviour of Oriental
Jews over the years and attributed Oriental tilt towards the right-wing Likud Party for its
hard-line foreign policy with respect to Israel's Arab neighbours and ultra-orthodox Shas
party for its politics of religion.

ORIENTAL IMMIGRANTS AND POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

The origin of Israeli political party system can in large part be traced to Diaspora

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experience. A great variety of ideological orientations existed among Jews in the Diaspora before Israel's independence. A major political divide concerned the basic analysis of the Jewish question, and of the solutions to be provided for it -- whether through Zionism and the struggle to create an independent Jewish state, local Jewish autonomy in the Diaspora, or otherwise. In addition, Jewish political participation in Diaspora tended to reflect the attraction of Jews toward general ideologies prevailing in the surrounding societies, such as liberalism, socialism, nationalism, and the like. Jewish political responses, then, emphasised a great variety of conflicting ideologies and interests.

The most important factor was the formation of a well developed political structure composed of the World Zionist Organisation and of political and public institutions in the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Jews in and from Muslim countries played only a negligible role in this political structure as the Zionist Movement was primarily a European movement. By the establishment of the state a political system had developed with a wide range of well organised institutions, with positions of dominance and prominence and Oriental peripherality. 3

In Israel, ethno-national criteria lie at the base of the system of national symbols that express the collectivity's normative commitment to the Jewish people and order the response to the problem of national security anchored in the Arab-Israeli conflict. 4 On its

establishment, the State of Israel took over the anthem and the flag from the Zionist movement and adopted seven-branched candelabrum of Jewish religious tradition as the official symbol of the state, thereby expressing the link to the Jewish people as a historic cultural-national entity. The symbols of sovereignty and statehood -- the flag, the presidency, the government, Parliament, and especially the army -- became the foci of strong national identification both in Israel and in the Diaspora.\(^5\)

The specific commitment to the Zionist conception that places the immigration and settlement of Jews in Eretz Israel at the centre of the Jewish national revival is embodied in the Law of Return. This unique law, as mentioned earlier, grants privileges to Jews who wish to become Israelis, but confers no privileges on Jewish citizens as against non-Jewish citizens.

The most prominent application of ethno-national principles in the sphere of national security is the exemption of all Israeli Arabs (except for the Druze) from compulsory military service. The exemption of Israeli Arabs from the draft is not specified in law, but implemented through the discretionary powers vested in the Minister of Defense.\(^6\)

The diverse political backgrounds of Diasporic Jewish communities were gradually transfused by Jewish immigrants into the political reality of the pre-state \textit{Yishuv} and provided the foundation of the major political camps that still operate in the contemporary Israeli political arena. In turn, the changing characteristics, needs, and

\(^6\) Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, op. cit., p 5.
experiences of Israel's population, along with evolving local political realities, stimulated continuous adjustments — and great fragmentation — in the Israeli party system.

The establishment of the state was followed by massive immigration on the one hand, and by enhanced political struggle among the already existing political forces on the other. Due to the Law of Return all Jewish immigrants were granted immediate citizenship, including the right to vote. The immigrants, as a result, were not left outside the political system, but were approached by party emissaries and functionaries at all stages of travel to Israel and in the immigrants camps on arrival.

Their rapid and intensive introduction into the political system did not stem from the internal activity of the immigrants propelled by their specific needs; but quite the contrary, from the needs of the existing parties to gain support in their internal struggle. In the context of this political struggle, the immigrants who lacked resources or organisation, were "taken on" as a reinforcement to the various political contenders rather than entering as an autonomous, self-determining force. What is important to note here is the fact that the entrance of Oriental communities did not lead to any redefinition of the existing political system, its organisational structure or any debate on such issues.

We have already mentioned in the second chapter that the education and occupations of most of the Oriental immigrants were not suited to the existing Israeli economy, which made them highly dependent on unskilled, low paid, state initiated employment which was scarce. This dependence on the state also led to their politically

7 Deborah Bernstein, op. cit., p 14-16.
vulnerable situation as also they had little political experience which could have helped them from their own political organisations or enter the existing organisations in a way more beneficial to them.

Primarily, Oriental immigrants in the first decade were seen as a quantity, as a mass to be acted upon, to be molded, or -- at a more concrete level -- to be won over by the ruling party or distributed by the different parties according to their relative power. This approach ran through all levels of political structure from top leaders to local functionaries. 8

Even Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister shared the same perception and in fact went one step ahead. He said: 9

The exiles now gathering in Israel are not yet a people, they are a scattered mass and human dust, with no language, education or roots, with no links to the tradition and the vision of the nation. The spiritual integration of this immigration, its transformation from human dust to a cultural, creative independent nation is a difficult task which must be accompanied by great love and devotion.

The Zionist Congress of 1951 came to a more or less similar resolution which said:10

8 Ibid, p. 17.
9 Quoted in Deborah Bernstein, op. cit., p. 17.
In the face of the mass immigration from Middle Eastern countries, the Zionist consciousness and the cultural, social and occupational standards of these Jewish masses and of the youth of these countries for efficient integration in the economy and society of the state of Israel.

Examining the above mentioned facts one can argue that there existed a gap between the goals of the founders of the Jewish state and the cultural background of the Oriental communities. Also there was a big difference between "pretensions and practices"\textsuperscript{11} of the founders of Israel which further kept away Oriental Jewry from substantial political participation during the early decades.

