

The significance of Israel's “loyalty oath”

Jean Shaoul**4 November 2010**

The Israeli cabinet is to bring in legislation requiring those applying for Israeli citizenship to pledge their loyalty to “the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state”. Presently they must pledge loyalty only to “the state of Israel”.

The move is clearly discriminatory and would not apply to Jewish immigrants, but only to Palestinian immigrants from the West Bank or other foreigners who marry Arab citizens of Israel. Non-Jewish immigrants would have to sign up to an ideology that excludes the one fifth of Israel's existing population that is Arab.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also demanded that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas recognise the Jewish character of the state of Israel as a precondition for talks. For him to do so would mean acknowledging that Palestinians who fled or were driven out of their homes in 1948 and 1967 and their descendants have no right of return to Israel and would also jeopardise the status of Israel's Palestinian citizens.

The cabinet has in addition backed legislation calling for a national referendum before any of the illegally occupied territories—East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights—is ceded to the Palestinians or Syrians in a peace agreement, compromising the chance of any such agreements being secured.

A raft of further discriminatory and anti-democratic legislation is in the pipeline, including a loyalty oath for Israeli parliamentarians aimed at Palestinian MPs. Parliament is discussing legislation that would make it a criminal offence to deny the existence of Israel, or mark the anniversary of the Nakba, or Catastrophe, as the Palestinians call the day that Israel was established. It would be an offence to carry material promoting the boycott of Israel. Governmental organisations in receipt of funds from other nations would have to declare all contributions.

Another bill will enable the admissions committees of the settlements in the West Bank to deny membership to ethnic minorities on the basis of their religion and political views, and thus limit residence exclusively to Jews. It is in effect an apartheid law.

Israel is actively preparing for civilian unrest among its Palestinian population. It recently staged a secret training

exercise, mobilising the army, police and prison officers, to test their ability to contain riots in the event of a “land for peace deal” that transferred Arab towns in Israel to a new Palestinian entity and thus stripped their inhabitants of their Israeli citizenship.

At one time, only the extreme right talked about “population transfer”—a polite synonym for ethnic cleansing. Now it has become government policy, even if not openly acknowledged as such.

The bill's origins lie with Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, who wants to see Israel's Palestinian citizens transferred to a putative Palestinian entity. He had demanded a loyalty oath of all Israel's Palestinian citizens as the price for joining Netanyahu's coalition government last year.

While Netanyahu has tried to present the proposal for a loyalty oath for new immigrants as a watering down of Lieberman's original demand, he is just as much in favour of a loyalty oath and a population transfer as his coalition partners. In 2003, he called Israel's Palestinian citizens a “demographic time bomb” and said it was necessary to ensure a Jewish majority if Israel's Jewish character was to be preserved.

Tzipi Livni, leader of the opposition Kadima party, has also called for Israel's Palestinian citizens to move to the new Palestinian entity, when or if it is established. She has opposed the bill only because it would “cause internal conflict and damage [Israel's image in the world]”, as have some within Netanyahu's Likud party.

Isaac Herzog, the Labour Party social affairs minister, said, “There is a whiff of fascism on the margins of Israeli society. The overall picture is very disturbing and threatens the democratic character of the state of Israel. There have been a tsunami of measures that limit rights...we will pay a heavy price for this”.

Ehud Barak, the defence minister and chairperson of the Labour Party, who portrays himself as the voice of reason in Netanyahu's cabinet, sought to distance himself from the bill, calling for non-Jews seeking citizenship to pledge their loyalty to Israel's “Declaration of Independence”, which itself defines Israel as a Jewish state. This echoes the

demand of the rightwing fanatic and legislator, Rabbi Meir Kahane, who in 1984 called for all non-Jews to swear allegiance to the Jewish state and sign the Declaration of Independence.

More than 6,000 Jewish and Palestinian Israelis took to the streets of Tel Aviv to protest against the bill. Ahmad Tibi, an Israeli Arab legislator, said, “No other state in the world would force its citizens to pledge allegiance to an ideology”. He accused Netanyahu of being behind “a gradual ethnic cleansing scheme—removing as many Arabs as possible, while creating a Jewish, homogeneous Israel”.

Such a policy is not an aberration, but flows inexorably from the establishment of a state based on Jewish religious exclusivity. Israel was founded in 1948 following a vote by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1947 for the partition of Palestine into two states: one Palestinian and one Jewish. While the vote in part expressed the enormous sympathy felt throughout the world for the plight of the Jews following the Second World War, it was ultimately determined by the machinations of the major powers. The United States, Soviet Union and France saw the establishment of Israel as a means of enhancing their own strategic interests in the oil-rich Middle East, blocking those of Britain, then the dominant power.

Israel would, its founders claimed, build a just and democratic haven for a people who had faced discrimination and oppression for centuries. It would be a state defined uniquely, not in geopolitical terms, but by religion. Its doors would be open to all who subscribed to Judaism. That is, it would not simply be a state of and for the Jewish people—as most people thought—but a Jewish state, with control by religious authorities, something that modern states have rejected and overthrown long ago. Today, only Iran and Saudi Arabia are explicitly religious states.

At the same time, its founding document proclaimed that Israel would “foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants” and “ensure the complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex”. It would, therefore, be both a democratic and a Jewish state. The domination of Israeli political life by the Labour Party with a reformist agenda served to conceal to some degree at least the fundamental irreconcilability of these two stated objectives.

But the incompatibility of these two aims was made immediately apparent to Palestine’s Arab citizens, who constituted 67 percent of the population and held legal title to more than 90 percent of the land. More than 700,000 Palestinians were driven out of their homes or fled after the UN vote in 1947 and the Israeli-Arab war of 1948. They were not allowed to return to their homes and their property was seized by the state. Those that remained lived under

military rule until the 1960s and have faced poverty and discrimination ever since.

The 1967 war created another wave of refugees, while those West Bankers and Gazans that remained have faced constant suppression. Today, East Jerusalem’s Palestinian residents fear eviction as Israel seeks to Judaicise East Jerusalem and prevent its return to the Palestinians.

But the capture of Palestinian territory in 1967 and its subsequent illegal occupation means that Israel rules over a Palestinian population whose birth rate is higher than Israel’s. The significance of this only became apparent with the dramatic fall-off in Jewish immigration to Israel in the last 15 years and the increasing number of young Israelis leaving the country. Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and Israel are expected to constitute a majority within the next 10 to 15 years.

It is this “demographic time bomb” that has led Israel to emphasise its character as a Jewish state and is the source of the attraction, for some at least, of a “two state solution”.

The evolution of Israel into an apartheid-type regime that viciously oppresses the Palestinians, both those in the occupied territories and within Israel itself, suppresses all opposition, and promotes rightwing vigilantes and ethnic cleansing, is the inexorable and tragic outcome of the Zionist perspective. Today, all the Zionist parties, even those that once called themselves socialist, have joined forces to reproduce within Israel and the Occupied Territories the ghettos, repression and civil war from which earlier generations of Jews had fled.

The only way out of this tragic impasse, for Jews and Arabs alike, is through the construction of a unified socialist political movement of workers and peasants. Such a movement would be pledged to end all forms of national and religious discrimination and exclusivism throughout the Middle East by destroying its roots in capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination.



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