

Religious Extremism and Status Quo Politics

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Abstract - The paper examines the issue of status quo politics by examining the traditional compromise that identifies Israeli politics since the country's establishment in 1948. The research examines the relationship between politics and religion by analyzing the dual character of the country as a Jewish and democratic state. In the absence of a written constitution, the relationship between religion and politics has been governed by a political compromise known as "the religious status quo." In a predominantly secular population, the agreement refers to a political understanding between secular and religious parties not to alter the communal arrangement concerning religious matters. The status quo model acknowledged the priority of religious demands in some areas in a way that reflects a social and political compromise rather than principled decision-making. This model still dominates Israeli society today – demonstrating the conflicting identities of the religious and secular communities. This unique structure protects religious freedom but rejects separating religion and state. It demonstrates the conflict of identities between the secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority about the role of religion in society – with the decision not to decide and adopt a religious status quo as a comprehensive political compromise.

Keywords - religion, politics, status quo, compromise, Israel

I. Introduction

Research of global politics reveals that most political decisions have a status quo alternative, maintained through political compromise of doing nothing or maintaining current or previous decisions (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). This policy is generally supported by researchers who view the opportunity to conduct a widely agreed policymaking. For example, Rostbøll (2017) argues that the reasons for compromise are inherent in the democratic ideal since compromise can give greater legitimacy to public policy beyond what is achieved by a mere majority decision. This view is supported by Haselswerdt and Bartels (2015), which suggest that the policy status-quo structures citizens' perceptions of policy proposals. Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2016) further argue that status quo political actors are satisfied with the political order and power distribution. Davidai and Ongis (2019) also argue in favor of status quo policies, concluding that the tendency to see life as zero-sum exacerbates political conflicts. Back (2013) supports this view, arguing that since most social issues are associated with ideology, the

challenging position elicits group differentiation, with the result that people ascribe more negative motives for the attitudes of their opponents and more positive motives to their allies. Bellamy (2013) sees the obligation to compromise as an important form of democracy, whereby citizens must agree despite their disagreements.

This article examines the counter-relations between politics and religion in Israel by analyzing the shapes of the relationship between law and religion – the political understandings between religious and state leaders even before establishing the country in 1948. This compromise structures the tensions between the secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority and is still effective today, almost a century later, since most Israelis support the meaning of a "Jewish state" and accept the official stance of the state, which accepts Orthodox conversion only. The common belief of secular and religious Israelis is that the binding connection of all parts of society involves the founding objectives of the Jewish state – the connection between statehood and religion. The religious and political status quo is based on the religious belief that the country is a Jewish state that observes religious law, and on the other on the political reality of a modern democratic country. The ultimate impact of the status quo in Israeli politics is evident in that the composition of the population completely changed due to the arrival of several waves of immigrants, but the framework of the relationship between religion and the State remained unchanged. This framework includes interdiction to work on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, division of education systems according to religious criteria, the power of rabbinic courts in matters of civil status, and exemption of young ultra-Orthodox from military service, which is compulsory to all other segments of the Jewish population (Greilsammer, 2000).

II. Religious Status Quo - the debate over the status of religion

The research looks at the status quo as the core of political behavior since people favor the existing and longstanding mechanisms, forming barriers to cognitive and social change (Niven, 2000). This conclusion is compatible with the rationale that led to the religious status quo compromise that was decided during the early years of Israel's existence, as the challenge of state-building and absorbing successive waves of new immigrants meant that religious challenges received scant attention from the public or policymakers. The religious challenges were focused on two uniform religious minorities within a



hegemonic secular majority: the ultra-Orthodox population, composed of highly conservative non-Zionist groups, and the national-religious population, who identified with Zionism. Strongly rejecting modern secular culture, the leaders of the most influential minority - the ultra-Orthodox - contented themselves primarily with demanding autonomy for themselves, thereby isolating their community from the Israeli mainstream.

The broader tension between civil law and Jewish religious law was addressed primarily by the status quo shaped by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. Enshrined in a letter from Ben-Gurion to the ultra-Orthodox leadership, the status quo contained various provisions: that the legal day of rest would be Shabbat (Friday night to Saturday night); family law - notably personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, burials, and Conversations - would be congruent with Jewish law; government-supported institutions will have Kosher kitchens, and the ultra-Orthodox community would have autonomy over its educational institutions.