**POLITICAL STRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONS**

Israel is a good example of the parliamentary system. After its establishment in 1948, the state of Israel rapidly developed its main formal institutional characteristics. The structure of government consists of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, with a President, a Parliament, a Cabinet, and a legal system. The president is the titular head of the state, whose functions are mainly ceremonial and formal. He is elected for a five-year term by a majority vote and secret ballot of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). The first President of the state was Chaim Weizmann, who was an outstanding leader of the Zionist movement during the Mandate period.

The Knesset is the formal (but not actual) supreme government agency elected by the people, and in turn selects the executive branch based on its membership. The leader

\textsuperscript{11} Based on an interview with Arien Dayan, a prominent Israeli journalist who specialises on Oriental Jewry.
of the plurality party is usually called to form the government. If there is no majority party (as is usually the case in Israel), a coalition government is formed. The government ceases its term in the office if the Knesset expresses no confidence in it. But while the Knesset can express a lack of confidence in the government, it cannot express no-confidence in a single minister.

The one-chamber Parliament consists of 120 members, whose powers are not limited either by presidential veto or by the Supreme Court. It is elected for a four year-term by direct, equal, and secret ballot, on the system of proportional representation.12 Formally, the government is responsible to the Knesset and cannot be formed without majority support in the Knesset and must resign when it fails to command the latter's confidence.

The Knesset is the supreme legislative body of the state. It has tremendous symbolic importance as the seat of People's sovereignty and the most important deliberative council of the nation.

The political leadership of the parties that can form a working coalition in the Knesset is elected to be the government. Formally, the President, after consultation with leaders of the parties, assigns a member of the Knesset the task of forming the government. He negotiates with the various party leaders on the choice of his colleagues, who may not be members of the Knesset. The member may notify the president within three days that he declines the responsibility. In he does not, this government builder has

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12 S N Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 286.
21 days, if needed, or he may turn to someone else to perform the task. If a second Knesset member also fails to form the government, the President may turn to a third and so on.\textsuperscript{13}

When approved by the Knesset by vote of confidence, the government is constituted. The principle of collective responsibility officially governs the Cabinet system, although the exact interpretation of this responsibility has constituted a bone of contention in many of the coalition governments.\textsuperscript{14} Formal and informal power rests with the government and its ministers. There are gradations of power, with the Prime Minister and those close to him near the top of the scale. Politically and constitutionally, the entire exercise of forming the executive branch of the government is dependent on the composition of the legislative branch and its acquiescence to the process of coalition formation. It is an elementary fact of political life in Israel that it is the government, and not the Knesset, which is the focus of political power in the country.

The regulations for cabinet ministers have been more stringent for some time. A minister is expected to devote all his time to his job. Rules against professional and commercial conflicts of interests have been established, and while these expressed expectations have proven largely unenforceable, they make clear the norms of behaviour expected of ministers.

\textsuperscript{14} S N Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 287.
In the Knesset, especially for those more active in the day-to-day operations of the house, a clublike atmosphere develops. Common interests and shared experience bring people together regardless of the party background.  

The judicial branch of government comprises religious as well as civil courts. The judicial system provides one of the greatest paradoxes in Israeli civil life. In a culture that is very highly politicised, the judicial system is professional and impartial despite its occasional wavering and despite charges that it is being politicised. The rabbinical courts exercise exclusive jurisdiction on matters of marriage and divorce in the Jewish community. In other matters of personal status, such as alimony, probate, and succession, they may hear a case only if all parties consent.

The ecclesiastical courts of the Christian communities have exclusive authority in marriage, divorce, alimony, and confirmation of wills of the members of their respective communities and they may judge other matters of personal status with the consent of the parties concerned. The Muslim courts have exclusive jurisdiction in all matters of personal status of the Muslim community.

Although there is no written constitution, the political system as a whole and particularly the judicial system respect the principle of limitation of government and have exercised self-restraint in many areas. The country has been, almost from its inception, under emergency conditions and hence liable to be run by emergency regulations. Yet, in

15 Asher Arian, op. cit. p.188.
16 Ibid. p. 194.
17 S N Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 287.
many areas (at least in Israel's pre-1967 boundaries) of civil liberties Israel's record is good.\textsuperscript{18}

According to Israel's electoral law, the 120 seats in the Knesset are divided proportionally according to the vote won by each party. Only parties failing to reach a minimum of one percent of the national vote are excluded.\textsuperscript{19} One result of the system is to permit political representation of relatively small socio-political groups, thus enabling virtually all significant minorities to be heard. Since no single party has ever won an absolute majority of the votes, government has been possible only on a coalition basis. As a result, tiny political factions occasionally gain disproportionate power.

\textbf{PARTY SYSTEM}

The Israeli party system accommodates a variety of competing ideological orientations. It is where electoral lists are drawn and approved, an act that determines the roster of personalities who will be in the Knesset, the natural reservoir or those with increased probabilities of attaining significant levels of power. The development of political party organisation in Israel is highlighted by a tendency toward mass-membership parties with extreme oligarchic tendencies. The tone was set by the parties of the left, both secular and religious, and the other parties followed.\textsuperscript{20}

The most important political parties in Israel were, to a great extent, also predominant during the time of the Yishuv. Within them all, the transformation attendant

\textsuperscript{18} Asher Arian, op. cit. p. 194.
\textsuperscript{19} Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 80.
\textsuperscript{20} Asher Arian, op. cit. p. 115.
of the establishment of the state, brought about the development of new unified organisations uniting the different movements, sects and interest groups and with a marked shift in orientation towards the absorption of new elements. There are left-oriented, centrist (progressive and liberal) and the Zionist religious parties in Israel. Labour and Likud are two prominent parties of the country today. Since no political party has ever won an absolute majority of the votes, government has been possible only on a coalition basis. As a result, tiny political factions occasionally gain disproportionate power.

