

Israeli elections highlight disaster facing Middle East

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Israelis going to the polls today find the official political life of their country has reached an unprecedented impasse as the Middle East faces a war that will destabilise the entire region.

Israel's economy has deteriorated to the point that the country is about to be declared uncreditworthy. Yet, rather than addressing this crisis and its terrible impact on the social conditions of the Israeli population, the government is prosecuting a ferocious war against the Palestinian people.

All the polls show that Ariel Sharon's government has little popular support for his brutal policy in the West Bank and Gaza, and that many Israelis favour withdrawal from the occupied territories. But his Likud Party is likely to win the biggest share of seats in the Knesset because there is no viable political alternative among the parties standing in the elections.

Sharon has completely revoked the Oslo peace process begun in 1993 and has all but destroyed the Palestinian Authority. His government has instituted Israeli army control over every town in the West Bank, assassinated Palestinian leaders and their families, incarcerated thousands of Palestinian youths without trial, and stepped up financial support for Zionist settlers in the Palestinian territories. Above all, he has tied Israeli politics to those of the Bush administration in the US and its drive to dominate the oil resources of the Middle East.

Last weekend the government ordered the deepest Israeli invasion of Gaza City in two years, killing 12 people and wounding at least 67. Israeli tanks and helicopter gunships destroyed Palestinian homes and shops. Among the dead was a seven-year-old boy shot while playing near an army outpost. Both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been sealed for the duration of the election whilst Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has refused to rule out the total reoccupation of Gaza.

Sharon no doubt hopes that by escalating the violence he can frighten the electorate into voting for him. The likelihood of further suicide bombing reprisals from increasingly desperate Palestinian youth will be used to justify yet more repression. This is Sharon's cynical *modus operandi*.

The lack of any mass support for the established political parties has enabled organised crime to take a direct role in politics. The *Ha'aretz* newspaper revealed that Sharon received illegal campaign contributions of \$1.5 million from South African businessman and family friend Cyril Kern and that gangster elements bought places on the Likud electoral list. Rather than investigate these serious charges, Sharon had the state prosecutor

who leaked the information, Liora Glatt-Berkowitz, suspended from her job. She now faces prosecution and a possible three-year jail sentence.

The Labour Party has been unable to make any political headway despite these revelations. After a brief attempt to revive its electoral fortunes under its new leader Amram Mitznah, Labour's support is collapsing. Polls suggest that it may only get 19 seats in the Knesset. The party may split after the election as some Labour MKs join a coalition government under Sharon and others refuse.

Mitznah presents himself as a moderate alternative to Sharon. He claims that a Labour government would restart peace talks with the Palestinians and put an end to the conflict. In reality Labour never offered a political perspective that was fundamentally distinct from that of Likud. But the Labour campaign's rapid disintegration has removed even the appearance of an alternative to Likud within the official political spectrum. The turnout at the polls is expected to fall to an unprecedented low, expressing widespread alienation from the political process.

Insofar as Mitznah has a different approach to the Palestinian question it is because he represents a wealthy layer that sees the prospect of making money out of business deals with Israel's Arab neighbours. His much-publicised "good relations" with Arabs in Haifa, where he is mayor, extend only to the richest sections of society. While Mayor Mitznah drinks tea with the Arab elite, poor Arabs have their houses bulldozed.

Arab and Israeli businessmen share a common interest in creating a Palestinian state that can be used as a source of cheap labour for manufacturing and agriculture. The protracted occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has halted any such economic development and has seriously affected the economy of Israel as well.

There is nothing inherently progressive about Mitznah's call for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. As a general in the Israeli army, he was as willing as any leading military commander to unleash brutal repression against the Palestinians. Noam Chomsky describes in his book *Fateful Triangle* how, when Mitznah was in command of the West Bank during the first *intifada*, the army destroyed 3,000 Palestinian homes on the pretext that family members were suspected of throwing stones or similar offences. Between December 1987 and March 1989 Israeli forces under Mitznah's command killed 302 Palestinians and wounded another 3, 252.

Mitznah support for a return to the so-called "peace process",

elaborated at Oslo in 1993 and at Camp David in 2000, is aimed at the creation of a colonial-style bantustan arrangement in the West Bank and Gaza. When the Labour prime minister Ehud Barak put forward these proposals at Camp David, even Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, who had agreed to every previous demand placed upon him, did not dare accept it because it would so obviously subordinate the Palestinian state to Israeli authority.

