

Israel's Prime Minister Barak forms autocratic government

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Ehud Barak, Israel's new Prime Minister, has formed an unrepresentative coalition government that will concentrate power in his hands and continue the policies of the outgoing right-wing Likud administration.

Only seven weeks ago, the Israeli electorate rejected Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's economic, social and political program with what was, for Israel, a landslide vote for Barak. In direct elections for the office of Prime Minister, Barak received 56.5 percent of the vote compared to 43.5 percent for Netanyahu.

Such is the fractured nature of Israeli political and social life that the three largest parties, including Barak's party, One Israel, together hold less than half the seats in the 120-member parliament, the Knesset.

One Israel was formerly the Labour Party. Its name change was in order to distance the party from its previous advocacy of social reformist policies. A former military general with little political experience, Barak's meteoric rise to leadership after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin itself speaks volumes for the political degeneration of the Labour Party.

After lengthy negotiations, he has formed a 75-member coalition with seven other parties. The coalition significantly does not include the Am Ehad (One People) party of Amir Peretz, the leader of Histadrut, the trade union organisation to which most workers, particularly in the public sector, belong. Peretz split from Labour to form a separate party as public sector workers and students mounted a series of strikes over the last year.

Neither does Barak's coalition include any Arab politicians, although Israeli Arab voters, a crucial bloc, supported him nearly unanimously.

The coalition does on the other hand involves all the

religious parties, including the ultra-orthodox parties that want to establish a Jewish fundamentalist state. This is the first time since 1952 that they will all serve in a Labour-led government. Hitherto, Labour has always been a strongly secular party, opposed to the domination of the religious leaders over political and social life. The change has caused huge resentment among One Israel's secular allies.

Barak has included the religious party Shas, whose disgraced leader will serve a four-year jail sentence for corruption while holding office in previous governments, including Labour. He has included the Centre party, led by Yitzhak Mordechai, a former Likud member, the secular liberal Meretz party and the Russian immigrant party, Yisrael BeAliya. He attempted to bring Likud into the coalition, but could not reach agreement with acting leader Ariel Sharon, another former military general.

By including such a large number of small parties, Barak is not beholden to any one member of the coalition. It also leaves the opposition, dominated by the right-wing Likud, Arab parties and ultra-nationalists, in disarray.

The price of establishing such a large coalition has been to offer seats round the cabinet table. Shas has four posts. Sharansky of the Russian immigrant party has the coveted interior ministry. The National Religious Party has the powerful housing ministry, although Barak will personally take the decisions on any further building projects in the West Bank settlements.

This leaves only six seats for his own party and one for a woman, giving rise to considerable grumbling among his supporters.

The Prime Minister has taken steps to strengthen his own office and will hold the key defence post.

The finance post has gone to Avraham Shohat, who held the same post in the 1992-96 Labour coalition. When the news leaked out, the Israeli Stock Exchange immediately registered its disapproval and demands were raised that any plans for stimulating the economy with government spending and expanding the deficit must be dropped: Barak had to continue the Likud government's "successful fight against inflation".

Shohat quickly announced: "I'd like to reassure the business community that we are going to pursue a very responsible policy that will be good for the economy, a policy of growth." In effect he was signalling that One Israel has abandoned any pretence of pursuing economic policies that would ensure national cohesion. Instead it will continue the Likud policies that have led to unemployment of more than 300,000 in a country of 6 million people. Business leaders are demanding more of the same, with calls for the "reform of the capital markets", the breakup of monopolies like the Port Authority and the Electric Corporation, the privatisation of the airline El Al, the Railways Authority, and other state-owned enterprises, as well as cuts in taxes.

Barak has still to work out a role for the 75-year-old Shimon Peres, the former Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party. Parliament immediately rejected his nomination for Knesset Speaker in favour Avraham Burg, Barak's political rival. By assigning other ministries to people with little expertise, experience or interest in their portfolios, he has tried to ensure not only that his policies dominate but also that his political rivals will be unable to build an effective power base against him. Like the military man that he is, his overall conception in government building is one of divide and rule.

One of the key features of the coalition agreement is the introduction of the so-called "Norwegian Law". This will enable Barak to expand the cabinet from 18 to 24, while asking ministers to give up their Knesset seats to allow those lower down the party lists to enter in their place. This will lead to an increasingly authoritarian form of government, whose ministers are not answerable to parliament.

Barak is riding a tiger. The 18-member coalition cabinet is fraught with tensions and contradictions. Despite the Israeli system of proportional representation for electing members of parliament, the

cabinet does not contain representatives from some of its key or even traditional voters. Despite having aroused expectations among the working class, One Israel will do its utmost to provide the low wage platform desired by the pharmaceutical, electronic and high tech corporations.



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