

Israel: Corruption scandal grips ruling Likud

David Cohen
31 December 2002

Israeli politics has been shaken by allegations of corruption and ballot rigging in the leadership elections within the ruling party, Likud. The scandal comes as parties are preparing for the general election scheduled for January 28.

The liberal daily *Haaretz* wrote on December 11 that although the Likud elections seemed to be properly conducted, “behind that formal procedure was an ugly and dangerous political reality ... the result is glaringly evident in the Knesset [parliament] list proposed by the Likud: Of the 40 top candidates, 19 are new faces, and many of them are men and women without an appropriate record of public service and without the necessary qualifications to be counted as members of the Israeli parliament.”

The police have since decided to investigate leading Likud members and MPs with regard to how the primaries were conducted and the methods by which candidates won high places in the Likud’s list. The scandal began after Knesset member (MK) Nehama Ronen, who failed to win a realistic slot in the Likud Knesset list, revealed that during her campaign four Central Committee members had asked her for payoffs of between NIS 1,000 (US\$200+) to NIS 1,500 (US\$250+) per head in return for votes in her favour. Ronen rejected all the requests for money.

Haaretz reported that Ronen told its journalist that “out of the hundreds of Central Committee members she met during her campaign, only four explicitly demanded payment. She refused to identify them, other than to say three live in the centre of the country and one lives in the south.” She said, “They presented themselves as powerful, able to bring me as many as 40 votes, and when I inquired afterward, I was told that was true.... One asked me right at the start, ‘How much are you paying?’ I said I’m not paying, nothing.” She added, “another said that he usually takes NIS 2,000 [more than US\$400] per Central Committee vote from the candidates, but since I was new in the Likud, he was ready to give me a discount, between NIS 1,000 to NIS 1,500 per Central Committee vote he brought me.... One explained to me the ‘logic’ behind the bribery. He said he and his colleagues spent a lot of money to get elected to the Central Committee, so this was his way of regaining his expenditures. I told him that I had no intention of paying, and innocently asked if there are people who pay. He said, of course, since those who don’t pay don’t get votes.”

The most sensational scandal was the Inbal Gavrieli’s affair,

a relative unknown who managed to grab the twenty-ninth spot on the Likud list for the forthcoming elections. Inbal Gavrieli’s father, Shoni Gavrieli, has been suspected of involvement in a number of illegal gambling scandals but has so far escaped conviction. Police have investigated her family’s attempts to form relationships with members of the legislature, but failed to find any evidence of wrongdoing. All that is known is that the family hosted bountiful events at the night club they own in the city of Jaffa, to which senior party members and central committee members were invited. Gavrieli managed to garner 400 votes, which was enough to earn her a realistic place on the Knesset list.

Haim Cohen, another candidate in the Likud primary, told police that a fellow member of the party’s central committee had demanded \$70,000 in return for political support in the internal elections and \$500 for each supporter he succeeded in recruiting. *Israel Radio* reported that Cohen said the same committee member had told him, “My support is a question of money, and my participation in Likud is a business matter.”

In addition, a secretary for a candidate who ran in the Likud primary has alleged that her boss had asked her to hint to Likud Central Committee members that she would be willing to have sex with them in return for their votes.

The fraud squad is also planning to question Deputy Infrastructure Minister Naomi Blumenthal on suspicion of involvement in alleged vote buying. Blumenthal, a popular Likud politician who came in ninth in rankings for the Likud Knesset slate, is suspected of paying for rooms for MKs at the luxury City Tower Hotel in Ramat Gan City the night before the party’s primary. Police arrested Blumenthal’s aide and driver and a Magistrate’s Court gave investigators warrants to access a printout of incoming and outgoing calls from the man’s cell phone.

The scandal has called into question the future of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s government.