This arrangement entailed significant compromises. On the one hand, the absence of public transport on Shabbat disproportionately affects poorer private citizens who do not own cars. Many Israeli citizens were unable to marry and divorce, particularly those forbidden to marry by orthodox Jewish law, such as inter-faith couples and same-sex couples. The Israeli army drafts both men and women, and most Israelis complete their military service during their emerging adulthood years, whereas young ultra-Orthodox are not drafted (Malchi, 2018). On the other hand, Orthodox leaders fear their complicity in many violations of Jewish religious law in the public sphere. And yet, Israeli secular and ultra-Orthodox elites have chosen to tolerate these compromises (Leon, 2014).

Religion has always played an important part in Israeli politics because of the extreme role of religious faith among ultra-Orthodox (Haredi). In the early years of Israel's statehood, common goals contained religious politics, with secular ambivalence toward religion. The political leadership created agreements, both formal and informal, known as the status quo. While economic, demographic, and sociocultural changes undermined the agreements, the religious compromise has become politicized, allowing the government to mediate between secular and religious groups through the religious and political status quo (Ben-Porat, 2013).

Within this compromised structure, religion was granted an excessive role in Israeli society's public and private spheres, which derives its symbols, flag, and the national anthem from religious sources. Jewish religion plays a crucial role in Israel's Basic Law of Return, which recognizes the right of Jews worldwide to become citizens of the state provided that their mothers are Jewish or that they converted to Judaism and belong to no other religious affiliation. Religious courts are granted an almost full monopoly over the determination of personal status (marriage, divorce, alimony, maintenance, burials, and

conversions), and religious restrictions are imposed in many fields of life, including the operation of the means of public transportation on Sabbath and other holy days. This situation reflects a broader conflict with secular segments because the ultra-Orthodox run a separate network of schools, support large families on taxpayer-funded handouts and enforce a public status quo that has enraged the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019). The Haredi leadership lives in a state of threat from spiritual, social, cultural, and political phenomena surrounding the community. These basic assumptions lead the community in all life aspects: clothing, education, marriage matchmaking, and even language. The community's cultural segregation and sectorial coherency are aimed to protect Jewish culture from western culture and secularism (Cohen, 2006).

The issue of dual identities of religion and nationalism has identified Israeli society since the country's establishment. The ethno-religious conceptions of state and nationhood were built into Zionism's objective of creating a "state of the Jews", highlighting the important role played by collective threats (Fritsche, Jonas and Kessler, 2011). The perceptions of existential threats that identify Israel have been dominated by the prevailing view that the country is facing existential threats, with the ultimate objective of its enemies to bring about the destruction of the "Jewish state." (Heler (2019). The central role of Jewish history in the construction of Israeli and Jewish identity was followed by a deep sense of insecurity that was built into the Jewish-Israeli collective experience of the ongoing conflict with its neighbors. This conception reinforced the role of religion in Israeli society and culture (Zerubavel, 1995), while the challenge of state-building and absorbing successive waves of new immigrants meant that religious challenges received scant attention from the public and policymakers (Kimberling, 2001).

What identifies Israeli politics best is the permanent religious status quo which enabled the legal adoption of the "Jewish nation-state law" – that defines Israel as the Jewish nation-state. The basic laws (Israel's version of a constitution) reserves the right to self-determination to the Jewish collective only, relegating the Palestinian-Arab minority, which constitutes about 20% of Israeli citizens, to a secondary status outside the collective. Numerous opinion polls confirm the strong domestic support for ethno-religious conceptions of state and nationhood. The prevailing view is that the country is facing existential threats, and the ultimate objective of its enemies is the destruction of the "Jewish state" (Maoz 2009).

Israeli politics has been the case, which is a perfect example of identity politics based on religion. With the dominance of religious groups, no constitution separates religion and state. The country is defined in its Basic Laws as a Jewish and Democratic state. The origins of this definition are in the Declaration of Independence (1948), which states that Israel is a 'Jewish state. The Law of return (1950) declares the Jewishness of the State, open to the 'return' of all Jews. According to the Law of the

Rabbinical Courts (1953), all Jewish Israelis must marry and divorce according to the rule of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, even though most Israeli Jews do not practice Orthodox Judaism. Other sectors of Judaism have no legal authority concerning the Israeli state and must meet the Orthodox criteria used by the Chief Rabbinate to define Jewish identity. Miller (2014) explains that this connection becomes integral to the state's social and political identity with a close relationship between religion and politics.

III. Political Status Quo - nationalism and religious extremism

Despite being segregated from the general Israeli society, the ultra-Orthodox community has much political power based on their religious identity. But the question asked here is if this political stalemate could remain effective despite ongoing social changes in Israeli society. This question is relevant to research on the status quo since religious parties have adopted an ideological position of Israel as a nation-state based on religion, with a dominant perception of the right-wing sphere of the Israeli public, as they shifted the entire discourse to advocate for increased nationalism and religious extremism (Talshir, 2019).

This research sees the political role of the status quo as the inevitable starting point of any change (Vemberg, 2004). Varone, Ingold, and Jourdain (2017) investigated the conditions under which pro-status quo groups increase their advocacy success during an entire policymaking process. They found that occupying a central network position is insufficient for the pro-status quo groups to improve their advocacy success. Godwin and Ilderton (2014) found that political disunity reduces policy effectiveness by restricting the authority of leaders to generate new policies. They further conclude that focusing solely on policy change neglects the influence exerted when leaders need to defend policy agenda by preventing unfavorable changes to the status quo. These findings are supported by Maner, Gailliot, Butz, and Peruche (2007). They concluded that although power may generally lead to riskier decisions, power may lead to more conservative decisions among power-motivated individuals, especially when the status quo is perceived to be in jeopardy.

The important role played by identity politics of Israel as a Jewish state has been demonstrated in the policy advocated by the passing of a law that legally identified Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The Basic Law: Israel - the Nation-State of the Jewish People, determines that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, that the State of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and that exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People. The law also deals with the State's symbols and official language, the status of Jerusalem, the State's connection with the Jewish People, and the Ingathering of Exiles.

The triumph of the political identity of the religious communities provides a testimony to the superiority of the Basic Law over other laws. As explained by the Knesset

transcripts, because the law is the product of the Knesset acting as the Constituent Assembly and the definition of a "basic law", one may conclude that it is constitutionally superior. But although the law represents a clear ideological discourse, the research attempts to understand the need of the government to adopt a policy of religious identity in redefining an already existing shared national identity of the connection between religion and state. This question can be explained according to Varone, Ingold, and Jourdain (2016), which found that occupying a central network position is insufficient for the pro-status quo groups to improve their advocacy success, and this is evident in Israel, the influential role of religious identity in politics is since Israeli political system is based on the principle of proportional representation and Haredi vote is committed to their identity party politics. Research shows that the status quo ascribes positive motives to their allies (Bäck, 2013). In Israel, votes from the entire country are tallied up, and parties are represented in the Knesset directly proportional to the percentage of votes received. This system facilitates many small parties and makes it virtually impossible for any party to muster the 61 seats (out of 120) required to pass legislation and govern. The resulting need to form coalitions comprised of several parties gives disproportionate power to smaller parties that can make or break a potential coalition. Religious parties have been partners in almost every coalition, largely because their primary concerns have not centered on crucial foreign or economic policy but rather on the religious nature of the state. This made the religious parties convenient partners who sought to safeguard religious interests and guarantee that the state would maintain a Jewish character.

The roots of the political status quo are based on the proportional nature of the political system. The executive branch of Israel is headed by a prime minister who is the coalition leader of the Knesset. In an election, voters vote for party lists rather than individual candidates, with seats in the Knesset apportioned according to the percentage of votes each party receives in the election. After the election, a coalition government must be formed of the elected representatives since Israelis vote for parties, not individual candidates (some through primaries, choose the candidates). The more votes the ruling party gets, the more seats it has in Israel's 120-seat parliament, the Knesset. This structure means that small parties (including religious parties) are important in local politics, as their support is necessary to form a coalition required to pass legislation.