The major feature of internal party structures in Israel is indirect representation. Members cast their ballot only once for the broadest-based institution of the party. This broadest-based institution elects the next highest-level institution, the members of the third tier are elected by those in the second, and so on. This arrangement facilitates control of the party by a group or groups of activists while professing concern with the demands and wishes of the broader membership. Indirect democracy can be thought of as a many-layered pyramid with each layer distilled to from the layer above it until the topmost layer is finally reached. Each layer is called upon to select only the layer directly above it, but all higher layers can commit the party as a whole, unless specifically prevented from doing so by the constitution.

Israeli party structure is a multi-tiered one that includes a broad-based convention, a narrower-based central committee that elects an executive committee, which in turn

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22 Asher Arian, op. cit. p. 123.
selects a secretariat. While the number of tiers and their respective sizes may change, the general principle applies. As a rule, the more tiers between the mass membership and the leadership, the more unlikely direct democratic control or, if one prefers, the more indirect form of representation.

Political life in Israel, as exemplified by its parties, its organisations, the Knesset, and the government, is highly oligarchic and hierarchical. But change can and has occurred. Each party has worked out its own particular combination of issue positions. This composite political pluralism ensures governability by way of a variety of possible coalition agreements on selected and specific portions of each party's programme. This also means that voters usually have a range of choice among several parties, parts of whose programmes are sufficiently close to one another.

Prominent ideological tensions exist, first, between different party positions with regard to the Israeli-Arab conflict and, second, between various approaches to the question of religion and secularism. A further factor making for political cleavage, common to almost every other political system, is social class. While many issues taken individually, tend generate political confrontation with little room for compromise, national defense, religious, and socio-economic platforms, as expressed by the different parties, do not overlap according to rigid and constant patterns.

Since this chapter is concerned more with the relationship between the ethnic dimension and voting behaviour rather than politics per se, we will, in the light of the

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23 Ibid, p.132.
24 Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 81.
above mentioned facts, briefly analyse the results of past Israeli political elections after the end of the period of mass immigration and examine the Oriental factor in Likud movement and right-wing tilt of Oriental communities vis-a-vis their political alienation over the years and socio-economic status.

ORIENTALS AS VICTIM OF POLITICAL ALIENATION

As discussed in the first and second chapter, Israeli society and institutions, as they existed in 1948, were better suited to absorb European and American immigrants who were better equipped in terms of language, culture, education and other values necessary to deal with a new political system of modern state of Israel. Ashkenazim shared more values with the existing Israeli society than did the Sephardim who were also the victims of the negative images and thus had to pay a greater costs in migrating.

Upon their arrival, apart from having discriminated against in social and economic spheres, Oriental immigrants had to face political alienation also as Knesset and local political institutions were over-represented by Ashkenazi communities. Various factors combine to explain this situation. In addition to the longevity and tenacity of the European pioneers in terms of holding on to political office, many Orientals coming to Israel entered a political system not familiar to them. Also, in their Middle Eastern countries of origin, political systems were far less complex, there usually existed fewer political institutions and the Jews tended to remain politically uninvolved.
In addition, there had been very little activity in Muslim countries which resulted in lack of experience in internal Zionist politics and in relative ignorance of the political scene. Thus the organisations and the resources of the veteran political centre, together with the inexperience and lack of means of Oriental immigrants, set the scene for the emergence of the dependent relationship between them.\(^25\)

The living conditions of many Sephardim in Israel upon their arrival were such as to make it difficult for new leaders to emerge.\(^26\) As discussed in previous chapters, depressed incomes, ethnic ecological segregation, poor housing and settlement and poorer educational preparations are not factors conducive to success in modern politics. As a consequence national political was dominated by the Ashkenazi Jews for coming many years.

Though all Jewish immigrants to the new state of Israel were granted immediate citizenship including the right to take part in elections, the actual political participation on the part of the Oriental immigrants was very limited during the first decade and has remained limited ever since.\(^27\)

Also at the local level, elections seats in the local council proportional representation of the Oriental communities did not figure out in the initial years. Elections at the local level are structured so that the voter casts his ballot for a party list of candidates. Seats in the local council are then assigned among the various parties in

\(^{25}\) Deborah Bernstein, op. cit., p. 17.
\(^{26}\) Avraham Shama and Mark Iris, op. cit., p. 131.
\(^{27}\) Deborah Bernstein, op. cit., p. 13.
proportion to each party's share of the total vote. This proportional representation is executed on an at-large basis. The first name on the list gaining a plurality often serves as mayor. In many instances the person chosen to head the list of a party was not a local inhabitant selected or groomed by the local party apparatus but rather an individual slated by the national party organisation. Frequently this was a reward for his loyalty and dedication to the national party, rather than his knowledge and ability relevant to the problems particular to that city. In other instances, towns would have their mayors and town councilmen appointed directly by the Minister of the Interior as a prerequisite to granting these towns local autonomy.28

Such practices, which invariably went against the political representation of Oriental Jewish community, were not productive in terms of recruiting leaders who were capable, dedicated and responsive to local problems. In any democracy leaders who are in effect imposed on localities by an external factor, as a national political party, would tend to see their opportunities for reelection and advancement as being best served by acquiescence to the directives and policies of the national party.

Therefore, such leaders are not likely to vigorously press the national government for aid to local projects and services if such demands contravene the official national party policy. On the other hand, when the local leadership, which is more rooted in the local populace, is recruited for political representation, it is more sensitive and committed to local problems.