Israel’s Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein instructed the police December 14 to open an investigation into bribes and payoffs allegedly proposed by Likud Central Committee members. He has also asked the Communications Ministry for an explanation of Minister Reuven Rivlin’s use of his ministry office and its telephones for telemarketing his campaign for a Likud nomination to the Knesset. *Haaretz* revealed that “telemarketing clerks hired by Rivlin before the Likud internal

elections worked out of the Communications Ministry and used the ministry's telephone system. The activity went on for four days. The callers were hired by Rivlin through Manpower, the employment agency, and they were assigned to call members of the Likud Central Committee, collect data on the respondents' plans for voting, and to ask the committee members what they thought of Rivlin. Rivlin came in 37 on the list."

To offset the crisis, Justice Minister Meir Sheerit formed a Likud election reform team with a mandate from Sharon to change the system for electing the party's MKs, before the January 28 election. Sharon said that he would expel anyone found to have committed improper acts during the party primary, even if it meant kicking out ministers or Knesset members. He gave Sheerit 30 days to come up with a proposal.

However, the scandals have since reached closer to home. The Israeli police have announced they will question Sharon's son Omri on his ties to people accused of involvement in vote rigging. *Haaretz* reported, "according to testimonies, Omri Sharon had a lot of influence over the party apparatus and over the activists in the field, who took over many Likud branches. There are also suspicions that the Likud as a party illegally assisted Ariel Sharon supporters to get elected to the Central Committee and also to the Knesset candidate list in the end of November." Omri Sharon came in twenty-seventh in rankings for the Likud Knesset slate.

The *Maariv* daily commented, "What is infuriating is that the dimension of corruption in the Likud has reached an extent liable to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the government to be formed by the biggest party."

"Sharon ... is a man without limits," wrote a commentator in *Yedioth Aharonoth*, Israel's largest circulation daily, and "running a state without boundaries, in a way that knows no bounds."

The Labour party has used the corruption charges to further its own campaign against Likud. Recently elected Labour leader Amram Mitzna stressed, "I will not join a national unity government under the Likud." He told Channel 2, "There is no doubt ... that organised crime is apparently infiltrating a party, a ruling party, and is trying in this way to make achievements."

Labour Party General Secretary Ophir Pines-Paz called for the formation of a special committee to investigate Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and all the Likud candidates, to put a stop to the connection between politics and organised crime. "The new testimony about extortion and attempted bribery in the Likud raises questions about the vulnerability of democratic rule in Israel. The danger of criminals slipping representatives into the Knesset and influencing senior ministers requires enacting immediate far-reaching laws," Pines-Paz said.

But Labour has not emerged unscathed from the scandals. *Maariv* also commented, "The Likud Central Committee does not own the copyrights on corruption in Israeli politics.... Corruption existed in another era and another place."

Labour MK Eli Ben-Menachem has been accused of offering

\$400 to a rival candidate so he wouldn't stand against him and is being investigated by the police.

More fundamentally, until recent weeks Labour was Sharon's main coalition partner and propped up his government while it mounted a brutal assault on the Palestinians and implemented harsh austerity measures against the Israeli working class. Together with Likud, Labour shares responsibility for the growing divide between rich and poor which lies at the root of the corruption scandal.

A recent report of the Center for Social Policy Studies, "Israel's Social Services 2000", notes that workers' incomes are declining and unemployment is rising: "The recession, which began in 1996, the policies of economic restraint and the lopsided growth of the economy (leaning strongly towards high tech industries) have all contributed to this situation ... the indicators of poverty are a cause for serious concern. Throughout the last two decades, both during periods of economic growth and decline, the percentage of families living below the poverty line has increased. Some 22 percent of children live in poverty today as compared with 13 percent in 1980."

The preservation of democratic norms becomes impossible under conditions where the broad mass of the population has become alienated from all the official parties and from a political process geared to the betterment of the few at the expense of the many. In contrast, the unrestrained enrichment of the upper echelons of the ruling elite naturally attracts the support of and fosters connections with semi-criminal and even overtly criminal layers—anxious to establish their own place within ruling political circles and to support their own selfish interests. It appears that they now find it easy to buy their way into ruling circles in return for what are in fact fairly small sums of money, which is itself an indication of just how rotten things have become.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact