

# Isolated opposition



*MK Dov Khenin surprised everyone by leading his movement, City for All, to a strong showing in Tel Aviv's municipal elections. Six months later and relegated to sitting in the opposition at city hall, the fledgling party is learning the ropes on the fly and finding it difficult to deliver on many of its promises*

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• By Jesse Fox

**M**ichal Barzel-Cohen sits cross-legged on a slab of cracked concrete near Rothschild Boulevard in central Tel Aviv. Barzel-Cohen, an artist and practitioner of alternative medicine, waves an arm toward the surrounding empty lot, known as “Kiryat Sefer.” For over 12 years, she has led a stubborn campaign to transform the 26-dunam site into a public park.

“This is the last remaining piece of empty, publicly-owned land in the city center,” she says, “and, as such, the last chance we have to build a park for the residents here.”

A thick file folder tells of a long and exhausting struggle: letters to and from city officials, sketches of various building plans, photos of demonstrations, historical land documents.

Barzel-Cohen and her neighbors began their struggle in 1997, when they established an organization called “Green Not Cement.” The group’s first action was to throw a street party in Kiryat Sefer, during which three symbolic trees were planted in holes carved out of the cement. By the next morning, the trees were gone.

Over the next decade, Barzel-Cohen tried pretty much everything she could think of to win City Hall’s support for the park. She organized countless community events, put on an art exhibition and even produced a movie. City officials responded with a series of building plans for the area, some of which included space for a park, but all of which included setting aside land for construction at the expense of the park – something Barzel and her fellow activists found unacceptable. At one point, the land was even leased out to an entrepreneur, who sought to run the site as a parking lot.

Last month, however, something unexpected happened: the residents won.

In an unprecedented move, a municipal planning committee voted unanimously to recommend transforming the entire area into a park, while transferring construction rights to another site.

Barzel-Cohen, for her part, says she was not surprised by the vote. She attributes the change at City Hall to a general change of attitude brought about by the economic crisis and greater understanding of ecological issues, as well as to the dedicated support of local politicians like Deputy Mayor Meital Lehari of Meretz.

However, she adds, there was



INSTEAD OF sitting on the sidelines and criticizing, City For All wants to be a proactive opposition, taking the initiative and using the tools at its disposal to influence policy. In photo: City For All supporters, locked out of a city hall meeting, try forcing their way inside. (Daniel Cherrin)

## Grassroots take hold in city hall

*City For All is using its time in the opposition to learn the political game, and to show rivals and supporters alike that it’s not just another Tel Aviv fad passing in the wind*



IN AN unprecedented move, a municipal planning committee (in photo) voted unanimously to recommend transforming the entire Kiryat Sefer area into a park, while transferring construction rights to another site. (Amit Tzinman)

another factor that led to the residents’ victory. Six months ago, a groundswell of public support swept a new political player called City for All (*Ir Lekoalanu*) into Tel Aviv’s city council. Although Barzel-Cohen herself is

not affiliated with City for All, the movement has been among the park’s most adamant supporters, and was instrumental in harnessing the grassroots pressure that led to the park’s approval. Says Barzel-Cohen:

“City for All has changed the public discourse in this city.”

UNAFFILIATED WITH national-level political parties and composed of people from the Left, Right and center, City for All

was, from the beginning, a strange animal in the local political landscape. Founded in early 2008, the movement began as a loose coalition of activist groups and residents united in their opposition to Mayor Ron Huldai’s policies and governing style.

In August 2008, City for All announced that Dov Henin, a prominent environmentalist and human rights advocate, would head its list. Henin, a member of the left-wing, Jewish-Arab communist party Hadash, had earned respect in the Knesset, but his radical political stances threatened to alienate voters not identified with the Left.

The movement launched a marketing campaign that utilized, among other things, word-of-mouth and online social networks to build support. Almost overnight, Henin became something of a cult figure, and his animated portrait became an almost iconic image, appearing on T-shirts, stickers and invitations to parties.

Despite the almost underground nature of the campaign, City for All’s strategy seemed to work. The media began to take notice, artists and bloggers jumped wholeheartedly on the bandwagon and local celebrities lent the campaign their fame. Increasingly, City for All emerged as a serious challenger to Huldai’s leadership. The only question remaining was whether or not the party’s seeming success would be translated into concrete results at the polling booths.

The municipal election results became clear in the early morning hours. Huldai, with just over half the vote, was on his way to a third term as mayor. His party, Tel Aviv 1, had won five seats on the city council. In the economically comfortable parts of the city north of the Yarkon River and in certain well-off eastern neighborhoods, Huldai and Tel Aviv 1 had won in almost every polling station.

Henin, with just over a third of the vote for mayor, had lost. City for All, however, had won the greatest amount of votes for city council, and would also have five seats. In the young, liberal city center, Henin and City for All were overwhelmingly victorious.

Following the election, Huldai set about putting together his coalition. When the dust settled, City for All’s five city councilors found themselves alone in the opposition, with one other faction, Yaffa, still undecided.

For City for All, it was a euphoric but bittersweet victory. Its strong showing had stolen

# Sarid says no, youth say yes to Henin

**C**ity for All was founded in early 2008 when a loose coalition of activist groups and city residents united in their opposition to Mayor Ron Huldai's policies and governing style. The movement's first task was to figure out what it stood for.

Slowly but surely, it began to take shape. Eager to offer another kind of politics, the movement set up a series of forums and groups that would serve as the backbone of the movement. The different forums attracted a broad spectrum of supporters, and were tasked with formulating policies on issues such as housing, transportation and education.

Another question was who would lead the party. Early speculation

focused on former education and environmental protection minister Yossi Sarid from Meretz. While polls showed him to be a potent challenger against Huldai, Sarid himself was ambivalent. Eventually, he announced that he would not run.

In August, the party announced that Hadash MK Dov Khenin, a prominent environmentalist and human rights advocate, would head its list. A relative newcomer to the Knesset, he seemed a natural choice, and his candidacy captured the imagination of many in the city. For the first time in years, Tel Aviv's younger crowd seemed legitimately enthusiastic about municipal elections.

— J.F.



MAYOR RON Huldai's (sitting on right) policies and governing style unified activists and residents seeking a change. In photo: City for All councilman Yoav Goldring addresses a crowd, with Meretz councilwoman Yael Dayan (top left) looking on. (Daniel Cherrin)

the limelight, and undermined the confidence of Huldai and his supporters. On the other hand, it seemed likely that City for All was now headed for the opposition, and no one seemed to know what that would mean.

Could a determined opposition party, they wondered, really help shape municipal policy, especially under a mayor as strong as Huldai? Half a year later, the question remains to a large extent unanswered.

CITY FOR ALL's impressive performance in the November elections, according to Prof. Avner de-Shalit of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, represented something of a wake-up call for the mayor's administration. "One way to understand the results of the election," he says, "is that voters were sending a message to Huldai that they wanted something different."

In his previous two terms, Huldai had never faced any serious challenges to his rule as mayor. Now, for the first time in 10 years, Huldai would be faced with a large and determined opposition.

When City for All's representatives moved into their offices at City Hall, they brought with them a distinctively progressive worldview and a new agenda for the city.

"In other cities around the world, mayors are thinking ahead," says party spokeswoman Sharon Shahaf. "In many places, they are beginning to address issues like climate change and urban sustainability at the local level. In Israel, a mayor is still judged based on his ability to provide pretty landscaping, traffic circles and a working sewage system. We are trying to raise people's awareness, along with their expectations of their local government."

Internally, City for All was unique in its attempts to integrate citizen activists into its decision-making processes. Unwilling to adopt the traditional form of an Israeli political party, and eager to offer another kind of politics, the movement set up a series of "forums." These small groups of committed activists, organized along geographic and topical lines, would become the backbone of the movement. The various forums attracted a broad spectrum of supporters, and were given the task of for-

mulating the movement's policies on issues such as housing, transportation and education.

IN LOCAL politics, the winner generally takes all. Parties that choose not to join an elected mayor's coalition are left out in the cold, denied access to powerful positions and influence over local affairs.

like-minded lawmakers and building coalitions around specific issues.

City for All was hopeful that it could also advance their agenda this way, building coalitions with other council members around specific areas of consensus – even if they contradicted Huldai's policies. Instead of sitting on the sidelines



*'In Israel, a mayor is still judged based on his ability to provide pretty landscaping, traffic circles and a working sewage system. We are trying to raise people's awareness, along with their expectations of their local government' – Sharon Shahaf, City for All spokesperson*

After the elections, nine parties decided to join Huldai's coalition. Despite being offered a place in his coalition, City for All decided to remain in the opposition.

But City for All was not discouraged. They pointed to Henin's success in the Knesset as a model: though never a member of the government, the MK had managed to pass an impressive amount of environmental legislation by identifying

and criticizing, they would be a proactive opposition, taking the initiative and using the tools at their disposal to influence policy.

However, the movement's representatives soon realized that being an active opposition in Tel Aviv was not going to be easy. Huldai is a strong mayor, and is supported by much of the country's political establishment, while City for All remains



UNAFFILIATED WITH national-level political parties and composed of people from the Left, Right and center, City for All was, from the beginning, a strange animal in the local political landscape. In photo: City for All supporters at a city hall meeting. (Daniel Cherrin)

underfunded and barely known outside Tel Aviv. And, despite his harsh criticism, even Henin admits that the Tel Aviv Municipality, with all its faults, functions better than most local authorities.

Worse still, the other factions on the council, with which City for All had hoped to cooperate, have treated the movement with extreme caution. It seems no one wants to appear too close to such a vocal opposition, lest their loyalty to the coalition be called into question.

"We are a young movement, and are still developing and learning what it means to be in the municipal opposition," says Shahaf. "After focusing on gathering support before the election, we have spent the last several months learning how to be an effective opposition."

Shahaf admits that bad blood existed between her party and others immediately after the elections – even with parties with similar worldviews. However, these days, she says, the movement is rebuilding its ties to the other factions, and remains committed to building coalitions around specific issues.

Dan Rabinowitz, an anthropology professor at Tel Aviv University and one of the movement's senior figures, is more blunt. "The first few months in opposition have exposed the weakness of the structures now in place in local government in Israel," he says. "Mayors recruit the council's support by appointing leaders of the various parties as paid deputies and other office holders and have no obligations towards their opposition."

THE INITIAL frustration with the reality of municipal decision-making has forced the young movement to think more creatively about how to exercise its power.

Lately, that strategy has begun to bear fruit, and cooperation with other factions has started to develop. City for All recently partnered up with the Likud to secure a six-month moratorium on home demolitions in Kfar Shalem. Both City for All and Likud have city councilors who hail from the neighborhood, which has long suffered from legal and planning problems.

The movement's members have also been able to realize their power in the various municipal committees. Rachele Gilad-Volner, a social worker who has

# Yaffa Party still on the fence

While the rest of the parties are either in or out of the coalition, one remains undecided. "We are not an opposition party, not yet. In fact, we are still negotiating," says Omar Siksik of the Yaffa Party, which holds one seat on the city council.

Although Yaffa is perceived as an Arab party, Siksik, a merchant from Jaffa and a 30-year veteran of local political activity, insists that he represents both Jaffa's Jews and Arabs. Negotiations, he says, are progressing, and the city has shown flexibility thus far.

Although technically part of Tel Aviv, Jaffa has its own set of problems and its own distinctive characteristics. The main issue on Siksik's agenda is housing. Since early 2007, almost 500 families in Jaffa have lived under the threat of demolition and eviction orders.

Siksik is demanding that the city set up a roundtable to discuss the issue, with all of the entities involved, including public housing and land authorities, as well as residents. In the meantime, he would like the city to commit to a freeze on home demolitions.

Encouraged by progress in Kfar Shalem, Siksik thinks this can be done. He is also lobbying for affordable housing for Jaffan families, which he also thinks is achievable.

Siksik points to a 50 percent dropout rate at Jaffa's high schools, and underfunded public schools. Improving the state of Jaffa's schools and lowering dropout rates, he says, will lead to less crime in Jaffa.

Although he is not formally a part of the opposition, Siksik has only positive things to say about City for All's performance thus far. "It's always good to have a strong, democratic opposition," he says, "and they are doing a good job." — J.F.

been involved in local activism for 25 years, is a member of the Local Urban Planning Committee, through which all building plans in the city must pass on their way to statutory approval.

"Our presence on the committee makes a real difference," she says. "Today, decisions on things like building new skyscrapers and highways, which until recently would have easily gained approval, are no longer approved automatically."

On other important fronts, however, the movement has yet to make a substantial impact. Affordable housing for students, young people and lower-income families, for example, is a key issue for the movement's voters. It has also been declared a priority by Huldai, who even commissioned a plan to create affordable housing from a specially-appointed team over a year ago.

Despite this apparent confluence of interests, concrete attempts to provide affordable housing have yet to be approved, and City for All representative Yoav Goldring's recent suggestion to include funding for it in the city's new annual budget was rejected.

During a special city council

meeting devoted to discussion of the city's new NIS 4.5 billion annual budget, City for All submitted some 60 reservations. The new budget, the movement claimed, prioritized development and education projects in the north of the city over the disadvantaged south, and prioritized new roads and parking lots over bike paths and public transportation – despite the fact that Tel Aviv's air pollution from vehicles is ranked the worst in the country.

However, according to Goldring, none of City for All's reservations were accepted, and the budget was easily passed with the support of all of the coalition parties.

DESPITE THE party's failure to produce concrete achievements, a subtle shift has become evident in city policies. On a number of fronts, City Hall has exhibited a measure of flexibility recently that was absent during the past decade.

City council meetings, for example, are now recorded and posted on City Hall's Web site. This was not true during previous meetings, and was one of City for All's priorities following the local elections. City for All had planned to tape the meet-

ings and post them on its own Website, but the municipality began to tape them, as well.

"I think that, because of our presence, we are seeing the municipality do things they wouldn't do without City for All," says Goldring. "They are doing things that we are demanding, while making sure that we don't get the credit."

One of City for All's demands is that the municipality promote policies of urban sustainability in Tel Aviv, things like public transportation that reduce environmental impacts and raise quality of life in the city. Last month, as part of the city's centennial celebrations, the municipality organized a conference on urban sustainability (*Vision for the future still blurry*; April 24, *Metro*).

Describing the conference as a fig leaf, City for All took the unusual step of sending letters to the dozens of foreign experts invited to speak at the event in which it emphasized the "huge gap between the celebratory façade City Hall is presenting" and the "careless, myopic... policy of revenues above people" that it pursues in reality.

According to Gilad-Volner, many in Tel Aviv had hoped that the Centennial Conference would attempt to stimulate a real dialogue about the city's problems. "A lot of people came to hear original thinking," she said. Instead, Gilad-Volner described the event as a "song of praise" by the city's leadership to itself. "The question of public transportation, which is critical," she added, "was not even seriously discussed."

This week, however, marked another first as Huldai met with a number of local environmental organizations and activists in an attempt to stimulate a dialogue about green issues. In his 10 years as mayor, Huldai had never attended such a meeting.

Nevertheless, City for All remains skeptical about the change in the mayor's tone. "I think that, because of our presence, we are seeing the municipality do things that they wouldn't do without City for All," says Goldring. "They're beginning to answer our demands, while making sure that we don't get the credit."

WHILE City for All emerges from its first few months in the opposition, while managing to score a handful of crucial steps forward, the question remains – how much power does a municipal opposition party really have to promote its agenda?

In the opinion of de-Shalit, it is still early to draw conclusions about City for All. While it has already successfully changed the way people talk about the issues on the agenda in Tel Aviv, he says, the real test will come

when it is either elected or decides to join a coalition. When this happens, it will have to compromise on some of its positions, there will be internal disagreements, and the party will be forced to make hard choices.



*'Today, decisions on things like building new skyscrapers and highways, which until recently would have easily gained approval, are no longer approved automatically'*  
— Rachel Gilad-Volner, City for All

If it stays true to its path, and manages to convince the public that it represents a real alternative, says de-Shalit, the party's position could improve. "A party using its five years in the opposition to incubate itself is very realistic in local politics, unlike in national politics," he adds.

There is also a precedent for this: Jerusalem's newly-elected mayor, Nir Barkat, who lost in his bid for mayor five years ago. Rather than withdraw from local politics, Barkat transformed himself into the leader of an active and aggressive opposition, and went on to win the next election.

Until then, City for All remains determined to find common ground with other municipal factions. "It is and will remain an uphill climb," admits Rabinowitz. "But we are here to stay and make a difference."

BACK IN Kiryat Sefer, Barzel-Cohen and her fellow neighborhood activists remain cautiously optimistic. Following the decision in favor of the park, a number of official statements have come out in the press implying that the decision might still be overturned.

In the meantime, the residents have no intention of abandoning their campaign for the park. They have planted the beginnings of an organic garden, and continue to hold weekly picnics at the site.

"Public participation is the most important thing today," Barzel-Cohen says. "The residents have to be included in the processes that are changing the city." As to the future of the park, Barzel-Cohen remains confident: "The city realizes now that the residents have great power."



VOTERS UNDER the age of 35 preferred Khenin (in photo) by far, while the elderly overwhelmingly supported Huldai. (Daniel Cherrin)