

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

Explaining Right-Wing Politics in America, via the Middle East

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER

JERUSALEM  
LIBERALS were confounded. The right-wing incumbent’s blue-collar base was sticking by him, cheering as he weaponized identity politics, attacked democratic institutions and appeared to place his own interests ahead of the nation’s.

A familiar set of facts, to say the least. But the liberals in question were Israeli, the incumbent was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the working-class voters were Israeli Jews with roots in North Africa and the Middle East.

A Tel Aviv University sociologist named Nissim Mizrahi who spent years studying those voters and grappling with their rejection of liberalism thought he understood why.

The problem was not, he said, as some liberals contend, that Jews of Mediterranean origin, or Mizrahim, were confused about what was best for them. They weren’t suffering from Stockholm syndrome or “false consciousness.”

What liberals failed to see, the professor asserted, was that working-class Mizrahim were consciously spurning liberalism for a reason: what they see as the endgame of the liberal worldview is not a world they wish to inhabit.

“It’s really hard for liberals to imagine that their message, their vision itself, poses a threat to the core identity of other people,” Professor Mizrahi, 58, said in an interview.

His description of liberalism’s blind spots, published in the newspaper Ha-aretz a year ago, shook the Israeli left like an ideological bunker-busting bomb, and could hold lessons for another deeply polarized society in the West.

The parallels between Mizrahi voters in Israel and Trump voters in the United States are impossible to miss, Professor Mizrahi said.

Both see themselves as their countries’ most patriotic citizens, and demonize the left and its allies in the news media, academia and other liberal redoubts as traitorous enemies. Both, he said, feel disdained by those elites, who dismiss their views as racist, ignorant or unwittingly self-defeating.

“You keep ridiculing us and presenting us as undemocratic and dangerous,” he said, articulating the non-liberal view. “But we are the people. Who are you?”

Professor Mizrahi, as his surname suggests, is a product of the Mizrahi working class himself: His mother, who moved to Israel from Iraq as a teenager, met his father at an institute for the blind (both had lost their eyesight, from trachoma, at age 2). The couple raised their son and his two sisters on a shoestring in Kiryat Hayovel, a poverty-stricken and overwhelmingly right-wing Jerusalem neighborhood of Mizrahi immigrants.

When a teacher said that young Nissim was bright, and should perhaps attend vocational school to become a handyman, he said, his mother responded tartly that her son would study and grow up to earn enough “to hire your son.”

Drawn to higher education, his outlook took a leftward turn in the United States while on a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Michigan, where he earned a Ph.D. in 1998, and later at Harvard. He met other young Mizrahi scholars, still a rarity in the Israeli academy, which was dominated by Jews of Eastern European origin, and experienced something of a political awakening as a liberal and a Mizrahi.

Returning to Israel, he became an activist on Mizrahi education and human rights.

There seemed to be ample reason for Mizrahim, long treated as second-class citizens, to be drawn to liberal promises of equality and social justice. Yet, nothing he said could budge even members of his own family from their right-wing leanings.

In 2011, after hearing a visiting lecturer from Europe extol human rights as the “international moral language,” Professor Mizrahi had an aha moment.

If such liberal ideas were so universal, he asked, why, in Israel, “had they failed



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN BALIITY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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NISSIM MIZRACHI

to reach the hearts and minds of working-class people?”

He recalled demonstrations where liberal activists called for coexistence with the Palestinians and spoke of prosecuting both Israeli soldiers and Hezbollah fighters on war-crimes charges — an expression of shared humanity that he said liberals found “morally sublime” but which had onlooking Mizrahi taxi drivers boiling over with rage.

“The resistance is physical,” he said. “They become so violent, as if you are threatening their personal property, or about to rape their daughter. And if we don’t understand why they are so upset, we don’t understand anything.”

FOR the Mizrahi working class, he said, the liberal vision of peace with the Palestinians, of breaking down barriers and prejudices between peoples, imperils their own sense of identity and belonging as Jews in a Jewish state. To them, the nation’s borders, walls and segregated Jewish and Arab communities are not just reassuring but essential for coexistence.

The way they see it, he said, is “if the liberals get their version of peace, it’s a threat to my way of living.”

That sense of belonging, he concluded, defeated every attempt by the left to make inroads with working-class Mizrahim.

In addition to feeling scorned by the liberal elite, he said, Mizrahim and Trump voters also share a perception that solving the world’s or the Middle East’s problems — whether by welcoming immigrants and striking trade deals that send jobs overseas, or by rushing to give a bitter enemy a state next door — too often comes at their expense. Charity must begin at home.

Some critics on the left have accused Professor Mizrahi of glossing over serious issues of racism, sexism and homophobia.

