

Political stalemate forces general election in Israel

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Israel will go to the polls to elect a parliament on February 10, some 12 months earlier than scheduled.

In the meantime, the disgraced Ehud Olmert, who faces six investigations into corruption, will resume the leadership of the Kadima party and continue as prime minister, despite his resignation from the party leadership on July 30. Olmert said the country had too many pressing security needs for him to leave office immediately.

Israel will continue to be ruled by a lame duck government under conditions of mounting political and financial instability globally, within the region and Israel itself. This will be the sixth general election held before its due date, with none of the governments completing a full four-year term.

The decision to call an election follows the failure of Tzipi Livni, who narrowly won the leadership of the Kadima party in September following Olmert's resignation, to form a majority coalition under her leadership. Kadima holds 29 seats in Israel's 120-member parliament, the Knesset, and rules in coalition with Labour, with 19 seats, and the Pensioners Party, which has eight seats and has split into two warring factions. Shas, an ultra-orthodox party with 12 seats, refused to remain within the coalition.

Such is the fragmented nature of Israeli politics that almost all its governments have been coalitions. For the last 20 years, the coalitions have always been beholden to small parties and this time it was Shas that was the kingmaker.

Shas, the largest religious party, represents impoverished Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. It had been in discussion with Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the rival right-wing party Likud, who had been seeking early elections on the basis of opinion polls that predicted a swing to Likud at the expense of Labour. Shas had evidently decided that a future Likud government offered better prospects and sought to drive a hard bargain with Livni, or to threaten to precipitate an election she was keen to avoid.

Livni had for weeks been almost universally presented by the media as a candidate untainted by corruption, someone who could restore faith in Israeli politics and the best and last chance of securing a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. This is a travesty of the truth.

As foreign minister, Livni has presided over one channel of the negotiations with the Palestinians, the talks with Ahmad Qurei. Olmert had deliberately sidelined her from the main talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. But the talks, which were supposed to deliver a Palestinian state by the end of the year, have ground to a halt in the face of Israeli intransigence.

Livni has participated in a government that has expanded the settlements in the West Bank, increased the number of roadblocks there by more than 10 percent in the last year, waged war on Gaza in 2006, killed hundreds of Palestinians and laid siege to Gaza since June 2007, cutting off the most basic supplies.

She has made it clear that she would continue Olmert's policy of seeking

some kind of deal with the Palestinians, while retaining all the major settlements in the West Bank that Israel has occupied illegally for 41 years. Like all Israeli prime ministers, she publicly postures as an advocate of peace and friendship with Israel's Arab neighbours while actively pursuing a belligerent and expansionist policy.

Her bid to form a coalition floundered on her refusal to meet two of Shas's conditions. Shas had insisted that the government restore child allowances for large families that form the basis of its support and face increasing poverty. While Livni came close to meeting this demand, she refused to accede to Shas's second demand that all Jerusalem remain in Israeli hands.

Agreeing to this would be tantamount to halting once and for all any possibility of reaching a deal with the Palestinians, which is supposedly the aim of the Bush administration, upon whom Israel depends. One of the Palestinians' central demands is that some part of east Jerusalem would be the capital of any putative state. From Washington's perspective, public support for a Palestinian state facilitates the support of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia for the ongoing occupation of Iraq and possible future hostilities against Iran or Syria to secure control of the region's oil resources.

While it is highly unlikely that Livni, or her bitterly divided party, would cede an inch of East Jerusalem, to say so publicly would be a step too far. Inasmuch as she counts as a dove within official Israeli politics, this is because she does not espouse the wholesale expulsion of the Palestinian population out of Israel and the occupied territories as do some right-wing politicians.

When Shas pulled out of talks for a new coalition, Livni was reported to be furious with the demands being placed on her by all the smaller parties. She argued that she had no government because she refused to cave in; telling the *Ha'aretz* newspaper that she was "not willing to be blackmailed" and the alternative to early elections was "for me to capitulate to extortion." Livni issued a statement saying, "When it became clear that everyone and every party was exploiting the opportunity to make demands that were economically and diplomatically illegitimate, I decided to call off (talks) and go to elections."

She said "there are prices that others are willing to pay but I am unwilling to pay at the expense of the state and its citizens, only to be a prime minister in a government of paralysis."

It should be added that she, like every other ruling party in Israel's history that espouses peace with the Palestinians, refused to even consider including in her coalition Arab Knesset members, who typically have at least 10 seats and could be expected to support a peace deal.

Political paralysis was indeed what was facing Israel, a situation made no better by the calling of elections. Israel now faces a three-month period under conditions where the electorate are profoundly alienated from official politics, something that Israel's president Shimon Peres acknowledged when opening the winter session of parliament. He said, "This Knesset session is opened against a background of internal and

external turmoil which has aroused great concern in the heart of every citizen."