Since coalition governments have ruled Israel, the political status quo and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority. Thus, ultra-Orthodox parties have been important players in coalition building and party politics, giving them important leverage and political power disproportionate to their size. These parties have had a central role in Israeli politics, maintaining a balance between the left-wing and the right-wing blocs, and their influence has far exceeded their relative size. However, this instrumental influence may raise a red flag since the idea of religious identity as a driving force behind

intergroup conflict can lead to fundamentalism, as competition between social identities might be resolved by one identity asserting dominance over the others (Altemeyer&Hunsberger, 2004). Fisher (2016) explains that fundamentalist movements that participate in secular political systems can gain prominent political positions that allow them to impose their extreme ideology on society. In the case of Israeli Haredi, he found that the more political power fundamentalists accrue, the stronger their tendency to promote their religious agenda. Looking at the fundamental principles of their political policies, Haredi parties are focused on sectorial concerns, not showing much interest in external political issues, but they have important political support for the government. They have been in almost every government and succeeded in exploiting their power over legislation regarding issues relevant to religion, state, and budgets (Shalev, 2019). As a result, creating changes about the status quo governing religious practice is very difficult to achieve, and repeated legislative efforts to weaken the power of smaller parties have largely been unsuccessful. Given Israel's deep sensitivity towards religion-state issues, mainstream parties and politicians have favored the status quo on such issues rather than attempting any changes (The Jewish Federations of America, 2017).

IV. Social Status Quo - religious extremism and modern life

The Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society is a perfect example of the contrast between religious extremism and modern life. This extremist religious public is unique in its wish to live a religious life and still be part of society so as not to be disconnected from modernization. The Orthodoxy embodies traditional values that have been accepted for hundreds of years – including the principle of segregation and differences in the role of men and women in the family and the community. These basic assumptions lead the Haredi community in all life aspects: clothing, education, marriage matchmaking, and even language. These characteristics are expressed in banning institutionalized communications, which are considered extreme concerning religious faith. But as a result of gender differences and weaknesses in education and participation in the labor market, members of these groups lack the skills needed for well-paid jobs, and these deficiencies limit the effectiveness of their employment gains for lowering poverty. Low social transfers imply that large families in these communities face deprivation that contributes to child poverty and continued gender inequality. This situation creates a digital gap since advancements and improvements in technology provoke differences between workers with high skills and those with lower skills. The Haredi segregation strategy not only managed to stop the erosion of Haredi society but regenerated the numbers, strength, and power of a society that had nearly vanished. In recent years, however, modernity has started to penetrate the closed gates of Haredi neighborhoods. The fight against radio, television, and computers was successful, but nothing could stop the internet and the cell phone. The need to come to terms

with the modern world, especially in the realms of living conditions, health, social benefits, and income, has forced the Haredi leadership to take what Israel offers while trying to remain in a separate world. This leads to contradictions like Haredi political parties that are part of the government coalition despite the religious disconnect of the community from the secular majority.

The main issue that needs to be further investigated is how modern influence would change the religious compromise. The ultra-Orthodox are a minority in Israeli society, maintaining a delicate and tense relationship with the majority (Cahaner, Malach, and Choshen, 2018). The ultra-Orthodox community is multifaceted, emphasizing spirituality, perceptions of leadership, dress code, and even spoken language. According to the Israel Democracy Institute (2017), Haredi represents 12% of the population, and the Haredi sector is projected to comprise 16% of the total population by 2030. It will constitute a third of all citizens and 40% of the Jewish population in 2065. The marriage rate in the ultra-Orthodox population (aged 20 and above) stands at 82%, compared with 63% for the rest of the Jewish population. A significant shift is also evident across a broader age group. There is a constant decrease in the poverty rate for the Haredi sector, reflecting the increased integration of Haredi men and women into the workforce in recent years (Sharon, 2018). But although the Haredi society is undergoing big changes, there remains a significant wage gap relative to the non-Haredi population. These gaps are dangerous to the economy since the achievements of the Israeli education system have been lower than the OECD average (Flug, 2014). According to Israel's National Insurance Institute, Israel has the highest poverty rates among OECD member states (Annual Poverty Report, 2018).