Menachem Mautner, a law professor who is both a critic and adherent of Israeli liberalism, said that Professor Mizrahi’s portrayal of the Mizrahi worldview was overly “rosy.” But he said it would be a mistake to dismiss Professor Mizrahi’s conclusions.

“We need to internalize them and to take them seriously,” he said.

Professor Mizrahi, who is married to an ophthalmologist and has three daughters, has some influential allies in Israeli politics, among them Tehila Friedman, a centrist lawmaker.

S. FRIEDMAN, who as an Orthodox Jew and a feminist said she had ample experience mediating between traditional and liberal values, said the most common complaint about Professor Mizrahi was that he had legitimized discrimination, especially anti-Arab bias, among Mizrahim.

“That’s a big problem,” she said. “That’s always a problem with seeing the world in circles — first my family, then my tribe, then my people, then other people.” But that’s the way most of us live.”

Professor Mizrahi, she said, is “trying to give respect to those sets of values, which deserve respect.”

Understanding the other side is a prerequisite to bridging the political gulf, Professor Mizrahi said. When he was a visiting professor at Berkeley, a student confided that she was having horrible fights with her mother, a Trump voter. He urged her to try to set aside her anger and interrogate her mother as if she were a research subject.

It helped, he said.

“The other side’s concerns are not mine, but they should be, because I care about him or her,” he said. “We share something in common here. We are sharing this land and this nation. It sounds horrible, but he or she needs to become part of us. Because they are part of us.”

To that extent, Democratic relief over Mr. Trump’s defeat obscures a serious risk, he said.

He recalled how Israeli liberals, driven from power in 1977, celebrated their comeback in 1999 when Ehud Barak of the Labor Party ended Mr. Netanyahu’s first term. Triumphant, the left did not bother to reach out. It went right back to marginalizing Mr. Netanyahu’s right-wing base.

But Mr. Barak did not last two years, his successors have all been right-wingers, and Labor today is effectively defunct.

“This is the lesson maybe for you,” Professor Mizrahi said. “OK, you won the election, fine. But don’t forget that red America is still there.”

In Mexico, Ex-Governor Is Murdered On Vacation

By OSCAR LOPEZ

MEXICO CITY — The former governor of the state of Jalisco was gunned down early Friday while vacationing in the resort city of Puerto Vallarta, the authorities said, a brazen killing that further illustrated the government’s struggles to rein in the deadly violence that has surged across Mexico over the past five years.

The killing of the ex-governor, Aristóteles Sandoval, who was shot in the back inside a restaurant restroom, is one of the highest-profile political killings in Mexico in recent memory, security experts said.

Mr. Sandoval was killed just hours before President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his cabinet delivered a grim update on the nation’s security situation during a news conference.

More than 31,000 murders were recorded in Mexico this year as of November, the latest month for which government statistics are available, a figure roughly on pace with 2019. But homicides have nearly doubled over the past five years, underscoring the government’s failure to curb the surging violence it inherited.

Mr. López Obrador offered his condolences to Mr. Sandoval’s family and, in a nod to his increasing reliance on soldiers to tackle the country’s soaring violence, said that the federal government and the military would assist in the investigation.

No suspects were immediately identified in Mr. Sandoval’s killing, but security experts said it could be the work of the brutal Jalisco New Generation Cartel, which came to power during Mr.



CARLOS ZEPEDA/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Aristóteles Sandoval’s killing is the latest in a bloody year.

Sandoval’s term from 2013 to 2018 and now controls much of the state.

“The Jalisco cartel has a complete domination over Puerto Vallarta,” said Eduardo Guerrero, a security analyst at Lantia Consultores in Mexico City. “No other group has the reach of these guys to assassinate a former governor.”

“They are a cartel of great audacity, that isn’t intimidated, that aims at the highest levels,” Mr. Guerrero added.

More than half of the country’s murders this year have been concentrated in six of Mexico’s 31 states, including Jalisco, the country’s deputy director of public security, Ricardo Mejía Berdeja, said at the president’s news conference.

The killing of Mr. Sandoval comes just months after an audacious attempt to kill Mexico City’s chief of police, an episode that was tied to the Jalisco cartel. The attack shocked residents who long saw the capital as an oasis amid the country’s violence.

Mr. Sandoval’s killing may also highlight the increasing presence of powerful cartels in local politics, said Falko Ernst, a senior Mexico analyst for the International Crisis Group, a global think tank.

“There are still questions to be asked about how separate politics and organized crime really are,” Mr. Ernst said. “This unleashes the beast.”

Mr. Sandoval made headlines in October, when he announced his resignation from a top post in the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or P.R.I., which governed Mexico for most of the 20th century.

“I’m going to stay in the P.R.I. but being critical,” he said in a video posted on social media. “And if they don’t like it, let them kick me out. But I’ll never stop saying what I think.”

