

Narrow victory for Kadima in Israeli elections

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The victory of Kadima in Israel's general election has been hailed as a popular mandate for the unilateral redrawing of the country's borders by 2010 and the creation of a new "political centre-ground." In reality, the vote reveals a deeply fractured society that is politically, economically and socially unstable.

On a record low turnout Kadima, the party led by Ehud Olmert since its founder Ariel Sharon fell into a coma, performed much worse than expected. It won only 28 seats instead of a projected 35 to 40. It will rely heavily on the support of the Labour Party, which did better than predicted by winning 20 seats, and still needs the support of smaller parties to form a government.

The dominant sections of Israel's ruling elite, Washington and the European powers backed Kadima's policy for unilateral separation from the Palestinians—what is in fact an attempt to permanently annexe much of the West Bank, including Jerusalem. But it was the support of Labour and other nominally left parties that enabled Sharon's policy to be portrayed as a more realistic path to peace and the elections as a plebiscite on disengagement, with no other alternative to the demands of the far right for war until total victory.

The pro-Labour *Haaretz* insisted, "Anyone who wants to perpetuate Israel's control over the Palestinian people should vote for one of the parties on the right. Anyone who admires the courage demonstrated by Ehud Olmert, who presented the voters with his plan for a withdrawal from most of the West Bank and a corresponding evacuation of settlements, and even promised that his coalition will include only parties that promise in writing to support the withdrawal, should vote for Kadima, or for Labour or Meretz, both of which support an additional withdrawal."

Notwithstanding such efforts to focus attention exclusively on the disengagement plan, growing social

antagonisms found a partial and distorted expression in the election result.

Labour was able to win increased support because its new leader, Amir Peretz, made limited promises to safeguard the more impoverished sections of society. His election campaign coupled pledges to join Kadima in a coalition government so as to push through separation from the Palestinians with calls for raising the minimum wage and other social measures.

The seven seats won by the Pensioners Party, one of the major shocks of the election, was another manifestation of the social tensions that have been created by the drive to destroy Israel's once extensive welfare network. The party came from nowhere by campaigning for pensions for all citizens and for medical care to be subsidized by the state.

On the right, the collapse of Likud, from which Sharon split in order to form Kadima, was in part due to the deep unpopularity of its leader Binyamin Netanyahu. As finance minister he has become indelibly associated with the austerity measures imposed since 2003.

Kadima's poor performance and its heavy reliance on Labour and possible inclusion of the Pensioners Party, the ultra-orthodox Shas and other smaller formations have given risen to concern over the possibility of forming a stable government. This would necessitate reliance on an electoral base that is objectively in conflict with the neo-liberal economic programme demanded by the major corporations and banks. Israeli shares fell as soon as the stock markets opened yesterday.

Ultimately, the electoral manoeuvres with Labour and the Pensioners Party cannot prevent the development of explosive class tensions within Israel. There is no basis for any party that upholds the interests of Israeli capitalism to resolve any of the pressing social problems afflicting working people. To the extent that

Peretz honours his commitment to back the government in slashing public spending, his demagogic appeals to the poor will be undermined, exposing the ephemeral character of Labour's increased support.

Instability is also made inevitable by the disengagement plan itself. Though this is deliberately concealed by most of the media, there is no possibility of establishing peace based on land grabs that reduce the Palestinians to an impoverished ghetto existence.

As Britain's *Economist* magazine admitted, "A Palestinian state under such constraints would not prosper. So long as Israel controls its borders, it would not even count as sovereign. It would be much like Gaza since the disengagement. Citing intelligence reports of planned terrorist attacks, Israel has kept Gaza's main border-crossing for goods closed more often than open since the start of the year, causing serious food shortages and leaving Gazan fruit and vegetable exports worth millions of dollars to rot. Such friction between security and economics would keep the West Bank poor and angry, encouraging attacks across the border."

There is no consensus behind the disengagement plan that is meant to have created a new centre. Rather, the adoption of Sharon's perspective by most of the so-called left is indicative of a lurch to the right within official Israeli politics that also finds expression in the growth of the far-right parties.

Labour's support for Kadima is the end product of the two-state solution championed by the entire Zionist left. Sharon relied directly on Labour to remain in government. He formed Kadima with the backing of Labour's former leader Shimon Peres in order to break the grip of the right-wing settlers and pave the way for the renewal of an effective electoral bloc with Labour.

Although Yossi Beilin's Yachad-Meretz party, the political wing of the Peace Now group, may not join the government it has described disengagement as opening "a window of opportunity for the renewal of the peace process." It no longer calls for a withdrawal to Israel's border prior to the 1967 war, but calls them a guide to negotiations on a final settlement "with the goal of removing the smallest number of settlers possible from their homes.... Both sides will consider the facts on the ground and re-evaluate the borders accordingly."

The capitulation of the left has left the far right as the

only significant political opposition to Kadima.

The Labourites have routinely justified their support for Sharon as a necessary compromise that would serve to neutralise the influence of the settlers and the ultra-orthodox parties by creating a stable "centre."

But such efforts to rebrand the core leadership of Likud could never provide a basis for resolving what is a profound crisis of rule within the Israeli state. Instead it has paved the way for explosive political developments that pose grave dangers to the Israeli and Palestinian working class.

Likud's collapse to just 11 seats benefited the far-right parties that were once only able to influence state policy by exerting pressure on their far larger ally. Likud, once seen as the most aggressive militarists, has been overtaken by parties that advance policies once associated with Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach party, considered so extreme that it was banned from running for office in 1988.

Yisrael Beiteinu, with 12 seats, is led by Avigdor Lieberman and counts on support from Israel's 900,000-strong Russian immigrant population; "Israel is our home" demands the ethnic cleansing of some 500,000 Arab Israeli citizens and subjecting those remaining to a "loyalty test." The National Union-National Religious Party, from which Lieberman split, also secured nine seats.

Together with Likud, these far-right formations control over a quarter of the seats in the Knesset (parliament). They can mobilise a social base which, though numerically small, is ideologically driven and enjoys the support not only of sections of the army but also a powerful Zionist and Christian fundamentalist lobby in the United States.

Not only will these right-wing parties continue to do everything in their power to worsen hostilities with the Palestinians, but their efforts to this end will be used to justify Kadima's own acts of military and economic aggression.



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