Barak's proposals were a continuation of those put forward by his Likud predecessors. Like them, he allowed illegal settlements to continue. Barak sanctioned Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000 and gave the order to shoot Palestinian protesters.

The bitter experience with Barak's government, which was elected on a wave of feeling that the war against the Palestinians must end, has contributed in no small degree to the deep disillusionment with politics that is evident in the current election.

When they lost power, Labour joined Sharon's national unity government, which used Shimon Peres's international reputation as a supporter of Oslo to legitimise the repression of the Palestinians. The other Labour member of Sharon's cabinet, Ben Eliezer, was even more right-wing than many Likud members.

It is not only Labour's perspective that has been exposed as bankrupt. Peace Now, Meretz and the extra-parliamentary war movement as a whole share the same basic outlook that peace and democracy are compatible with maintaining the Israeli state.

However, Likud's rise to power reflects the objective character of the Zionist project, which can only be maintained by the use of military force and terror. Its political trajectory, with its ever more open support for ethnic cleansing, growing corruption and the destruction of all democratic forms, is an expression of an inexorable historical logic that was set in motion by the violent foundation of the Israeli state.

The present US administration has played a crucial role in this process. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has been the most outspoken in expressing America's intention to redraw the political map of the Middle East under US hegemony. But even the so-called doves in the administration have issued only the mildest criticism of Israel for its continuous atrocities in the occupied territories.

Official US aid to Israel for the current year is \$2.7 billion, of which \$2.1 billion is for military assistance. However, Israel is now requesting an emergency bailout consisting of an extra \$8 billion in loan guarantees and \$4 billion in special military grants. "We recognise the economic impact on Israel of the ongoing war against terrorism and regional stability, and are considering how the United States can contribute to continuing to assure its bright future," said Sean McCormack, a White House spokesman.

A number of commentators have pointed to the close connections between the Bush administration and Likud. Undersecretary of Defense Policy Douglas Feith and Chair of the Defense Policy Board, Richard Perle, wrote an advisory paper in 1996 calling on the newly elected Likud government to "make a clean break" with the Oslo peace process and reoccupy the West Bank and Gaza. Members of the right-wing Jewish Institute for National Security (JINSA) and the Center for Security Policy (CSP) are actively pushing Likud's policies on Pentagon and State

Department committees, including Perle's Defence Policy Board.

US officials have attempted to exert some restraint over Israel's assault on the occupied territories for tactical reasons. Washington needs to maintain support among Middle Eastern states for its war against Iraq. The most right-wing elements around Bush, however, are prepared to use Israel to blow apart the region with little regard for the catastrophic outcome for Jews or Arabs alike.

Israel's strategic alliance with Washington is reflected in its increasingly belligerent attitude towards Europe, which has traditionally been the country's main trading partner. In a recent interview with *Newsweek*, Sharon was asked about the recent peace proposals put forward by the Quartet of the United Nations, the European Union, the US and Russia. He replied dismissively, "The Quartet is nothing! Don't take it seriously."

Britain's recent attempts to organise a peace conference were met with outright obstruction from the Israeli authorities, who refused to allow representatives of the Palestinian Authority to travel to London.

Arab nationalism has also played a crucial role in exposing the Palestinians and the masses of the entire Middle East to the attacks of US imperialism and its Zionist allies. During the Cold War, Arab nationalist regimes were able to lean on the Soviet Union and project a radical image. But, as subsequent developments have shown, the Arab bourgeoisie were always willing to seek an accord with imperialism against the Arab masses.

Egypt recently summoned the Palestinian factions to Cairo in an attempt to broker a cease-fire, which it hoped would help Mitznah in the polls and restart peace talks. But both Hamas and Islamic Jihad pulled out of the conference when they realised they were being asked to give up all resistance. They feared losing any support among the Palestinian masses if they did so.

It is a measure of the repression suffered by the Palestinians that so many young people are willing to carry out suicide bombings and that such a desperate tactic receives popular support. But it is also an indictment of the perspective of the nationalist movement that this is the only form of opposition to Israeli rule that seems open to Palestinian youth.

Regardless of who wins the elections, there will be no peace in Israel, much less the Middle East as a whole. Only a united movement of Arab and Jewish workers in the struggle for the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East holds a progressive way forward for the Israeli people and the masses of the entire region.



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