

## Weary Israel loses faith in its leaders

The rape allegations against the President are just the latest in a long line of political scandals

**Richard Miron in Jerusalem**  
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On a smooth, trimmed lawn, Israel's tuneful police band entertained the thousands of visitors who trooped through the President's residence in Jerusalem during a recent open day. But few of the onlookers missed the irony that President Moshe Katsav could face a less festive visit by the police if the country's attorney-general decides to indict him on charges of rape, sexual harassment, illegal wiretapping and fraud.

For his supporters who came to shake the President's hand, it was a political witch hunt. But for others outside the President's residence, such as Naomi Schneidermann from the Association of Rape crisis centres in Israel who came to call for his resignation, it was yet another shameful episode involving the country's leadership: 'I think this affair has done terrible damage not only to the particular office of President but also in the message we are sending to our citizens.'

For months police have been investigating Israel's head of state following revelations that a woman employee at the presidential office alleged that he had raped her. A string of other women came forward with similar allegations, all of which Katsav has strenuously denied.

Katsav is the most recent and most senior figure to have been caught up in a swath of scandals that have cut through Israeli public life. On a single day last week, two former justice ministers began separate trials. Chaim Ramon, who served until recently in the current government, is charged with forcibly kissing a young female soldier, and his predecessor, Tzachi Hanegbi, is also in court following allegations of making illegal political appointments.

Public disgust at the country's leaders, both political and military, has reached a peak following the recent war in Lebanon, which many Israelis believe was mismanaged. Many feel that there is a link between the succession of scandals involving sex, money and fraud and the war. Now Israelis are angrily questioning what has gone wrong. Jerusalem has become a focal point for their despair and frustration. There is a palpable sense of division between the people, the politicians and the generals.

Outside the heavily protected Prime Minister's office, by a busy junction, is a tent made of banners calling on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, along with his Defence Minister and Army Chief of Staff, to resign. Activists sitting in plastic chairs in the sun wear T-shirts emblazoned with the words: 'A people of heroes - A government of cowards.' Ari Shavit, a columnist for the liberal Haaretz newspaper, has described 'a tremendous gap [between] the worst of Israeli society at the very top and the energy, creativity and resilience of ordinary Israelis'.

Israel's politicians and generals were once seen as puritanical figures devoted to the national good. David Ben Gurion the nation's revered first Prime Minister, chose to retire to a kibbutz in the desert. Today many Israelis contrast that with recent former leaders who appear to prefer the comfort of the lecture tour circuit and lucrative consultancies.

In the early years of the Jewish state, collectivism and aestheticism were embraced by the socialist establishment that ruled the country. But in the past 20 years Israel has become wealthier and more individualistic. Israelis have long desired normality in their personal lives as well as their politics.

Many now believe that the perceived weakness of their leadership may be a symptom of that change. Dan Halutz, the Army Chief of Staff, was reported to have sold his shares portfolio on the first day of the Lebanon war. While he did nothing illegal, his actions caused an outcry, not simply because he was involved in looking after his personal finances at a time of national crisis but also because it was thought that a senior military figure should not have been concerned in any way with personal enrichment.

Israelis from opposite ends of the political spectrum find themselves united in their shared sense of disillusionment. At a candlelit rally last week in central Jerusalem left-wingers bearing the banners of the anti-occupation Meretz organisation stood alongside members of Bnei Akiva, a religious youth organisation which strongly supports the Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

The rally had been called to demonstrate for a state inquiry into the conduct of the war. But for many it was more about expressing dissatisfaction with the direction of the country as a whole. 'We want our children to grow up and be proud of what's happening and to be part of something positive, and I don't feel that at the moment,' said Helen Lowenstein, who works in education. One of her three children is in the army and she said that she had grown used to the corruption of the politicians but had come to the rally because 'now it's even entered the army'.

Yet there are those who believe that the leadership crisis may provide an opportunity for change. Shavit believes 'there is a reasonable chance for change for the better' as ordinary people who have been put off politics now become involved to improve matters.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, an organisation with 20,000 members, believes that the public may now be receptive to its message of constitutional reform.

Others perceive a growing fatigue within Israeli society. A well-known sociologist in Jerusalem describes the situation as grim, but adds that he believes in 'the politics of hope'.

For ordinary Israelis this appears to be an unusual time. They feel as though they have been cast adrift from their leaders. One man demonstrating outside the President's residence in Jerusalem said he has come 'because I am pained and lonely because of the government that forgot me'.

The question is whether his actions, and those of others, will be enough to heal the breach between the leaders and the people of Israel.