

Opinion

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Arithmetic and moral imperatives

by Chibli Mallat

Since The Daily Star (May 19) and An-Nahar (May 21) published op-ed articles calling for the meaningful inclusion of Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship in the government which Ehud Barak has 45 days to form under Israeli law, all the indications in Israel are that he won't.

Well, not quite all. On May 27, the subject of Arabs in government was skillfully addressed by the authoritative Meron Benvenisti in an article he wrote for Haaretz. He called obliquely for the inclusion of Arab-Israelis in the Barak coalition now being negotiated.

Benvenisti had proved back in the 1970s - through his West Bank data project - that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was far from benign, thus destroying the myth which leading circles in Israel and America had been floating for several years to deflect international criticism over Israel's violations of the 1948 Geneva Convention.

In his subtle article in Haaretz, he asked why it was that the leftist Meretz Party was bending over backward to include the ultra-Orthodox Shas in Barak's coalition instead of directing its efforts to bring in Arab partners?

Then, on May 30, Haaretz published a remarkable and powerful editorial, reprinted on this page, that advanced the argument for Arab-Israeli participation in government even further.

Let me carry on, in the same vein, with some simple arithmetic. Arab-Israelis -

whom I prefer to call Palestinian-Israelis - constitute some 20 percent of Israel's population. In terms of registered voters, they form somewhat less, because of the dominant youth element in the community, some 500,000.

Of those, at least 75 percent cast their ballots, and exit polls showed that 94 percent voted for Barak. In simple arithmetic, that accounts for 400,000 Palestinian-Israeli votes.

Here is some evidence of the decisive Palestinian vote for the leader of One Israel: Labor lost seven seats in the elections, with 615,000 votes. Of those elected, there was

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not one Arab on the list, as against a Druze for Likud, and Hussein Hussein for Meretz.

At some point, the legacy of anti-Arab racism which Labor has left will have to be addressed. But the point now is more pressing, because however we look at the figures, Barak owes his victory to the Palestinian-Israelis.

There is stronger evidence: Barak received 1.8 million votes, against 1.4 million for Benjamin Netanyahu. This means that if the Arabs had not voted for Barak, he would have in all probability been defeated by the incumbent.

In any case, he would not have won with the 56 percent landslide he did. It is the

420,000 Arab votes for Barak which won him his victory.

One should salute the articles in Haaretz. They come from people who are ready for equality. But let me introduce some more radical arithmetic.

Palestinian-Israelis constitute some 20 percent of the population. They only have a maximum representation of 10 percent in the Knesset. According to Israeli law as it stands at present, the Cabinet should comprise 18 ministers.

More simple arithmetic: From the 1.8 million people who voted for Barak, shouldn't the Arabs who helped elect him get at least four portfolios, rather than the simple environment portfolio which the editors of Haaretz are suggesting for Abdulwahab Darawshe?

More than simple arithmetic, there is need for a moral imperative. Some affirmative action would not be amiss. The opportunity is there, against all the negative indications. The language, after all, is basic. Supreme Court Justice Aharon Barak is quoted in a not-dissimilar vein on the Jerusalem Post's website edition. One wonders: if Barak continues to ignore the Arab voters, would there be room for the court to step in?

At a time when Barak is starting to implement his promise to withdraw from Lebanon, 21 years after Israel's first large-scale invasion, another battle for justice is joined inside Israel-Palestine. One hopes: that all the people of the Middle East will win it.

Chibli Mallat, professor at law, wrote this commentary for The Daily Star