

Israel: Leadership election plunges Labour Party into factional warfare

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The Israeli Labour Party leadership election ended acrimoniously on Tuesday, with allegations of vote rigging.

Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, defence minister in Ariel Sharon's Likud-Labour coalition government, claimed that the victory of his opponent, Avraham Burg, speaker of the Israeli Parliament, was a fraud and demanded a recount. Both candidates have hired lawyers and are seeking to use the courts to secure their leadership of the party.

With virtually all the ballots cast by Labour Party members counted, it appeared that Burg had won by a tiny margin—less than one percentage point—although the result has not been officially declared. Ben-Eliezer immediately denounced the result as a theft and called for the setting up of an electoral verification commission, chaired by a magistrate, to supervise a recount. "It's a major political scandal that smears the entire party", Ben-Eliezer said.

A spokesperson for his campaign claimed that the vote had been rigged in favour of the nominally more politically moderate Burg, particularly in the north of Israel where Israeli Arabs and members of the Druze community live. With two thirds of the votes counted, Ben-Eliezer had been leading with 51.7 percent to Burg's 47 percent. But then Burg moved ahead after a much higher turnout in the north than in the rest of the country and a strong vote from the Druze who, Ben-Eliezer says, had previously supported him. Burg denied the allegations and declared himself the winner.

The leadership election was held due to the resignation of Ehud Barak, following his humiliating defeat in the prime ministerial election against Sharon last February. The 78-year-old foreign minister, former party leader and prime minister, Shimon Peres, has filled Barak's shoes since he stepped down. Burg's

lawyer, Yaacov Neeman, has acknowledged that legal action would damage what little credibility the party has retained.

The record and programme of the two candidates provides a revealing exposure of Labour's threadbare claim to be the party of peace and how its true role has been to strengthen the political domination of Likud and the most right-wing sections of the political and military elite.

The pressing economic and social problems facing both Palestinians and Israelis were virtually ignored in the Labour leadership election, which focused exclusively on how to deal with the Palestinian uprising against Israel's 34-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Burg portrayed the election contest as a fight for the very existence of the Labour Party. In a swipe at his opponent, he said he would not allow the party to become assimilated into Sharon's Likud party.

Ben-Eliezer is seen as the most enthusiastic supporter of a military offensive against the Palestinians, and his politics is indeed indistinguishable from those of Sharon's party. He came to Israel from Iraq in 1949 and is one of the many former generals who dominate Israel's political landscape. After serving as commander in the Southern Lebanon campaign in 1977 and in the Occupied Territories, he entered Parliament in 1984 on a right wing list that subsequently joined the Labour Party. Deputy prime minister under Barak—another military man—he also held the housing and construction portfolio, in which position he authorised the largest expansion of the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza since the 1993 Oslo Agreement that was supposed to halt their growth.

After Sharon's victory in the February elections, Ben-Eliezer was nominated as defence minister in the Likud-

Labour coalition formed a few weeks later. It is Ben-Eliezer who appears on Israeli television night after night to justify Sharon's tough military action against the Palestinians, famously arguing, "Terror has only one real answer—terror". He has not simply endorsed the use of F-16s to drop one tonne bombs on the Palestinian Authority and guided missiles to assassinate Israel's political opponents; he has been the driving force behind it. His campaign slogan was "Fuad [the name by which he is known] will do the business". "I will fight terror, and no one in the world has the moral right to demand that I do nothing after getting a report that terrorists are on the way to murder our children," Ben-Eliezer told *Jerusalem Report*.

No one could doubt Ben-Eliezer's militaristic credentials, but the same could not be said for Burg's portrayal of himself as a dove. His father was a leading member of the National Religious Party and served for more than 30 years as minister in successive governments. Burg junior was one of the leaders of *Peace Now*, the protest movement that emerged against the war in the Lebanon. A protégé of Peres, he became a member of the Knesset/parliament in 1992, resigning after three years to become leader of the World Zionist Organisation. He re-entered Parliament in 1999, became speaker and, notwithstanding his reputation as a former peace activist, a vigorous opponent of Barak's apparent concessions to the Palestinians at the Camp David summit in July 2000.

Burg stayed in the Labour Party when it joined Sharon's coalition, thereby lending crucial support to the government's brutal suppression of the Palestinians. Like Peres, he has sought to combine support for Likud with appeals for the resumption of talks and warnings that saying that the invasions, assassinations and military attacks on the Palestinians may close off any possibility of a negotiated settlement for another generation. Amongst those desirous of a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, Burg could not advance himself as a convincing leader. Especially under conditions in which Peres—the man most closely associated with the signing of the Oslo Accord—refused to endorse either candidate and who, in his capacity as foreign minister is the chief apologist for Sharon's crimes, while Barak—the man who was elected to finally bring peace with the Palestinians—came out in support of Ben-

Eliezer.

Between 40-50 percent of Labour's 117,000 members—including those most alienated by the party's lurch to the right—did not vote, although in the Arab areas the turnout was 80 percent. This enabled Ben-Eliezer to successfully mobilise his own right-wing constituency and come within almost a thousand votes of beating Burg. Only six months ago, polls showed that 70 percent of the party supported Burg against just 30 percent for Ben-Eliezer. More generally, according to opinion polls, if elections were held in the next few months the Labour Party faces a wipe out. It would be lucky to win 20 seats, while the Likud would win 40 in the 120-seat Parliament, an unprecedented reversal of fortunes.



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