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Israel's 'Chienlit' Revolution

By EMMANUEL NAVON
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The fact that today Israel is wealthy enough to undergo a social revolution similar to the one in 1960s France is a good thing. But like the French protesters, the organizers of Israel's revolution are interested only in ousting the PM – a strategy that is doomed to fail just like it did in France.

As French students and intellectuals were playing Robespierre and Mao on the streets of Paris in the spring of 1968, then-French president Charles de Gaulle had formulated another linguistically creative maxim: *La réforme oui, la chienlit non*. Journalists and commentators were forced to look up “*chienlit*” in the dictionary. “*Chienlit*” was used in old French and it means “carnival mask.” What could the General possibly mean? It was a pun of course: divide the word as follows, “chie-en-lit”, and what you get is “shit-in-bed.”

Ahem.

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Israel was completely disconnected from “Mai 68.” France was at the height of its power and de Gaulle's rule was unchallenged. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy offered the perfect antidote to a bored youth. Meanwhile, by contrast, Israel's young generation had just emerged victorious from the Six Day War. Fighting for their survival and immersed in building a new country, young Israelis had no time to sit in café terraces, planning revolutions.

Aside from the Black Panthers in the 1970s, Israel never experienced any types of social revolt organized by its youth. Being raised in a conformist society with a uniform public discourse, and taught to respect the army's authority, Israelis were never known for their revolutionary zeal. Add to this the challenge of making a living in a socialist economy and the stress of being in a permanent state of war, chances of a Mai 68-equivalent were zero.

So the fact that Israelis are finally taking to the streets is actually good news: It shows that Israel has become so wealthy and secure that people actually have the time and luxury to talk about changing the world with *nargilas* and guitars. Like the French -who had never had it as good as the late 1960s – Israel is now experiencing its our “chienlit revolution.”

This is not to say, of course, that there is no economic hardship in Israel. But it is Israel's pervasive oligopolies and unfair tax system that make it impossible for middle class families to make ends meet, let alone save money. Real estate is unaffordable because Israel's Land Administration abuses its monopoly.

But protesters are picking a fight with the wrong person: No one has done more than Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in splitting up monopolies and lowering taxes.

Like the Mai 68 strikes, Israel's current social protests are not led by the union movement. During Mai 68, France's main workers' union, CGT, tried to contain the spontaneous militancy by channeling it into a struggle for higher wages and other economic benefits. Even the Communist Party got cold feet, and Jean-Paul Sartre accused them of "fearing revolution." What rioters really wanted was de Gaulle's ouster. Although the trade union leadership negotiated a 35% increase in the minimum wage, a 7% wage increase for other workers, and half of normal pay for the time spent striking, the workers occupying their factories still refused to return to work. Instead, they demanded new elections.

Likewise, the main organizers of today's protest in Israel are more interested in ousting Netanyahu than improving the lot of struggling families. This is why the Im Tirtzu movement pulled out of the protest: it realized that protesters were looking for a fight, not for solutions.

At the end of the day, Mai 68 was a flop. De Gaulle called for early elections and his party won the greatest victory in French parliamentary history. After the carnival, it was time to go to bed – in clean sheets.

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