



Israel votes for expansionism and war

Marcus Halaby Tue, 24/03/2015 - 17:25

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On Saturday 7 March, only ten days before Israel's recent elections, 50,000 people demonstrated in Tel Aviv against prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition. They were led by supporters of the Zionist Union, an opposition electoral list headed by the Labor party's Isaac Herzog and former Likud and Kadima minister Tzipi Livni. Her present party, Hatnuah, is a 'liberal' split from the centre-right Kadima, which she and former prime ministers Ehud Olmert and Ariel Sharon founded in 2006 as a split from the right-wing Likud, to support Sharon's policy of 'disengaging' from the Palestinians by withdrawing troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip.

Demanding 'change', in government, in the pursuit of a frozen 'peace process' with the Palestinians, and on social and economic issues that briefly brought Israel's increasingly squeezed European Ashkenazi-origin middle class onto the streets in an Occupy-style protest movement in the summer of 2011, they accused Netanyahu and his allies of a 'lack of vision' on the Palestinian issue, with former Mossad chief Meir Dagan and retired IDF general Amiram Levin warning that Israel faced the 'reality of apartheid' without a change in policy.

With an apparently infectious 'anyone but Netanyahu' mood in the air, opinion polls and even some exit polls confidently predicted a narrow victory for the Zionist left and centre-right. With a projected 23 or 24 seats in Israel's 120-member Knesset to Likud's projected 21, Herzog and Livni would have been placed to lead a coalition containing Yair Lapid's secular-liberal Zionist Yesh Atid party, the right-wing Sephardic religious party Shas, the non-Zionist ultra-orthodox party United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and Labor's perennial coalition partners, the left-Zionist Meretz.

Moshe Kahlon's centre-right Kulanu party, a recent split from Likud, would have held the balance of power between this and the alternative of a coalition of the right and far-right parties, led by a defiant Netanyahu who has already ruled out the possibility of a 'national unity' coalition with the Zionist Union. The choices facing the Israeli public could not have been more clear.

Indeed, the prospect of a 'moderate' Israeli government more accommodating to stated US policy, and committed to a cosmetic resumption of the 'peace process', was strengthened by the impressive showing of the Joint List, a coalition of the three main Arab parties (the United Arab List and the left-nationalist Balad and Ta'al) with Hadash, the successor of the former Israeli Communist party. Drawing the vast majority of its vote from Israel's Arab minority, it was widely expected to support a Zionist Union-led coalition from the outside, which would have given Herzog and Livni a comfortable majority of 75 seats. In the actual event it won its predicted 13 seats, amidst a high turnout from Israel's normally apathetic or abstentionist Arab electorate, making it the third-largest bloc in the new Knesset.

And yet Netanyahu defied expectations, winning 30 seats and 23 per cent of the vote. Naftali Bennett's religious-Zionist Jewish Home (which won 8 seats), the successor of the former National Religious Party, and far-right racist Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu (with 6 seats), a secular Revisionist Zionist party mainly supported by immigrants from the former Soviet republics, are both likely participants in Netanyahu's next coalition, with some combination of Kulanu (with 10 seats), Shas (7 seats) and UTJ (6 seats) making up the numbers to provide it with a majority of up to 67 seats.

Netanyahu won partly by stealing the clothes and the votes of some of his past and likely future coalition partners to his right, in particular Jewish Home, which won three fewer seats than expected. But by far the biggest casualty of Netanyahu's calculated bid for the support of the most extreme wing of the right-wing 'settler camp' was Yachad. A

far-right alliance of the supporters of former Shas leader Eli Yishai and Otzma Yehudit (?Jewish Strength?), a violent party that stands in the tradition of assassinated New York-based ultranationalist rabbi Meir Kahane, it drew most of its vote from the West Bank Jewish settlers.

Expected to win between 5 and 7 seats in polls since its formation in December, it wound up with none at all, narrowly failing to meet the 3.25 per cent threshold by 12,000 votes, or 0.28 per cent. This threshold had been raised from its previous level of 2 per cent only in March 2014, effectively forcing the pro-settler extremists to choose between a vote for a party of ?their? favoured candidates and a strong Likud that showed itself more than willing to accommodate their concerns.

In the process, Netanyahu has exposed the most ugly face of Israeli politics. He declared early in March that he would not allow the creation of a Palestinian state, renouncing the content of a speech that he made at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009 in which, albeit mainly for US consumption, he had previously indicated his willingness to accept a demilitarised Palestinian state within some small fragments of the West Bank.

On the very day of the elections, he posted a viral 28-second video clip on social media warning that Arabs, who constitute almost a fifth of Israel's citizens, were ?going to the polls in droves?, and that ?left wing organisations are bringing them in buses?. Declaring that this was ?a call-up order? for Jewish voters to respond to this danger to the state, he even claimed, like any good Arab dictator warning his people against foreign interference, that Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas?s calls and ?American money? were ?getting the Arab vote out?.

And in a further sign of Israel?s growing rift with its US sponsor, Netanyahu declared early on in his election campaign that his priority would be to prevent Iran from obtaining any nuclear capability, by pressing the USA and its allies to maintain and expand economic and diplomatic sanctions against it, giving a defiant speech to a Republican-dominated US Congress on 3 March warning the US public against President Barack Obama?s moves towards a rapprochement with the Iranian regime.

Netanyahu?s victory should not be the surprise that it was to many liberal commentators in the West, still mesmerised by their lingering love affair with a Zionist ?peace camp? supposedly bolstered by the defection to its ranks of former Likudnik hardliners like Livni, Olmert and the late Ariel Sharon.

Indeed, the ongoing decline of Israel?s Labor party, once the party of the Zionist establishment, Kadima?s disintegration and the failure of Labor?s alliance with its new ?centre-right? partners to achieve a larger share of the vote than the Likud party that they split from, demonstrate much the reverse: that a majority of Israel?s Jewish electorate, if pressed, prefer the ?real thing? of strident expansionism and militarism to the diplomatic charade of negotiations for a ?two-state solution? that no wing of Zionism seriously wants to see materialise.

Having ?defeated? the Palestinian uprising of 2000-05, and having punished the Palestinians for electing Hamas into power in 2006 by fomenting a Palestinian civil war and placing a Hamas-ruled Gaza under a starvation siege and regular bombardment ever since, it is only natural that they should want to finish the job.

There can be nothing more frustrating for the colonist citizens of a colonising state than the fact that it has not yet been able to impose a decisive formal surrender on its subdued indigenous people, despite their repeated subjugation; and that its major imperialist sponsor the USA insists, for reasons of grand imperial strategy involving its own relationships with its client Arab regimes, on promoting negotiations in which Israel risks being pressured to make concessions, however minor, that it feels no need to make given the objective balance of forces.

As Brooklyn College political science professor Corey Robin put it, after declaring himself ?heartbroken? not to be able to call himself ?a Zionist any longer?, roughly two-thirds of Israel?s Jewish electorate have effectively decided that ?We are happy to end the peace process and instead rule over millions of Palestinians indefinitely; we are happy to have them have no vote, ever, either in their own state or in ours.? In the process Robin noted that they have voted in favour of ?the undemocratic version of the one-state solution?, that is ?the Herrenvolk [master-race] ethnocracy? that

Zionism's opponents accuse Israel of being, and that the real choice now is between 'a Jewish but undemocratic Israel' and 'a democratic Israel that is no longer a Jewish state'.

Indeed, even the Zionist 'peace camp' have no intention of allowing a viable and sovereign Palestinian state in the 1967 occupied territories. Their real concern is that the 'settler camp' and its right-wing allies want too much and too soon, and that a precipitous programme of settlement and expansion runs the risk of turning Israel into a bi-national state by default, by undermining its Jewish majority.

This was evident in Meir Dagan's speech to the 7 March rally in Tel Aviv, in which he emphasised that he wants neither 'a bi-national state' nor 'an apartheid state'. Amiram Levin similarly argued that peace 'is the only way to preserve the settlement project, the settlement blocs and to hold on to the Golan Heights'.

Their fear of the prospect of a 'reality of apartheid' that most outsiders looking in might conclude already exists amounts in reality to a fear that the Palestinians, once they realise that a separate Palestinian state will never come about, will abandon their struggle against the 1967 occupation and instead demand one person, one vote, from the river to the sea. This, after all, was Olmert's stated reasoning for his miraculous 'conversion' to the peace camp's post-Oslo goal of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinian Authority, during his tenure as prime minister in 2006-09.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that many Palestine solidarity activists feel little disappointment at Netanyahu's victory. Palestinian-American journalist Ali Abunimah declared that he felt 'relieved' by it, on the grounds that Netanyahu 'strips away the opportunities for the so-called 'international community' to hide its complicity with Israel's ugly crimes behind a charade of a 'peace process'', and that it means that 'Israel can no longer practice apartheid at home while falsely presenting itself as a beacon of liberalism around the world'.

In his chillingly accurate reckoning, a victory for Livni, one of the architects of Israel's war crimes in Gaza in 2008-09, and Herzog, who criticised Netanyahu's repeated attacks on Gaza for being too soft, would have achieved little more than allowing Israel to make use of international support to drag the Palestinians into yet another decade of fruitless 'negotiations', over 'a ghetto-like bantustan designed to legitimize Israel's theft of vast tracts of land, its annexation of Jerusalem and its abrogation of the rights of Palestinian refugees'.

And while Netanyahu's scare tactics about the 'Arab vote' demonstrate his view that 'Palestinian citizens of Israel are not legitimate citizens deserving full rights', Livni has expressed much the same view herself in the past, and no Israeli leader in history has ever allowed the Arab or Arab-aligned parties into government, despite the size of Israel's Arab minority.

UK-based anti-Zionist Israeli professor Ilan Pappé similarly noted that Likud's victory, despite social and economic unrest and Israel's unprecedentedly low international standing, 'indicate clearly that there will be no change from within Israel in the near future'.

Believing that Labor has 'maximized its potential', Pappé argues that its failure to present a serious alternative to Netanyahu is due to the fact that 'Israel in 2015 is still a settler-colonialist state and a liberal version of this [Zionist] ideology cannot offer a genuine reconciliation to the indigenous people of Palestine'; the reason being that 'the raison d'être of a settler-colonialist society is displacement of the natives and their replacement by settlers. At best natives can be confined in gated enclaves, at worst they are doomed to be expelled or destroyed.'

It is doubtful in the extreme that the additional nail that Netanyahu has hammered into the coffin of the 'two-state solution' will seriously affect the willingness of US imperialism and its EU allies to protect Israel's right to continue its expansion into Palestinian lands, or to wage repeated one-sided wars against the Palestinian people to that effect.

What is true, however, is that Netanyahu's re-election means an Israel that is increasingly out of step with US imperialism, in particular on account of its alarm at Obama's overtures to Iran. This in turn is conditioned by the convergence between US and Russian imperialism in favour of the preservation of Iran's two major regional clients, the Shi'a sectarian state in Iraq and vicious and genocidal totalitarian regime of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The global

movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people should take advantage of this rift to make the Western imperialist powers' defence of the Zionist project ever more difficult in the eyes of their own peoples.

On the other hand, the emergence of Israel's Arab minority as a factor in its own right, in alliance with a part of the non-Zionist and anti-Zionist left, is an important sign of the viability of the exact prospect that 'converted' Olmert and drove the pro-settler extremists to hold their noses and vote for Netanyahu: that Palestinians and a small but brave minority of anti-Zionist Israelis in Israel-Palestine as a whole, on both sides of the Green Line, could pose an existential threat to the Zionist state by mounting a struggle for its complete decolonisation, in the form of a single democratic state for both peoples.

But that would require them to abandon their current strategy, of peaceful electoralism and a fatal reliance on the Zionist 'peace camp' to bring about the end of the 1967 occupation. And it will require a revolutionary workers' party to advocate the alternative: a revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the Zionist project of colonisation, in alliance with the global labour movement and the revolutionary social and democratic struggles of the Arab world.

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