

Israel: Sharon forced to call new elections

100,000 march for peace in Tel Aviv

David Cohen
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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has asked President Moshe Katzav to dissolve the Knesset (parliament). Sharon was not able to secure the majority needed to build a new coalition after the Labour Party left the government. He had done everything possible to placate the far-right and secure the basis for continued government, but to no avail.

Sharon nominated the former military chief of staff, Shaul Mofaz, to be the next defence minister and asked former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to replace Shimon Peres as the foreign minister—placing those who explicitly rejected the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords in all leading government positions.

Netanyahu insisted that he would only agree to becoming foreign minister if an early date was set for a general election—February or March instead of November 2003. Sharon refused to accept Netanyahu's condition, and asked the right-wing settler party—The National Unity-Homeland Israel—to join the government and prevent its collapse. Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the faction, refused to join the coalition unless Sharon agreed to launch an unrestricted military campaign against the Palestinians to destroy the Palestinian Authority, including the expulsion of Arafat. Sharon could not do this, as the Bush administration insisted that no public change in policy was made that would cut across its efforts to secure Arab support for war against Iraq.

Sharon thus did not manage to win the required support of 61 members in the Knesset, leaving him in charge of a lame-duck administration whose policies can be blocked by his opponents.

He had no choice but to call an early election and accede to Netanyahu's demands. Sharon and Netanyahu are set to contest for leadership of Likud next month, when the party will decide who will be its candidate for prime minister.

Current predictions are that Sharon will narrowly beat Netanyahu in the elections held by the Central Committee. Labour is in the midst of its own election contest, with both the mayor of the city of Haifa, Amram Mitzna, and the chairman of the Committee for Foreign and Defence Affairs of the Knesset, Haim Ramon, leading the former minister of

defence Binyamin Ben-Eliezer in the polls. Present estimates predict a victory for Likud, but the only certainty is that Israel faces a period of profound instability and social and political polarisation.

Ben-Eliezer was forced to withdraw from the coalition government due to the mounting opposition of broad sections of the working class to Likud's economic austerity measures and its war against the Palestinians. This came to a head over Sharon's commitment to invest hundreds of thousands of Israeli Shekels in the settlements on the Occupied Territories. Labour could not continue to support the government without signing its own political death warrant.

Shimon Peres, who led Labour into the coalition with Sharon and the Likud, wrote in *Haaretz*, "When the nation has people hungry for bread, the social issue must be at the top of our agenda. But it is impossible to correct the social situation without correcting the economy itself. As long as investments in Israel are not renewed and tourists don't come back, as long as the flow of capital out of Israel isn't stopped and budgets are disbursed according to parochial demands, the economy will not recover. And as long as the security situation is unstable, the basic conditions for social and economic deterioration will not change."

Haaretz, which purports to be the voice of liberal opposition to Likud, proclaimed that "the collapse of the outgoing government can only be welcomed. It will be remembered as one of the worst governments in Israel's history. It must now be hoped that the upcoming election will produce a coalition wise enough to repair the damage and restore the country to the right path."

But a progressive outcome to the election depends on a political break by the working class with Labour, which propped up Sharon until it became impossible to continue to do so.

In the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*, Uri Dan, the Middle East correspondent of the *New York Post* and a close friend of Sharon, gave a fairly accurate account of the service performed by Labour for Likud: "Only by co-operation in

the government with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shimon Peres could Sharon cause the delegitimisation of that other Nobel winner, Yasser Arafat. The White House is now closed to Arafat, after Peres himself, in a terrible, historic mistake, opened its gates to Arafat, on September 13, 1993, during Bill Clinton's presidency. Only together with Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Shimon Peres could Sharon restore freedom of action to the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] and enable it to pursue the terrorists, arrest or kill them, leave the West Bank cities and return to them, raid the Gaza Strip, in other words, wage a round-the-clock anti-terror campaign." He concluded, "Sharon, in the 20-month campaign he waged as the head of the national unity government, turned the Labour Party into a duster he used to erase the Oslo tragedy from the blackboard."

The right-wing trajectory of Labour means that the opposition to Sharon's war and budget cuts is developing largely outside its ranks. Last week saw a massive peace demonstration in Tel-Aviv, numbering over 100,000. Adam Keller, spokesman for the Gush Shalom pacifist movement, commented on the absence of leading Labour Ministers and MKs.

He wrote, "At least, attending this year's rally—unlike those of the past two years—did not involve the emotional wrench of having to listen to a keynote speaker directly involved in the war against the Palestinians—PM Ehud Barak in the rally of November 2000; Dalia Rabin-Pelosof, Deputy Defence Minister in 2001...

"So, this year's Rabin Rally, seven years after the murder [of the former Labour prime minister by a rightist religious zealot], however officially touted as 'non-partisan', was in a way the first manifestation of a new political reality. In other times, the enormous sign 'We Believe in Peace' over the podium may have been only a cliché or pious wish; in the Israel of November 2002 it was just a bit more: a crowd of about 100,000 mostly young people defying the trend of 'peace is dead'."

The *World Socialist Web Site* handed out leaflets opposing war against Iraq, which were read with interest by demonstrators as well as foreign reporters and tourists. Many people said they already knew of the *World Socialist Web Site* and read it on a regular basis.

The WSWS interviewed participants at the demonstration. Most protesters expressed bitterness towards the Labour Party for collaborating with Sharon.

Ami, 26, a student in the University of Tel Aviv, said, "I can't believe that the Labour Party decided to leave Sharon because of genuine concern for our future—students, workers, youth and pensioners. It did it because Labour knows that the Likud will win a serious section of the Israeli public and the leaders of the Labour Party want to rebuild their own

organisation. Nonetheless, I really believe that this is the worst government we have ever had and we need to bring down Sharon. A government with Sharon and the right wing will mark a new period in Israeli politics, mainly because the budget will abandon the vast majority of the population and invest the money in the occupation."

Debra, 37, a high school English teacher, said, "I agree that Bush's war on Iraq has nothing to do with questions of 'democracy' or 'weapons of mass destruction'. Why doesn't the media publish that it was the US that stood behind [Saddam] Hussein before the 1990s? Why does the media refuse to acknowledge the fact that this is a war for oil? I am frightened, mainly because I know perfectly well that if Saddam isn't in charge in Iraq there it will another dictator, like America did in Afghanistan. And who promises us that this ruler won't develop weapons of mass destruction and afterwards will betray its sponsor, the US?"

Sylvia, a British journalist, said, "It is great to read the *World Socialist Web Site* here! What a lovely surprise! Although I'm 100 percent Labour, I believe that many things your friends in the UK are saying are correct. I came to Israel and I'm totally shocked. Israel's government is throwing the fate of its citizens to hell. The occupation is the main factor in the collapse of Israel's economy. I didn't see any Western country with so many elements of social morbidity: poverty, beggary and starvation. And all of this because Israel wants occupation.

"The only way to save the Israeli and Palestinian people is to go forward to a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, alongside Israel."

Eitan, 21, is a soldier in the IDF. He said, "I won't serve the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. I think that our rulers are using us as human shields for realising their horrors. We should bring down Sharon and Arafat. I won't vote Labour, mainly because I think that it is an elitist party which has totally estranged itself from the young generation because this is a party of capitalist and robbers! I believe in a politics of democratic socialism, freedom, civil and human rights. Rabin led our country towards a social-democratic future, peace and civil liberties. The only way to kick out Sharon is by building a social-democratic party that will struggle for peace and liberty."



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