

Israeli Prime Minister Barak bows to religious fundamentalists' demands to save coalition

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30 June 2000

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak last week met almost all the demands of his right-wing religious coalition partner, the party of Sephardi Torah Guardians (Shas), to avoid the dissolution of parliament and early elections. Part of the price for the deal with Shas, reached June 22, was the resignation of three ministers from Barak's closest secular ally, the Meretz party.

Barak made significant concessions on the funding of Shas' religious schools. Since Barak became prime minister, he has ruled through an unstable eight-party coalition, which includes his One Israel (Labour) party. Under Israel's hybrid electoral system, there are two separate ballots. The prime minister is directly elected and cannot be deposed by the *Knesset* (parliament), while parliamentary elections are held on a system of proportional representation, ensuring that no party wins an overall majority.

Barak claimed last week's parliamentary manoeuvre would establish nationwide unity and enable him to wrap up a framework agreement with the Palestinians. In reality it demonstrates the enormous influence right-wing religious movements have on Israeli politics. The fact that progress in the peace talks is so dependent upon accommodating the fundamentalists says much about the character of that process itself, which is being engineered by the US, through the Arab and Israeli bourgeois leaders, including the Palestinian elite. Such a process, subject to the virtual veto power of Jewish religious fanatics, can in the end produce no genuinely progressive result for either the Arab masses or broad layers of Israeli workers.

The concessions to Shas are deeply unpopular amongst Barak's supporters. They followed a months-long political crisis, after Shas threatened to quit the coalition if the government did not provide finance for

its financially insolvent network of religious schools and colleges, day-care centres and clinics.

Shas has sought to channel the growing discontent of impoverished Israelis along religious and ethnic lines. It has played on the undoubted discrimination that poor Sephardi Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin face at the hands of the privileged Labour elite.

“Encouraged” to come to Israel in the 1950s as a result of secret deals with reactionary Arab rulers or, in the case of Iraqi and Egyptian Jews, expelled as a result of the actions of Israeli *agents provocateurs*, the Sephardi Jews have provided a source of cheap labour for Israeli employers. They received the worst and dirtiest jobs and for years were housed in tents, before the construction of barren development towns situated in border regions where the Sephardi residents bore the brunt of Israel's war of attrition with its Arab neighbours.

The politics of Shas and the other right-wing parties are couched in racial terms, setting Sephardi Jews against the secular and Ashkenazi Jews of European origin, to head off the development of a class-based opposition to the Zionist regime. This was the path first trod by the Likud party under Menachem Begin, who fused social resentments against the Labour Party elite that dominated the political and social institutions of the Zionist state with ultra-nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism.

The Likud government under Binyamin Netanyahu, Barak's predecessor, carried out the “New Right” agenda of privatisation and liberalisation of the economy. It cut state spending on education and social services, and as Netanyahu became increasingly unpopular Shas filled the vacuum among sections of immigrant workers abandoned by Likud. Shas' religious opposition to the secular elements in the state fuelled

rising tensions.

Shas developed its own education, healthcare and social welfare system to rival and replace the public system, in an attempt to build a right-wing populist movement. After years of cutbacks in public expenditure, these services are now a lifeline for many poor Israelis.

There has been considerable popular opposition within Israel, however, to Shas' backward fundamentalist network, and the allocating of public funds for its religious colleges by successive governments since 1984. Yossi Sarid, outgoing education minister and leader of the Meretz party, had refused to allocate funds, claiming that Shas was corrupt. He could point to the fact that former Shas leader Arye Deri, who had served in a previous Labour Party government, was jailed for six years for bribery and misappropriation of government funds, while a police investigation is under way into Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of Shas.

Yosef's response was to call the education minister a "devil". In a sermon, he said that Sarid's name "must be blotted out", implying that he should be killed. For many, it was reminiscent of the language used by fundamentalists against Yitzhak Rabin, the Labour Prime Minister who was assassinated by a right-wing fanatic in November 1995. Death threats were also made against Barak.

In the event, Barak calculated that it was more important to keep Shas' 17 MPs on board than Meretz's 10, preventing the former from joining the right-wing opposition to any "land for peace" deal brokered in the Wye Accord. Shas has become increasingly disenchanted with the "peace process", which Israel's financial elite regards as essential to gain access to the regional market, resources and cheap labour.

Far from benefiting from the "land for peace" deals, the most economically deprived Jews have lost their livelihoods. Unemployment in the squalid neighbourhoods where the Sephardi Jews live is double the national rate of 10 percent. Joel Benin, in *MERIP's press information note 23*, highlights important aspects of the peace agreements with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians, and their consequences for Israel's poorer layers. Israeli firms, especially clothing manufacturers, have closed down their sweatshops in the development towns where the Sephardi Jews live, moving operations

to Jordan and Egypt, or subcontracting work to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Benin states that in 1998 and 1999 alone, Israelis set up 30 factories in Jordan employing 6,000 workers and four in Egypt employing 3,000 workers. For example, the Delta Galil Company employs 2,000 workers in two factories in Egypt and 1,600 in one factory in Jordan. This is not a one-way traffic. As part of the Wye Accord, Israel signed a protocol to permit the employment of 200 Jordanians in Eilat, Israel's only port on the Red Sea. This is part of a broader project aimed at integrating Eilat with the neighbouring Jordanian city of Aqaba. However, Barak has been unable to secure any firm pledge from Shas to support the US-brokered accord.

Having narrowly avoided a fallout with the fundamentalist Shas, Barak now faces difficulties with the Russian immigrant party Yisrael B'Aliya. Earlier this week, a US plan, allegedly part of the blueprint for the Wye Accord talks and showing a Palestinian entity made up of 96 percent of the West Bank, was leaked to the Israeli press. In response, Natan Sharansky, interior minister and leader of the Yisrael B'Aliya, threatened to quit the coalition if Barak did not set limits to Israeli territorial concessions. Sharansky is opposed to giving up the Jordan Valley and Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem to the Palestinians.



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