28 Avraham Shama and Mark Iris, op. cit., p. 131.
In Israel, in those cities which had locally rooted leadership, there was substantial evidence or greater civic improvement than in comparable cities and towns whose leadership was superimposed from outside. Thus the relatively rapid development of beer Sheva, Kiryat Gat and Dimona in 1970s testified to the effectiveness of these cities' indigenously elected leadership. In these localities, education, housing and employment were in much more satisfactory condition than was the case in similar towns.²⁹

Further highlighting the political alienation of the Oriental Jewish community, a 1960 study has detailed some noteworthy data about Moroccan immigrants. This group was most vulnerable to the political machine: 62.9 percent were party members, and 74.9 percent participated in the election. When participants were asked why they had joined the party, 45.4 percent indicated material reasons, sixty percent believed that the objectives that their party tried to promote in the town were related to personal benefits, and not to ideological reasons. Among the respondents that emphasised the material aspect no one reported of demands for collective benefits, such as an improvement in the state of employment in the town. Only 30.8 percent were satisfied with the town's political life; 57 percent were satisfied with their party.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., p. 132.
Highlighting the political alienation of Oriental communities, Shlomo Avineri, then a professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem wrote in 1972.\(^3^1\)

The integration of the Oriental immigrants into the political structure of Israeli life thus shows remarkable similarities with the process through which Irish and Italian (and Jewish) immigrants became integrated into the American political structure at the turn of the century. None of the political alienation and exclusion which until very recently characterised the position of the American blacks can be found in the process which the Oriental communities are undergoing in Israel. Like the Italians and the Irish in America, they still are at the bottom of the economic ladder...

Almost negligible representation of the Oriental communities during the early years of the statehood and during the decades to come signifies their alienation from the mainstream Israeli political scene and from the Knesset.

A compilation of all those who served from 1949 to 1966 in the first six Knessets shows that 206 out of a total of 284 members were born in Europe or America, while only 25 percent were born in Africa and Asia. The remaining 53 were Israeli-born, for the most part of European parents.\(^3^2\)


Between 1959 and 1973 the number of ministers of Asian-African origin rose to two out of a total ranging between 15 and 24 (8-13 percent of ministerial posts). By 1989 their share in the government had increased to nine out of a total of 26 (35 percent).\footnote{Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 103.}

In 1972, there were 18 Sephardim out of 120 Knesset members and in 1973, of nineteen cabinet ministers, only one was Oriental. Though in the Knesset, the number of Jews of Asian-African origin (including those born in Israel) grew from eight in 1949 to 19 in 1973 -- an increase from seven to 17 percent.\footnote{Ibid, p. 103.} The new cabinet of Yitzchak Rabin which took office in 1974, included one additional Oriental from Tunisia, who became Minister of Agriculture.\footnote{Avraham Shama and Mark Iris, op. cit., p. 131-134.} The following elections did not result in any appreciable change till 1977 when Oriental-backed Likud party hit the Israeli political scene with snatching the premiership from Labour party.

The Orientals did not do well in terms of filling responsible position in the civil service either. A survey of senior civil servants, a group numbering some 3.9 percent of the civil service force of 40,000 in 1966/67, found that only 6.6 percent of these people were born in the Middle East or North Africa. Four out of 21 on the Central Committee
of the Histadrut (the General Federation of Labour and a key economic and political force in Israel) were Oriental, as were six out of 187 of the Zionist Executive Committee and one out of 12 Jewish Agency directors.\textsuperscript{37}

These trends are visible among both major parties and are further enhanced through the presence in the political system of forces even more attuned to an Asian-African electorate. The implications in the longer run may be quite significant, since local authority and trade-union frameworks may constitute important channels of recruitment for the national political leadership. In turn, structural similarity at the level of second or third-rank party leadership is consistent with the already noted striving of both major parties to win the confidence of large and ethnically heterogeneous constituencies.\textsuperscript{38}

Whenever the Orientals have been taken into the political fold, they have to start from the lower ranks. Thus in the 1980s the various forms of political activity of the established parties entailed the entrance of some Oriental immigrants into the lower echelons of the political hierarchy. As this is often alluded to as a channel of mobility, it is important to examine this issue.

Immigrants were to introduced to staff many of the lower ranking positions in the rapidly expanding institutions, especially those in far off places and in transit camps. Such recruitment was encouraged in order to ease the Contact between the various parties and the immigrants. The main motive for the incorporation of some immigrant activists was to advance the interests of the centre. Such recruits were left at the low levels of a

\textsuperscript{37} A study by Eli Eyal quoted in Avraham Shama and Mark Iris, op. cit., p. 134.
\textsuperscript{38} Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 103-104.
tightly hierarchical and highly centralised political structure. They became part of a clique supporting the functionary above them, and in turn developed their own clique, with which they obtained power in their neighbourhood or settlement. These local functionaries were chosen according to their party loyalty together with their ability to impose order and to restrict opposition.  

During the first two decades of the state the Orientals made some attempts at political action, but these attempts were relatively few and generally ineffective. The various ethnic parties and associations remained quite small and had little influence on either the Orientals or the political centre. Similarly, those Orientals who joined the established parties remained in the lowest echelons of the party. They served as political brokers, mobilizing support for the parties in return for a few benefits that were granted to their support.  

Though for years Labour party did not openly accept the political alienation suffered by the Oriental communities, but, before coming to power this year, Labour party chairman and incumbent Prime Minister Ehud Barak made a public apology to the Sephardim for the "mistakes" committed while absorbing Sephardi immigrants in the early years of the state.

