

Israeli prime minister announces early election

Jean Shaoul

5 December 2000

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has announced that he will hold elections some time next year, instead of in 2003 as scheduled. Barak made his unprecedented announcement just 18 months after he was elected on a mandate to reach a final agreement with the Palestinians on the nature of a Palestinian state. With Israel now locked in a war of attrition against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the early elections confirm Barak's position has become untenable.

Last week, facing the humiliation of an opposition vote to dissolve the *Knesset*, the Israeli Parliament, Barak said, "I'm not blind... You want elections. I am ready for elections." Polls give former leader of the opposition Likud party Benjamin Netanyahu, who is poised to return to politics after being cleared of corruption charges, a 14 percent lead over Barak if the elections were held now.

It is Barak's inability to reach an agreement acceptable to the broad masses of the Palestinians, on the one hand, and a religious right wing committed to a Greater Israel policy on the other, which has led to the present Palestinian *intifada* and the political impasse in Israel itself.

Barak, a former army chief of staff, has shown himself to be politically inept. He has managed to alienate almost every political tendency and social layer in Israel, including the trade union federation Histadut, traditional Labour party supporters, and Arab Israelis, who for the first time have rioted in support of the Palestinians.

Firstly, he failed to make a peace deal with Syria. Then just as he left for the abortive Camp David talks with President Bill Clinton and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority, the broad coalition of disparate parties on which his government rested collapsed in July, after a long period of political horse-trading with right wing bigots. At Camp David Arafat would not agree to his terms, which were also rejected by Israel's right wing who called it a sell out.

Since then Barak has led a minority government. His popularity has plummeted amid further coalition resignations and two months of unprecedented violence that

has left nearly 300 dead, mostly Palestinians, and thousands maimed in the Occupied Territories. All this has left Barak's vision of a final and comprehensive settlement with the Palestinians in tatters.

He has also tried, and failed, to form an emergency National Unity government with the right wing Likud party leader Ariel Sharon, who is opposed to a deal with the Palestinians. It was Sharon's provocative visit to the holy places in Jerusalem that provided the catalyst for the ongoing Palestinian uprising, the extent of which expresses the popular anger at the failure of the 1993 Oslo agreements to improve living conditions for the overwhelming majority.

The Labour leader's concessions to the religious parties, which have been able to impose their dictates over many aspects of social life, have increased the social tensions between the minority right wing fundamentalists and the majority of secularists. Barak has presided over the increasing social polarisation between rich and poor. He has infuriated public sector workers by refusing to negotiate a new contract—the last one expired in December 1998. Many are paid less than the minimum wage, while the higher paid workers have seen their wages fall behind those of the private sector and public services have deteriorated.

Barak has now staked everything on a desperate political gamble. He has pinned his survival hopes on Arafat and a peace deal, something the polls indicate that the majority of Israelis still want. He is hoping that with the election clock ticking, he will be able to kick-start the stalled talks with the PLO and come up with an interim package to put to the electorate on polling day. The election could then serve as Barak's promised referendum on a deal with the Palestinians.

He has admitted that his political future hung on such a deal, saying, "We are working to halt the violence, but there is no military solution to our problem with the Palestinians and therefore we have to keep the window [to negotiations] open." His anticipation is that the Palestinians will prove more amenable to concessions, given the possibility that his successor could be either Sharon or Netanyahu, neither of whom have much time for the Oslo Accords or even the very

notion of an agreement with the Palestinians.

At the same time, Barak is still trying to get Sharon to join him in an emergency government until the new elections—counting on his fear of being replaced by Netanyahu as Likud party leader, to force him into some form of mutual self-preservation pact.

Arafat is indeed concerned at Barak's imminent defeat. The PLO leader telephoned Arab *Knesset* members, asking them to do what they could to prevent new elections. President Mubarak of Egypt, desperate to quell the violence that is threatening to destabilise the entire Middle East, is also working behind the scenes to get an agreement. For the first time in weeks, Barak's aides praised Arafat for his efforts to stem the shooting incidents in the West Bank and Gaza.

Barak has announced new terms for a possible “interim accord”. Israel would give the Palestinians 10 percent more land than they currently have, defer the discussions on the status of Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinian refugees, and release more Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, in return for the annexation of large blocks of settlements near Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. But such a scheme will not be acceptable with either the Israelis or the Palestinians.

But Arafat's public standing amongst the Palestinians is at an all-time low. The administrative machinery of the Palestinian Authority and its economy has all but collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of people are out of work as a result of the closure of the border with Israel and Israel's economic blockade; unemployment stands at 45 percent. Trade is at a standstill, tourism is dead and international investment projects have been shelved. The revenues for Arafat's security organisations have dried up.

As *Ha'aretz* reporter Ze'ev Schiff explained in an op-ed piece, “The last moments before chaos”, Israel is faced with a dilemma. Allowing the economy to collapse will plunge the PA into anarchy and chaos. If Arafat were to get out, ostensibly to continue the struggle from afar, but in reality to save his own skin, “the field would be taken over by the commanders of various militias and the resulting chaos would soon bring an end to the Palestinian regime... Those that want to see a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are deadly afraid of such a scenario.”

“One sign of the PA's poor state of health is the growing de-legitimisation of the Palestinian police, which is responsible for maintenance of law and order. Such a situation is the perfect setting for the emergence of a new grass roots leadership. That is what happened during the last *Intifada*, which saw the rise of the leadership of the Hamas organisation”.

Under conditions where Arafat's leadership is hanging by a thread, there is little possibility he will be able to force the

Palestinian masses to accept the type of limited concessions that will be offered by Barak.

Already most Palestinians believe that there is no real difference between an Israeli state headed by Barak, Sharon or Netanyahu. Despite his behind-the-scenes urging, two Israeli-Arab parties have made public their intention to stand candidates against Barak. Ahmed Tibi, a former adviser to Arafat, will be advanced by the Arab Movement for Change, while the United Arab List will also field a candidate. The vote of Israel's one million Arab's played a major role in securing Barak's election in May 1999, but there is no chance of such an overwhelming endorsement this time.

Barak also faces an internal battle for the leadership of his own One Israel, the former Labour party. Parliamentary speaker Avraham Burg is expected to mount a challenge to Barak. Burg, a former “Peace Now” activist, has the support of Shimon Peres, a former Prime Minister and party leader, *Knesset* deputy Uzi Baram and Interior Minister Haim Ramon. Others in the party, including cabinet ministers Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo Accords, want Barak to push for a peace deal before any efforts are made to challenge him. But this critical support would probably be withdrawn if Barak succeeded in his aim of forming a government of national unity with Sharon.

At a Likud secretariat meeting last week, Sharon said, “We have an interest in elections as early as possible, but I prefer to reach an agreement on it with the Labour party.” Obviously discomfited by Barak's election call and the prospect of a leadership challenge from Netanyahu, he said, “The nation needs to unite because division only encourages our enemies.” But it is not clear that Likud shares his desire for a unity government. Netanyahu is a clear favourite over Sharon in every opinion poll that has been conducted so far.

Neither Netanyahu nor Burg will throw their cap into the ring until a definite election date is set. Israel now faces a bitter election campaign under conditions of turmoil in the two main parties. Barak's decision to seek an early poll thus presages increasing political instability and strife within Israel itself and between the Israelis and the Palestinians.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact