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Israeli Leaders Hit With Wave Of Scandals

Vita Bekker | Fri. Aug 25, 2006

TEL AVIV — With Israelis already angry over their government's handling of the crisis in Lebanon, Israel has been hit by a wave of scandals involving several top government and military officials.

Justice Minister Haim Ramon, an architect of the ruling Kadima party, resigned Sunday after being indicted for allegedly having kissed an 18-year-old female soldier against her will. Tzahi Hanegbi, another Kadima member and chair of the Knesset's influential Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, was informed last week by the office of the attorney general that he would be charged with fraud, bribery and perjury relating to appointments that he made during his term as environment minister between 2001 and 2003.

President Moshe Katsav and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could find themselves in legal trouble, as well. Katsav reportedly was summoned this week for questioning in a sexual harassment probe after police seized computers and documents in a late-night raid on his official residence. He has denied any wrongdoing. It was also reported recently that Olmert is being investigated by the state comptroller for allegedly purchasing a Jerusalem property for hundreds of thousands of dollars below market price.

The string of developments and revelations comes just a week after the Israeli daily Ma'ariv triggered a firestorm by reporting that Dan Halutz, Israel's military chief of staff, sold off about \$25,000 in stocks just hours after the fighting broke out with Hezbollah. The scandals are fueling many Israelis' increasing distrust in the capabilities of their elected leaders at a time when many people already believe that the month-long war, which claimed 159 lives in Israel, was handled poorly.

“Along with this war, there is a sense in Israel that the whole political arena is rotten from its foundation,” said Daniel Kayros, director of fiscal litigation with the watchdog organization The Movement for Quality Government in Israel. “There is a sense that people are waiting for a good leadership,” he said.

According to Kayros, about 12 members in the last Knesset — a tenth of the Israeli parliament — faced some sort of police investigation.

The recent postwar discontent — in contrast to the broad support at the start of the hostilities — and the search for culprits have led the Israeli media to devote what some observers see as excessive attention to particular scandals involving political and military leaders.

“The hysterical element in the media, which just yesterday created a personality cult for [the leaders], is now urgently searching for a demon, a Satan, one man, with or without a uniform, who will carry on his back all the sins of the war,” wrote Nahum Barnea, top commentator of the country’s most widely read newspaper, Yediot Aharonot.

While the war appears to have exacerbated many Israelis’ lack of confidence in their politicians, the mistrust — especially on the issue of corruption — was high long before the conflict started. A 2005 poll commissioned by the global anti-corruption watchdog organization Transparency International found that 77% of Israelis believe that corruption has affected political life to a large extent.

Knesset members from across the political spectrum are joining forces to address the issue.

Arieh Eldad of the nationalist opposition party Ichud Leumi-Mafdal recently created an anti-corruption lobby that includes a diverse collection of fellow Knesset members, as well as such nonparliamentary activist groups as The Movement for Quality Government in Israel. The lobby is working to increase protections for whistleblowers, including a measure to prevent their firings and boost their financial compensation. It already has marked its first achievement: About a month and a half ago, the lobby succeeded in stopping the appointment of a candidate for the Health Ministry’s director general, largely due to allegations of fraud and issues of conflict of interest.

The aftermath of the recent war, Eldad told the Forward, provides a chance for Israel to reduce public corruption. “It’s true that a war or a national trauma is a situation which reduces our ability to tolerate corruption,” Eldad said. “This is really an opportunity to clean up the stables and improve ourselves.”

In the previous Knesset, the Likud Party’s Michael Eitan established an inquiry committee to probe government graft. However, he suspended the committee ahead of the March elections to avoid interpretation of its activities as politically motivated.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel is working on other draft laws to enhance the accountability of public officials, which it sees as key to fighting corruption. The group’s proposals include opening the vote in primaries to all party members, not just to members of the powerful central committees. Some observers tied Israeli electoral flaws to the recent war with Hezbollah.

In a recent opinion article published on Yediot’s Web site, Dan Caspi, head of the media studies department at Ben-Gurion University, said that Israel’s political leadership is plagued by mediocrity. He criticized the parties’ central committees, saying they produce and reward populist and manipulative politicians rather than create great statesmen.

“An institution plagued by mediocrity cannot rule, cannot make level-headed decisions and is not free to effectively lead the conflict against the Palestinians,” Caspi wrote. “If a committee of inquiry is set up, it should not avoid the main problem: namely, how to ensure that more adequate people take the helm.”

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