39 Deborah Bernstein, op. cit., p. 20.
Barak during party's first ever convention outside Tel Aviv in 1997, where more than 2,000 delegates gathered to hear from him repeat his public apology, in his address, said:

Entire communities were uprooted, tradition was broken, the fabric of the family damaged. It wasn't done maliciously, but the result was a great deal of suffering. We did not always know how to respect the wealth of the (Jewish) sources from which we draw. In my name and in the name of the Labour Party - I ask forgiveness. 41

Barak's move was interpreted as beginning of an aggressive campaign to woo Oriental voters and place social issues at the top of Labour's agenda alongside peace and security issues. He had attempted to insert a new language into a political culture where no one ever apologises for anything. Young Sephardi delegates held signs quoting the High Holiday liturgy: "I have forgiven as you asked." 42 Similarly Labour party in its campaign in 1999 had focused on wooing a large number of Russian and Ethiopian immigrants to bring them into Labour fold.

Labour Party's realisation of the arrogant treatment of Sephardi immigrants and its leader's apologising for the mistakes of his predecessors wrongdoings in 1997 and this year during the election campaign signifies political alienation of Oriental Jewish community since the onset of the statehood.

ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION: CONFLICT AND PROTESTS

The Ashkenazi-Oriental dichotomy in Israeli has also given rise to social discontent and various conflicts and a number of protest groups like Black Panthers in the country have surfaced on political scenario from time to time. These conflict stem from the way Orientals were incorporated into the society as well as from the way the class structure crystallised.43

Demonstration were organised through the country in 1949 to protest the lack of opportunities which forced many Mizrahim (Oriental immigrants), regardless of educational or skills levels, to take up menial jobs. In Ashkelon, thousands of Mizrahim in April marched against ethnic discrimination, while 300 Mizrahim from Ramleh staged a "noisy" demonstration in Allenby Street demanding "bread and work" and tried to storm the old Knesset building until they were forced by the Israeli police. Two weeks later, Mizrahim stormed the Jewish Agency building in Haifa and went on a rampage in the Department of Absorption demanding "work and housing" and police had to be called. In July of the same year, Mizrahi demonstrators from Jaffa attacked the former parliament building in Tel Aviv.44

Small protest groups kept on figuring from time to time but it was in Wadi Salib, a formerly Arab part of down town Haifa, that Oriental resistance to Ashkenazi discrimination first erupted on a large scale in the summer of 1959. After the Palestinians

fled or had been driven from Haifa by advancing Zionist troops in 1948, Wadi Salib's empty houses had been given to new immigrants and soon became overpopulated slums. By the end of the 1950s, most of the inhabitants were Mizrahim, specifically Moroccans.

The spark of the protest took place on July eight, when rumors swept through the neighbourhood that a Moroccan shot by police in the street had died of his wounds. The next day the Union of North African immigrants hit the streets carrying black flags and chanting slogans against police. Three weeks later slogan shouting by demonstrators led to violent clashes with police and rioting spread to other parts of the country which led to large scale arrests and detentions with four Union leaders given six-month prison.45

The gap between Ashkenazim and Orientals which Israeli officials and academics had predicted would close, showed no sign of diminishing during the 1960s and became more visible as a result of the unprecedented economic boom that followed the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, with economic benefits accruing overwhelmingly to the Ashkenazim.

Tensions further reached new heights when the then Prime Minister Golda Meir, in sharp contrast to the Orientals' DDT reception twenty years earlier, herself extended warm welcome day after day and to the Soviet immigrants arriving during 1969-70 and hailed them as the "real Jews" for they knew Yiddish. Resentments were further fueled by the attitudes of the new Soviet immigrants themselves, who sent petitions complaining

45 Joseph Massad, op. cit., pp. 57-60.
about having to live next to black Jews and threatening to leave the country unless the government satisfied their demands. 46

In this backdrop, Black Panthers made their first public appearance on March three, 1971 in a demonstration in Jerusalem. The group was a street-corner group from the slum neighbourhood and all the youngsters were of Moroccan origin, around 18-20 years old. Demonstrations continued through August, sometimes drawing five to 10,000 people. Some of them shouted “Golda, teach us Yiddish.” Their demands included the elimination of slums, free education and housing for the needy, the elimination of "reform schools," higher wages for those supporting large families, and full representation of Mizrahim in all institutions. Demonstrations, marked by clashes with the police, spread to other slum areas, and continued into the spring of 1972.

Government tried to sabotage the movement and the Panthers attempted to counteract the declining support evinced by dwindling demonstrations by establishing themselves as a political party, the "Black Panthers-Israeli Democrats," through a merger with the Israeli Democrats but failed to get a single candidate in 1973. The failure led to splintering of the movement and its co-optation by leftist establishment and/or Ashkenazi-dominated parties. Since then, the movement has continued to surface from time to time. 47

46 Uri Davis and Morton Mezvinsky, Des., "Documents from Israel " quoted in Joseph Massad, op. cit. pp. 57-60.
Most prominent among various protest groups, Black Panthers went through a number of phases. Their first, most influential phase, was as a protest movement. Their main achievement at that time was in dramatically drawing attention to the facts of poverty and deprivation born out of discrimination against Oriental Jewish community. The second phase, that of a political party, marked their failure to recruit even the minimal number of votes or establish organisation. Also they had joined the established political arena, and many saw them as co-opted. Although they did not bring about actual changes in policy, the Black Panthers raised the salience of burning questions in a manner that was largely irreversible.