"The difficult process that ultimately ended the days of this government raises question marks which trouble all of the people of Israel. The confidence in the conduct of the governing agencies has been weakened, and moreover, the public trust in their leaders has been damaged. This unpleasant truth must not be hidden or neglected," he continued.

Despite their professed differences and bitter antagonisms, the three main parties—Kadima, Likud and Labour—are united on the fundamental issues: the need to preserve a state based upon religious exclusivity that operates in the interests of the narrow financial elite committed to expansionism, militarism and the suppression of the Palestinians and its own working class, and which survives courtesy of its backer in Washington.

Netanyahu has declared that if elected, Likud would ensure that Israel keep the Golan Heights captured from Syria in 1967, thereby jettisoning the prospect of a peace deal with Syria, with whom Kadima has been in negotiations. He has also insisted on keeping large parts of the West Bank and the whole of Jerusalem, precluding any possibility of a mini-Palestinian state and a deal with the Palestinians. "We will not negotiate over Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people for the past 3,000 years. I didn't do it in the past and I won't do it in the future," Netanyahu declared. He opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state, which he claims would soon fall into the hands of Islamist militants.

With the majority of Israelis in favour of a deal with the Palestinians, and many warning that time for a two-state solution is running out, Livni's refusal to give in to Shas's demands has won her some plaudits at the expense of Netanyahu. Opinion polls now estimate that Kadima would win 29 of the 120 seats in Parliament, while Likud would come second with 26 seats and Labour would win only 11.

She has also sought to capitalise on her opposition to the ultra-orthodox by pledging to legalise civil marriage in Israel. Calling the issue "a matter of principle," she said that it would be part of Kadima's platform in the elections. The bill would enable about 300,000 Israelis who are currently seen by the state as "without religious affiliation," largely Russian Israelis, and as such cannot be married by the Rabbinate, to get married in Israel. She has sought to mend fences with Shaul Mofaz, her political rival within Kadima, by offering him the number two position within the party and any future government.

But even if victorious in the elections, Livni would be unable to form a stable coalition in favour of the "peace process." She would have to rely on the support of right-wing or ultra-orthodox groups that are deeply opposed to the establishment of even a truncated Palestinian state. Many commentators are predicting that the most likely outcome of the elections will be a national unity government made up of Kadima, Likud and Labour.

Since resuming control, Olmert has used the political stalemate to stall on external relations: both the talks with the Palestinians and the back-channel talks with Syria via Turkey.

He has acted to forestall the threatened closure of the universities, by acceding to demands for more money. But he warned of cuts in government spending, saying that in the face of the global financial crisis that would inevitably affect Israel's economy, the Israeli market must be prepared, "even if the government is a transitional one and the Knesset is heading towards elections." He pledged, "We will not tolerate recklessness and will continue to exercise strict fiscal discipline. I expect all members of this House to enlist and unite for the sake of this shared interest."

These threats of cuts are made under conditions of ever-growing social inequality. Adva, a social policy centre in Tel Aviv, recently published a report entitled *The Cost of the Occupation*, which stated that one in every

five Israeli families was now classed as poor, as compared with one in every 10 in the 1970s. This was due in part to the cost of occupying the West Bank and Gaza and the cuts in social spending to pay for the mounting defence spending: social security payments, particularly child allowances, unemployment benefits and income maintenance were cut significantly between 2001 and 2005.

The report challenged the belief that Israel's economy had prospered despite the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. Economic growth has been 5 percent and above for the last three years. But the cost of the occupation, while impossible to calculate because much of the defence budget is secret, has added over \$8 billion over the last 20 years, more than the government's budget for education this year.

Adva's report stated, "The truth is that the conflict with the Palestinians is like a millstone around the neck of Israel: it undermines economic growth, burdens the budget, limits social development, sullies its vision, hangs heavy on its conscience, harms its international standing, exhausts its army, divides it politically, and threatens the future of its existence as a Jewish nation-state."

As well as financial and economic problems, Israel has become a social tinderbox, facing increasing tensions between its Jewish and Arab citizens spearheaded by Israel's religious right and settler parties. There have been days of riots in Acre following an attack on an Arab who drove his car through a Jewish quarter of the city during Yom Kippur. In response, hundreds of Arabs took to the streets smashing the windows of Jewish shops, attacking cars and stoning Jewish homes. The following day, thousands of Jews began setting fire to and vandalising Arab homes, shops and businesses.

According to Adalah, a legal centre for Arab rights, tensions had been rising since 2006 when Jewish settlers set up a religious school in the city.

Ultra-nationalist settlers clashed with Israeli soldiers and police over the demolition of a settler outpost that had not been sanctioned by the government. Settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem have also been on the increase, with settlers from Kiryat Arba going on the rampage through a Palestinian village. Last month, right-wing forces planted a bomb outside the home of Peace Now activist Professor Ze'ev Sternhell.



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