The socio-economic gap is one of the most important issues that encourage the struggle in Israeli society since most people in the ultra-religious sector live below the poverty line. Despite their cultural segregation, the sector has great political influence, and thus many young members of the community do not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government (Kimberling, 2001). Former Governor of the Bank of Israel, KarnotFlug, warns that employment rates for Haredi men are particularly low due to education trends – as the rate of higher education among the Ultra-Orthodox population is particularly low. She explains that the way to integrate successfully into the labor market is to obtain an academic education, as those holding degrees enjoy much higher rates of employment and much higher wage levels than those who do not hold such a degree (Flug, 2014).

According to OECD Economic Survey, despite better employment outcomes among Haredi, workers from these communities are often trapped in low-paid jobs due to their weak skill sets, implying persistent poverty and weak aggregate productivity. Low social transfers imply that large families in these communities face deprivation that contributes to child poverty. High cost of living and house prices also weigh on the social situation and well-being,

and public transport deficiencies are detrimental to work-life balance and cause urban congestion and poor air quality. The survey found that making growth stronger, more inclusive, and more sustainable will require further action and more public investment in education to improve the skills of Israeli-Arabs and Haredi together with additional product market reforms and better transport infrastructure (OECD, 2018). Still, Haredi does not consider themselves as poor, nor do they behave that way. 71% of the Haredi are satisfied with their economic situation, compared with less than two-thirds of the non-Haredi Jews. More than 98% of Haredi report satisfaction with their lives (Zake, 2018). One main reason for that is the community support system of the Haredi society, which maintains a high level of community activity, including volunteerism and donations, mutual aid, concern for the needy, and diverse economic support frameworks (Zaken, 2018). The Haredi society also has a flourishing internal economy with stores, commercial outlets, and other businesses that deal only with the ultra-Orthodox sector (Eretz, 2018).

With the social integration of the ultra-Orthodox sector into the general Israeli society, a debate over whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should be exempt from mandatory military service was heated – although it could not break down the political stalemate on the religious status quo. The debate is demonstrated in a poll of the Israel Democracy Institute (2018) that found that half of the Jewish population view the recognition that Israel is the state of the Jewish people as more important than reaching a peace agreement with Palestinians. In contrast, the increased impact of secular ideology is supported by another finding of the survey. More than one-third of religious Israelis and 80% of people who define themselves as not religious either support the separation of religion from state or reduce the religious influence on life in Israel. The conflict between religious and secular conceptions is demonstrated by the different support of these groups to the current structure of religious and state coherent connection. The poll found that 70% of secular Israelis believe that life in the public sphere tended to favor the Ultra-Orthodox in recent years, while only 22% of the Ultra-Orthodox agree with this assessment.

V. Conclusion

The concept of the status quo is the most important issue in Israeli politics. The research examines three main reasons for the domination of the compromised structure that identifies Israeli society and its political system: the religious status quo - as a result of the debate over the status of religion in Israeli society; the political status quo - as a result of the conflict between nationalism and religious extremism; and the social status quo – as a result of the counter-relationships between religious extremism and modern life.

Traditionally religious fundamentalism comes as a response to a modern threat (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003), although as can be seen from the analysis brought here, status quo politics based on religion has benefited

minorities and gave religious parties a crucial influential position in government. The analysis here shows that the success of enforcing status quo politics by the ultra-Orthodox community is related to the extreme role of religious faith. The Haredi leadership lives in a state of threat from spiritual, social, cultural, and political phenomena surrounding the community. These basic assumptions lead the community in all life aspects: clothing, education, marriage matchmaking, and even language. The community's cultural segregation and sectorial coherency are aimed to protect Jewish culture from western culture and secularism (Cohen, 2006). The community chooses to separate itself from mainstream Israeli society, in residential patterns (living in separate neighborhoods), in education (separate educational streams), symbolically (distinct dress and customs), in cultural life (literature and media unique to the community), in a separate organizational structure, and the area of political leadership (Israel Democracy Institute, 2018). The religious and ideological gap between the Haredi society and the general society distanced the community from other sectors, although as demonstrated in this research, despite their cultural segregation, the sector has great political influence, and thus many young members of the community do not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government (Kingsbury, 2020).

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