THE EMERGENCE OF RIGHT-WING POLITICS: ORIENTAL DISILLUSIONMENT WITH ESTABLISHMENT

Understanding Israeli society, particularly regarding the character and evolution of the ethnic dimension within it, quintessentially requires an assessment of voting behaviour of different ethnic groups and widely held view that Oriental communities are the main support base of the Likud party for its hard-line foreign policy with regards to Palestinians and other Arab neighbours.

Right from the beginning during the first Knesset (1949) elections, some Israeli parties sought the support of an ethnic constituency. These parties were mainly addressing the non-Jewish sectors of Israeli society. Ethnic parties addressing a Jewish constituency appealed mostly, though not exclusively, to voters of Asian and African origin, emphasising the traditional-religious aspects of a given group's cultural
inheritance. Their share of vote in national elections was generally very small while most failed to attain the one percent minimum legally required to win at least one seat in the Knesset.

The vote of ethnic parties declined substantially of all votes in the first Knesset to throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Since the 1970s there has somehow been a revival, though it has taken place through repeated substitutions of one ethnic party for another, with each displaced party quickly disappearing from the scene.

Though openly ethnic lists have played a relatively marginal role on the Israeli political scene, one can not dismiss the possibility that ethnicity is significant in national political processes. Of the two major parties, Labour voters comprise a clear majority of European-Americans and the Likud a majority of Asian-Africans.

When the Likud Party overturned the Labour Party in the 1977 elections, the claim was made by observers that there is a definite relation between ethnicity and party voting and that the Sephardim, in casting their majority vote for Likud, were responsible for pushing Israel towards hard-line, right wing positions in politics. Their "defection", after 29 years of allegiance to Labour, came as a surprise to many in Israel and elsewhere and was perceived by many Ashkenazim as a threat to the ideological and socio-economic fabric of Israeli society.

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48 Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 85.
49 Ibid, p. 86.
Sharp polarisation along ethnic lines has been repeatedly attributed to the Israeli political system, especially since 1977. During 1981 and 1984 electoral campaign also, instances of ethnic tension intensified. For Israel's Oriental majority, the two dates -- Occupation of 1967 and Menachem Begin's victory in 1977 signaled the end of Labour hegemony over the Orientals and the beginnings, however tenuous, of a democratisation process that at least paid lip service to the possibility of social and cultural equality.  

Writer Ilan Halevi describes the new dynamic created by the occupation of 1967.

They who had attempted to forget the language of their parents could now, thanks to their knowledge of Arabic, do good lucrative business in the occupied territories, speculate and trade, and even move up a military and police hierarchy in which knowledge of Arabic became professional advantage of extreme importance.

Polarisation on ethnic lines also took place in subsequent election and as late as during the May 1999 election to the Knesset. Though the Likud has lost the recent election and the Labour party under Ehud Barak has come to power in Israel, the former has repeatedly won elections in Israel since 1977. The identification of Sephardim with Likud in 1977 was no longer interpreted as a chance phenomenon, but rather as a linkage between Sephardim culture and character on the one hand and Likud's foreign policy and defensive postures on the other. It was argued that certain cultural attributes inherent in growing up in Islamic and Arab society produced an aggressive nationalist and right-

51 Quoted in Ammiel Alcalay, op. cit. p. 19.
wing voter as also that Ashkenazic Jews were generally perceived as moderate and eager to reach reconciliation with Palestinians, while Oriental Jews were portrayed as bellicose and hostile toward Arabs. The Sephardi vote was no longer perceived as a protest against Labour's reign of 29 years but more of revolution taking place in Israel, and one that might effect the future of the country, region and world peace.

It is significant to note that research findings in the 80s suggested that the Sephardim had cast between three to 12 percent more votes for Likud than had their Ashkenazim counterparts. The findings also revealed that the young in general, more than their elders had voted for Likud, whereas young Sephardim had voted in greater numbers for Likud than had young Ashkenazim.

The emergence of the Likud on the Israeli political scene - a right wing hawkish political party supported largely by one ethnic group - was viewed by many Labour party members with fear and deep concern. It appeared that the achievements of the past - the political consensus and democratic forces embedded in socialist-liberal Zionist ideology - were being undermined. It was in this climate of anxiety and frustration that the Sephardi shift to Likud was perceived as boding ill for the character and image of Jewish state.

The prominent viewpoint has been that the Oriental voters shifted their loyalty from Labour to Likud after suffering decades of discrimination in the hands of

54 Maurice Roumani, op. cit., p.
55 Ibid, p....
Ashkenazim-dominated Labour regime since the days of Ben Gurion. Likud was active among Oriental Jews and tried to fill the gap left by Labour. In fact, many Oriental voters later shifted loyalty to Shas (an ultra-orthodox party) which was a protest group in the beginning and which is the most authentic voice of the Orientals today.\(^\text{56}\) Shas party which started in 1983 had 10 out of 120 seats in the last Knesset and plays a major role in government formation in coalition politics of Israel today.

After the May 1999 victory of Ehud Barak's Labour party, world media described the mandate of Israeli people as a "decisive blow for peace,"\(^\text{57}\) and "hawks in the doghouses" who were under the delusion that they could achieve peace and security without doing justice to the Palestinians while most Israelis thought otherwise and voted against the parties which stood for Greater Israel -- for not handing the West Bank to the Palestinians,\(^\text{58}\) thus reconfirming that the Likud stood for hawkishness with regard to its foreign policy towards Palestinians and its other Arab neighbours. But what is significant to examine is the fact that since Orientals comprise a good half of the population and are supposed to be right-wingers, who did they vote for when did Likud lost elections?

While the major argument goes that the Likud support in recent years is gradually eroding towards Shas, the latter's comparatively successful vote in successive elections reflects a more complex balance of factors than mere ethnicity, being also strongly tied to ideological (religious) preferences and other social factors.\(^\text{59}\) The party, which has also

\(^{56}\) Based on interview with Arien Dayan, a prominent Israeli journalist who specialises on Oriental Jewry.

\(^{57}\) The Hindu, Thursday, May 20, 1999, Kasturi and Sons Ltd, Chennai, p. 15.


\(^{59}\) Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p. 85.
been credited with "the first well-organised and successful political party of Sephardim in the history of Israel and is the most authentic voice of Orientals today," emphasises religious practices and other social factors (provides houses, employment and addresses other issues among Oriental Jews) and has a good network of schools in Oriental neighbourhoods and development towns, thus providing a desperately needed alternative as education has become very expensive in the country. The ultra-orthodox Shas is growing up phenomenally on Israeli political scene as the results of last few elections reveal. Currently it has 17 seats in the 120-member house.

How right-wing are the Oriental Jews and why do they feel a sense of affiliation towards right-wing Likud and Shas Party? These are the pertinent questions to be examined in this chapter in the backdrop of the attributed right-wing attitudes of Oriental Jews. For example, regarding attitude towards annexation, studies have suggested that more Oriental Jewish community members tend to take a hard-line position.

In 1972, a study found that 56 percent of the total population were against giving up any of the West Bank; 92 percent were returning the against returning the Golan Heights and Jerusalem. When these figures were broken down by ethnic group, 49 percent of the Ashkenazim and 70 percent of the Sephardim were against returning the West Bank. For those who were against returning the Golan heights and Jerusalem, the figures were 90 percent and 95 percent respectively. In 1984 this trend persisted. Forty percent of the entire population supported a compromise on the territories and 53 percent

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60 Based on interview with Arien Dayan, a prominent Israeli journalist who specialises on Oriental Jewry.
supported annexation. When broken down by ethnic group, 60 percent of the Sephardim favoured annexation, with the percentage higher among second and third generation; in contrast, only 53 percent among the Ashkenazim approved of annexation. Several other studies have pointed out similar attitudes of Oriental Jewish community towards Israel's Arabs.

There are various explanations for right-wing attitude of Oriental Jews and their vote in ethnic terms. Advocates of this portrayal cite that since Oriental Jews had lived as a minority in the Arab world their historical experience and cultural background are the reason for this militancy, and they maintain that repeated persecutions throughout the Arab world over the centuries instilled in the Oriental Jews a deep resentment and distrust of Arabs. Also now that they have become part of a majority in Israel, they "know better" how to deal the Arabs and in effect they seize the opportunity of their new majority status to vindicate their second-class status under Islam.

Another theory seeks to establish a linkage between Sephardim culture and character on the one hand and Likud's foreign policy and defensive postures on the other. Labeling ethnic groups as aggressive is a universal sociological phenomenon and various findings indicate that as a result of socio-historical causes, specific ethnic groups develop

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61 Studies by Abel Jacob (1972) and Yoram Peres (1984) quoted in Maurice Roumani, op. cit.
62 Yossi Yonah, op. cit. p. 38.
63 Maurice Roumani, op, cit., p....
aggressive modes of behaviour.\textsuperscript{64} It is argued that certain cultural attributes inherent in growing up in Islamic and Arab society produced an aggressive nationalist and right-wing voter. It is also argued that the Orientals are found to have a more rightist political orientation than Ashkenazim and they have a strong national commitment.\textsuperscript{65}

Others argue that since Israeli Jews tend to hold hawkish positions in foreign policy affairs, hawkish positions provide the Orientals with a golden opportunity for integration, a chance to prove that they are genuine patriots, clinging to their new homeland's central mores.\textsuperscript{66}

Yet another argument goes that the attitude of Oriental Jews are influenced by their religious belief system and this religiosity exhibits the low tolerance. Also, as argued earlier, out of their belief system Oriental Jews are said to be more traditional and not compatible with the value system of the state of Israel based on the principles of a modern western state.

However, such attributes have also to be understood in the backdrop of Oriental Jews' quest for identity and assimilation into mainstream Israeli society\textsuperscript{67} where they have historically encountered a rigid hierarchy, alien culture, cultural supremacy of

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Maurice Roumani, op, cit., p.\ldots
\item \textsuperscript{67} Yossi Yonah, op. cit. p. 38.
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European-American Jewish communities, political alienation and socio-economic discrimination.

Israel's move to the right, can not be said to begin with the Likud's victory at the polls in 1977. Israeli society as a whole moved increasingly in this direction after the 1967 war and more definitively so after the 1973 war. Moreover, hawkishness was not the monopoly of one camp or one political party. The difference of hawkishness between Labour and Likud was one of degree -- after all, the policy settlements in the newly occupied territories was initiated and expanded during Labour's term in office. 68

Moreover, it is the second or the third generation of Oriental Jews who were born and brought up in Israel and not the first generation which is supposed to carry Oriental cultural and traditional burden to Israel. Studies have indicated that it is the young Sephardim majority who shifted loyalty to Likud first and later to Shas party. Furthermore, the Sephardim, in general, are known to be "traditional" and are not dogmatically or strictly religious.

Today, many Sephardim youth born in Israel call themselves secular. Also we must understand that we are dealing with the second or third generation of the Oriental Jewish immigrants who have different attitudes and who have resented -- like their Ashkenazi counterparts -- both the impact of Labour policies upon Israeli society.