His death could augur a bloody campaign season as Mexico heads toward midterm elections in 2021, having already endured its deadliest political period on record in 2018.

“The message is intimidating,” said Mr. Guerrero, the security analyst. He also offered a sober prediction: “What we’re going to see in the next few months are unprecedented levels of electoral political violence in Mexico.”

Do not forget the Neediest!

Freed, but Not Yet Home: Kidnapped Boys Meet Nigeria’s President

By RUTH MACLEAN and ISMAIL ALFA

DAKAR, Senegal — Hundreds of boys kidnapped last week from their boarding school in northwest Nigeria were freed on Thursday night after six days in captivity. But they had some public relations to do for the government before they could go home.

Cameras rolled on Friday as they were led barefoot by soldiers carrying rifles and wearing balaclavas through the manicured grounds of the governor’s house in Katsina, 80 miles south of Kankara, the town where they had been studying.

Looking dazed, and still wearing their dusty clothes, they were packed into a conference room, some crouching on the floor, others dwarfed by big leather chairs. Television reporters thrust microphones at them.

Then they were given new clothes to change into and taken to meet Nigeria’s president, Muhammad Buhari.

“You children are very lucky,” he told them.

Kidnapped by gunmen in a Dec. 11 attack on the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara, a town in the country’s northwest, the students had been through a terrifying, exhausting ordeal.

The kidnappers beat them, marched them for days through thickets and gave them very little

to eat and drink, they told local journalists. They were petrified by military jets circling overhead.

Boko Haram, the Islamist group that has terrorized Nigeria’s northeast, had claimed to be behind the Kankara mass abduction, raising the worrying prospect that their reach had expanded far beyond their home territory. Though hundreds of miles away, the attack last week bore a striking resemblance to the mass kidnappings of schoolgirls carried out by the group in Chibok in 2014 and Dapchi in 2018.

One Kankara student was even forced to record a video message saying that they were being held

by “a gang of Abu Shekau” — referring to Boko Haram’s longtime leader.

But the government and many of the parents described the kidnappers not as terrorists but as “bandits,” the local term for gangs of criminals that stage frequent attacks in the country’s northwest.

And on Friday, so did the boy who had in the video, under duress, described the kidnappers as Boko Haram members.

“Sincerely speaking, they are not Boko Haram,” the boy, identified by a family member as Sani Abdulhamid, told a Nigerian television channel after the release, looking shaken and distracted in a

roomful of his classmates as reporters and officials jostled him.

He said that each day they were fed only once, and given water twice, but they were constantly beaten. He said gang members beat some of the smallest boys with big guns. “Tiny, tiny boys,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know how to explain.”

The government insisted it had paid no ransom for the boys’ release. Aminu Masari, the governor of Katsina State, where they were kidnapped, said: “It was purely negotiation.”

Kidnapping is a growing concern in Nigeria, where gang violence, armed robbery, terrorism and piracy are rife. More than \$18 million was paid out to kidnappers between 2011 and 2020, according to a report by the Nigerian consulting firm SB Morgen, which said that kidnap for ransom had accelerated sharply in the past four years.

And kidnappers no longer target just the rich. Poor villagers are increasingly kidnapped, too, with ransoms ranging between \$1,000 and \$150,000.

As the West African country’s overstretched, underpaid and often abusive police force has failed to protect many of its citizens, gangs have increasingly been able to operate unchecked. And vigilante groups have formed to protect communities, often exacerbating tension and leading to even greater insecurity.

The government maintains that it is tackling these issues.

“Our children should not have to go to school in trepidation,” said Nigeria’s minister of information, Lai Mohammed, at a news conference on Friday in Abuja, the capital. “And we will not relent until all Nigerians can go to bed at night with their two eyes closed.”

Residents of Kankara, and the country’s entire northwest, likely have more sleepless nights ahead, however. Conflict over land and grazing rights, fueled by arms flowing across borders, has caused death, disability and displacement there in recent years.

But for the schoolboys’ parents, their release is a welcome reprieve.

Many of the parents did not answer calls on Friday evening. Desperate to see their sons, they had rushed to Government House, the governor’s official residence in Katsina, where the boys were being marshaled from one photo op to the next.

But Abdulkadir Musbau, whose 12-year-old son, Abdullahi, was among the children taken, picked up the phone. He had not been allowed to see his son, he said. That had to wait until the president was finished talking to them, and until medical checks had been done. But he had been given a few minutes with Abdullahi on the phone.

“I was so happy when I spoke to him,” Mr. Musbau said. “It’s a huge relief for me.”



SUNDAY ALAMBA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nigerian schoolboys at a news conference Friday in the city of Katsina. They later met with President Muhammad Buhari.