

Israel: Sharon's victory presages internal strife amidst escalating aggression

Ann Talbot**31 January 2003**

Ariel Sharon became the first prime minister in recent history to win a consecutive term in office on January 28 when his Likud Party won the Israeli general election.

Nationally, Likud took 37 seats in the Knesset, compared to the 19 that it held previously. Labour fell from 26 seats to 19, while Shinui, a relatively new party, increased its share of seats from 6 to 15. The right-wing Shas Party fell from 17 to 11 seats and Meiretz, which emerged from the peace movement, won 6 seats, compared to 10 at the previous election.

With a US-led attack imminent against Iraq, Sharon will undoubtedly seek to use his victory to escalate his military suppression of the Palestinians under the guise of the "war against terror". Sections of the American press implicitly endorsed this policy, hailing the result as a sign that Israeli voters "endorse tough tactics" (*Washington Post*).

In reality, Sharon owes his victory not to any mass enthusiasm for his policies, but rather to the lack of any alternative political perspective on offer. Almost a third of the electorate stayed away from the polling stations. In what was the lowest ever turnout in an Israeli general election, only 68.5 percent of the country's 3.2 million voters cast ballots—a sharp drop from the 1999 general election, when turnout was 78.9 percent. In 1996, turnout was 79.3 percent.

Only about one sixth of the total electorate actually voted for Likud. This accounts for the apparent paradox between Sharon's electoral victory and opinion polls, which showed majority support for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

Shas's decline further underscores that the election results do not reflect a general rightward shift in the electorate, but rather a profound alienation from official politics.

Labour's vote collapsed to such an extent that, even in

its traditional stronghold of Haifa, where Labour leader Amram Mitzna is mayor, the party's vote fell, enabling Likud to gain the seat. For most of the previous two years, Labour's Shimon Peres and Ben Eliezer had collaborated as coalition partners in the Likud-dominated government. While Sharon launched savage attacks on the civilian population of the occupied territories, Labour covered his back by maintaining the pretence that the government was still interested in pursuing negotiations.

Despite its political survival hanging in the balance, Labour continued to offer no real opposition to Sharon throughout the election. Even Labour politicians on the campaign trail were heard referring to him affectionately by his nickname Arik.

Labour made no serious attempt to raise the question of the economy, enabling the Likud leader to make speech after speech in which he never discussed his government's dismal economic record. Israel's economy has shrunk by 1 percent in each of the two years that Sharon has been in office. This is a startling collapse from the 7.4 percent rate of growth Israel experienced in 2000.

Even these figures underestimate the situation, according to Nadine Baudot-Trajtenberg, an economist with the Bank Hapoalim, who points out that because the population has grown during this period the gross domestic product per person has fallen by 3 percent in both years. As a result, she estimates that Israel is suffering "the worst recession that any industrialised country has seen since World War II."

Nor did Labour raise recent corruption allegations against Sharon. This issue was effectively suppressed by mutual consent for the duration of the campaign.

The Shinui Party was able to capitalize on political disaffection despite having no distinct programme on either the economy or the Palestinian question. Shinui, which means "change," identifies itself as a secular party by attacking the subsidies paid to religious fundamentalist

groups. Its lack of principled differences with Sharon were made clear immediately the results were announced, when its leader, Yosef “Tommy” Lapid, a former talk show host, appealed to Labour to retract its commitment not to join a unity government with Sharon.

Lapid assured Sharon of Shinui’s support. “I say to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whom I congratulate: Sir, establish a secular unity government and we will serve in it faithfully.” He went on to urge Labour to depose its leader Amram Mitzna if he continued refusing to join a coalition.

In the immediate aftermath of his party’s devastating defeat, Mitzna reiterated his intention of remaining out of a coalition, noting that Sharon’s hope was that “the Labour Party will once more serve as a fig leaf for his failing policy.” However, there is every chance that within a short space of time Labour could be back in government with Likud, with or without Mitzna.

In his victory speech Sharon said, “It is time to come together,” and continued, “I am announcing today, that after the president assigns me the task of forming a government, I will ask all Zionist parties to join a unity government that will be as broad as possible.”

His reference to the “Zionist parties” was especially directed at Labour. Since the foundation of the state of Israel, Labour has been central to the Zionist project, giving a democratic and even socialist colouration to what was always a fundamentally reactionary programme.

Labour’s electoral collapse is part of the wider crisis of the Israeli state, which finds itself at an historic impasse. It is no longer possible to reconcile Zionism, which is based on religious exclusivism and the forcible oppression of the Palestinians, with the maintenance of bourgeois democratic forms of rule.

If Likud has been able to seize the initiative it is because the violent, racist, anti-Arab policies that it has pursued since it emerged as a faction within Zionism most consistently and ruthlessly express the logic and requirements of Zionist rule today. Labour has been drawn into Likud’s orbit because it shares its commitment to Zionism. Insofar as it has identified itself with the Oslo Agreement and the “peace process,” it has done so with the perspective of creating a Palestinian mini-state that would be completely subordinate to Israel. Meeretz and Shinui support the same two-state perspective.

If Sharon declares that the country faces a national emergency because of continued suicide bombings or because the US has launched a war against Iraq, these

parties will fall into line, whether they are inside or outside the government coalition.

Sharon has already made clear that his government intends to establish more settlements on occupied land in the West Bank. In his victory speech he declared that he would immediately free funds from the budget “to increase immigration to Israel from all of the Jewish diaspora.”

The Likud government and the religious extremists have consciously cultivated the settlers as shock troops in their bid to incorporate the occupied territories into Israel. By pressing ahead with the settlements, Sharon is attempting to create a greater Israel in which the Palestinians will be either driven into exile or subjected to an apartheid-style regime.

Sharon hopes to win Labour’s support to consolidate his new government and has threatened to call new elections if it does not agree, with the aim of forcing a leadership challenge in the party to oust Mitzna. The Likud leader does not want a coalition with the right-wing extremist parties, for fear it will antagonize Israel’s Arab neighbours and upset US efforts to get the backing of the Middle East regimes for its war against Iraq. Israel is more economically dependent on America than ever because of its economic crisis, and is relying on 1,000 US troops to defend it against a possible Iraqi missile attack.

In the aftermath of a US takeover of Iraq, Israeli strategists reckon that they will have a freer hand to deal with the Palestinians and carry through the ethnic cleansing of the occupied territories. This is a deranged perspective that could only be considered by a political class that has no policy to address the mounting social contradictions internally or establish stable relations with neighbouring states. It is the perspective of a criminal clique that is leading the Israeli population and the masses of the Middle East towards a catastrophe.



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