An analysis of 1988 election data indicates that the Likud lost some of its Oriental support while it gained some Ashkenazi voters. Likud was described as becoming less

68 Maurice Roumani, op, cit., p....
Sephardi than it was previously. The Oriental votes that the Likud lost, however, did not go back to Labour, but to Shas -- which paradoxically is by no means committed to the political agenda of the right. The leaders of this party have repeatedly expressed their position, which favours territorial compromise with the Palestinians in return for peace unlike the position held by the Likud. Since Shas has a majority of Oriental support and it is open on the question of land, the question arises whether it is fair to label Orientals as committed right-wing voters.

The religious approach to Jewishness, which many Orientals are believed to adhere to, is a kind of "liberal traditionalism" -- Sabbath rest, synagogue-going of a selective kind, frequent invocation of the name of God, and a generalised respect for Jewish traditions and practices. This is something no prominent member of the old (Labour) establishment would or could provide. On the contrary, there was often what seemed to be deliberate flouting of and disrespect for religious traditions. This religious approach of Oriental community can not be and should not be outrightly equated with hawkishness or right-wing tilt of the Orientals.

Some studies have suggested that the Jews of Asian and African countries being underprivileged, could be expected to believe that militancy (in the form of enhanced

69 Yossi Yonah, op. cit. p. 39.
defense expenditure) will drain resources that could otherwise go to improve domestic social and economic conditions. Hence their hawkish standing is less likely.\textsuperscript{71}

However, many of these arguments seem to be too simplistic as the Israeli experience is a complex web of various factors. Orientals' support to Likud in 1977, 1981, and 1984 also did not give them much access to the centre of power. Though, as studies suggest, with Likud at the helm of affairs for many years, a new entrepreneurial class, dominated by Sephardim, was emerging in Israel.\textsuperscript{72} Also, so far the peace with the Arabs is being associated with the right-wing Likud and its oriental support base. one can argue that decades of statehood dominated by Labour also did not yield peaceful coexistence between Israel and its neighbours though the world is waiting for premier Ehud Barak to deliver the goods in this direction. The peace with Arabs could actually lead to a greater legitimacy of Oriental culture in Israel and to Israel's acceptance and integration into the landscape of the Middle East and lead to bridging the gap between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

Oriental support to right-wing Likud and later to Shas should not be interpreted a mere hawkish attitude of the Asian-African communities. The existing veterans in Israel, overwhelmingly European political elites demonstrated a great slowness, if not reluctance, in allowing greater access to power to the emergent strata of the newer Asian-African groups. As a reaction, a circumventing strategy was enacted by members of the Asian-African group, mainly through the maneuvering space offered by the veteran party


\textsuperscript{72} Maurice Roumani, op, cit., p..
system, and to some extent with the flanking assistance of smaller and ethnically militant political new formations.\textsuperscript{73}

On the basis of the above cited analysis it can be argued that the relationship between ethnic origin group and ideological preferences -- as expressed in party choices -- is also mediated by various other factors, primarily the socio-economic status of the voters, which has been determined by various historical factors. The political behaviour of the voters reflects the socio-economic stratification of the origin group more than ethnicity per se.

Party shifts by large sections of certain ethnic groups may have occurred much more on the grounds of general, national political goals and aspirations than in relation to ethnic related interests. Though there is no denying the fact that that some independent effects of ethnicity might have played a role in the party choices, overall such effects were secondary as compared to other factors. Oriental communities' support to the Likud and later shift to Shas can by and large be attributed to their years of political and cultural alienation and disillusionment with decades of Labour rule and consequent continuing lower socio-economic status.

\textbf{SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION}

Following are the main points that can be extracted from this chapter.

1: Political system as it existed in 1948 favoured Ashkenazim as they were

\textsuperscript{73} Uziel O Schmelz, Sergio DellaPergola, and Uri Avner, op. cit., p.113-114.
educationally, culturally and politically better suited to fit into it while Oriental communities who did not have much interaction with modern nation stated entered a political system which was alien to them.

2: Oriental communities at the outset suffered from unequal political representation as after the independence political power for most years has stayed in the hands of Jews of European and American origin which further curbed the political participation of the Oriental Jews.

3: Since majority of immigrants from Oriental countries were not suited to fit into Israeli economy and were economically dependent on the state, it led to their political vulnerability and were seen as masses to be won by political parties.

4: Various studies reveal a negligible percentage of Oriental Jews in important political positions for decades. Wherever they have found participating in politics, they have to start from the lowest rank.

5: Political discrimination on the basis of ethnicity becomes clear with the Labour party leader Ehud Barak apologising to Oriental Jewish community for the mistakes of the past.

6: This ethnicity-based political discrimination led to emergence of various protest groups in Israel including militant Black Panthers who succeeded in raising the salience of burning questions Israel is facing even today.

7: Explanation that the emergence of right-wing Likud in 1977 and later ultra-orthodox Shas is an outcome of an "ethnic vote" of Oriental Jews and their
"militant nationalism" that Oriental countries produce is too simplistic. The second and third generation of Sephardim are as secular as Ashkenazim. Also there is a great difference between the political agenda of Likud and the Shas with the latter in no way adhering to the right-wing agenda of the former and being open on the question of land for peace.

8: The emergence of Likud and Shas can be attributed to, among other factors, the years of political and cultural alienation of oriental Jews and their disillusionment with decades of Labour rule, and later with the Likud regime, born out of their continuing lower socio-economic status. The political behaviour has reflected the socio-economic stratification of these origin groups more than the ethnicity.