

Likud routed at polls—vote signals deepening of Israeli crisis

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Israel's May 17 election produced an unprecedented landslide for the leading candidate for prime minister, Ehud Barak, and an historic defeat for the right-wing Likud bloc that has dominated the country's politics for more than two decades. Yet the results offer no solution to the intractable contradictions rending Israeli society. The bitter conflicts between Israel's Zionist state and the Palestinians, between secular and ultra-orthodox Jews, immigrants and native-born and, above all, Israel's working class and its ruling financial elite, can only deepen with the formation of a new government.

Barak, a former general who climbed to the top of the Israeli military establishment as the organizer of assassinations of Palestinian militants, was an unlikely candidate of the "left." His meteoric rise to the leadership of the Labor Party-led coalition, "One Israel," only demonstrated that this political formation offers nothing in the way of a fundamental reorientation of the Israeli state.

Receiving 43.5 percent of the vote compared to 56.5 for Barak, incumbent Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu appeared before a crowd of supporters shortly after the polls closed. As some in the crowd chanted "Death to the Arabs," he conceded defeat and resigned as head of Likud.

Netanyahu came to power three years ago with the core support of a coalition of ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties. He was the beneficiary of both the assassination of Labor Party Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Zionist fanatic and a series of terrorist bombing attacks by a wing of the Islamic fundamentalist organization Hamas. Blaming the terrorist attacks on the agreements reached between the Labor government and the Palestine Liberation Organization, Netanyahu cast himself as the intransigent defender of Israeli security and appealed to the fears of Israeli voters.

His 1999 campaign was essentially a reprise of the last one. Once again he attempted to run against PLO head Yassir Arafat and for a "united Jerusalem," while warning of the supposed dangers of a Palestinian state "on the outskirts of Tel Aviv."

But, as the election demonstrated, Netanyahu's three years in power were sufficient to break apart the coalition that he rode in on, and to deal a severe blow to the right-wing Likud political machine that first brought Menachem Begin into office in 1977.

Begin crafted the political line that fused the social resentments toward the privileged Laborite elite with ultra-nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism. At the core of this ideology was the vow to hold on to the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as part of "greater Israel."

Having signed the Wye agreement under US pressure last October, Netanyahu managed to alienate Likud's staunchest supporters among the Zionist settlers in the occupied territories, leading to the fracturing of his coalition.

Netanyahu's attempt to solidify the support of the Sephardic—Middle Eastern Jewish—immigrants worked to his detriment. This layer was first mobilized politically by Begin 22 years ago through demagogic appeals to their resentment of social marginalization by the Ashkenazim, or Jews of European origin, who made up the secular elite that dominated the institutions created by Labor Zionism. While these appeals produced the political "earthquake" for the Israeli right in 1977, they ended up in 1999 driving voters away in various directions.

The religious party Shas was one of the main beneficiaries, increasing its seats in the Knesset, or parliament, from 10 to 17, narrowly trailing Likud as the third largest party. With its base among the poorer Sephardic immigrants, the party used its grip over the Interior Ministry to assure itself extensive state subsidies that it used to create a vast network of religious schools and other social programs. As the Netanyahu government carried through privatizations and budget cuts that reduced the government's own funding for secular education, health and other services, Shas increasingly filled the vacuum for sections of working class immigrants who had previously voted for Likud.

The conviction of Shas leader Aryeh Deri on bribery charges may have served to increase support for the party

among Sephardic voters, who were told that the verdict was another example of discrimination. But for Netanyahu it only deepened the stench of corruption surrounding his government.

Meanwhile other, newer immigrants, most of them from Russia, saw the concessions to Shas being made at their expense. While this layer voted heavily for Netanyahu in the last election, they delivered their ballots two-to-one for Barak this time around.

A new party, Shinui, also took votes away from Likud. Formed by right-wing talk show host Tommy Lapid, a former Netanyahu supporter, it waged a demagogic one-issue campaign aimed at tapping resentment against the Orthodox leaderships, gaining six seats in its first election. The Orthodox leaders have denounced Lapid as an anti-Semite, while he claims to have been the target of death threats from Orthodox supporters.

For Likud the results were far more devastating than its loss in 1992, when Rabin came to power. It has shrunk to the size of its former core, the old Herut rightist party that was the heir of revisionist Zionism and Irgun terrorism. But it lacks Herut's ideological cohesion and is now saddled with the legacy of having driven its supporters into warring camps.

Barak is expected to begin negotiations in earnest this week with the aim of forging a coalition government. The predominance in these talks of a narrow group of senior ex-generals and Orthodox religious leaders is a telling indication of the profoundly reactionary character of the Zionist political setup.

Barak, himself the former Israeli army chief-of-staff, will be holding talks with the new Likud leader, Ariel Sharon, a former hard-line general who as defense minister was the architect of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. On the margins of the negotiations will be former chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and former defense minister Yitzhak Mordechai, the leaders of the Center Party, a new formation of ex-Netanyahu aides who ran on a "dump Netanyahu" platform.

While tens of thousands of Israelis participated in spontaneous demonstrations following the election, with many saying they had "taken back" the country from the right-wing and the religious zealots, both Barak's own politics and the ongoing coalition talks suggest that no such sweeping change is in the offing.

Barak is expected to bring either Likud or Shas into a form of "national unity" government that will continue many of the same policies pursued by Likud.

The prime minister-elect is committed to holding on to the main Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and has vowed to complete the withdrawals of Israeli troops called

for in the Wye agreement only to the extent "that our security requests are met."

Spokesmen for the Palestine Authority welcomed Barak's election as a step toward peace, and the Palestinian leadership did what it could to further his victory. Under Arafat's orders, security forces rounded up many Hamas militants on the eve of the election, with the aim of blocking any repeat of the terrorist attacks that helped bring Netanyahu to power three years ago.

One poll done in the West Bank and Gaza just before Israelis went to the polls demonstrated once again the sharp divide between the standpoint of the PLO's bourgeois nationalist leadership and that of the masses of Palestinian workers and oppressed.

The poll, conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, found 50.2 percent of the respondents saying that the coming to power of Labor would signal no change, while 18.8 percent predicted that conditions for Palestinians would worsen.

As the new government takes shape, there are indications that it could face its greatest opposition from the Israeli working class. Shortly after the votes were counted, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics announced that the unemployment rate had increased to 8.8 percent, the highest rate in six years. The growth in the army of jobless was the result of a protracted economic slowdown as well as the termination of various job training schemes initiated by the government prior to the election.

Barak pledged during the election to create 300,000 new jobs over the course of four years by taking money now going to religious institutions and redirecting it to infrastructure and other projects. At the same time, however, the Labor-led coalition is committed to furthering Israel's economic integration into the world capitalist market, a process that will inevitably mean a deepening of the privatizations and budget cuts carried out by Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, shortly after the ballots were counted, the Histadrut union federation announced plans to establish a "war committee" to plan strikes against the private sector over the refusal of Israeli manufacturers to meet demands for cost-of-living increases for their employees.



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