

Likud/Israel Beiteinu bloc prepares ground for war and savage austerity measures

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Days after the announcement of an early general election for January 22, the Likud party has overwhelmingly backed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan for an electoral bloc with the ultra-nationalist Israel Beiteinu (Israel is our home), led by Foreign Secretary Avigdor Lieberman.

According to the polls, the bloc with Israel Beiteinu will give Netanyahu between 35 and 42 seats in the 120-member Knesset, more than twice the number Labour is expected to win, and an unprecedented third term as prime minister. It paves the way for an extremist government based on authoritarianism, militarism and xenophobia. It will be one committed to an attack on Iran and any country deemed a threat to Israel's interests, a further assault on the position of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and, above all, a social and economic offensive against the Israeli working class.

Netanyahu's objective in calling an early election and forming this electoral bloc—put on hold after an abortive attempt to bring the opposition Kadima on board last May—was to sideline his religious coalition partners and limit their ability to push him into making budgetary concessions on behalf of their social constituencies. Since Israel's electoral system requires the electorate to vote for political parties not candidates, Likud will determine the position of its members on its list while maintaining the Knesset seat ratio between the parties: Likud 27, Israel Beiteinu 15.

In his speech unveiling the electoral bloc, to be called Likud–Beiteinu, Netanyahu declared, “One ticket will strengthen the government, it will strengthen the prime minister, and it will strengthen the country.”

He added, “We are asking the public for a mandate to deal with the security threats, at the top of which is stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and

fighting terrorism. We are asking for a mandate from the public to continue the changes in the economy, in education and in the need to lower the cost of living.”

Lieberman said, “The merger is a combination of experience, force and unity. This is what Israel's citizens expect. Given the challenges, we need national responsibility.”

Born in Moldova, Lieberman was in his youth a member of the right-wing Kach party outlawed in the 1980s. Since 1988, he has worked closely with Netanyahu and Likud, becoming Netanyahu's chief of staff during his first term as prime minister in 1996. He left Likud in 1997 after Netanyahu signed up to the Wye River agreement that made some concessions—on paper—to the Palestinians, later forming his own ultra-nationalist party based upon Israel's one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Israel Beiteinu became the third largest party in the 2009 election.

Lieberman supports the “transfer” of Israel's Arab population to any putative Palestinian state, demands a “loyalty oath” to Israel as a Jewish state as the basis for citizenship, and labels Israeli Arab legislators as “traitors” and “terrorists” who should be executed for meeting leaders of Hamas, the group that rules Gaza. He has sought to introduce a raft of anti-democratic legislation aimed at outlawing dissent.

He is under investigation for corruption and may yet be charged with fraud, money laundering, breach of trust, witness harassment and obstructing the course of justice.

His opinions, once considered marginal, have now become part of the mainstream and respectable political discourse in Israel. His role has been to shift the entire spectrum of Israeli politics to the right.

A recent public opinion poll, not the first or only one,

showed that 33 percent of respondents said they did not want Arabs to vote in parliamentary elections, 42 percent did not want an Arab neighbour, with a similar proportion saying it would bother them if there were an Arab student in their child's class. It found that most Israelis would support apartheid-type conditions if the government were to annex the Occupied Territories, although most people oppose such annexation.

The response of Labour party leader Shelley Yacimovich was to say, "This step turns the Likud into Lieberman's party. Tonight, Likud disappeared and instead there's an extreme Lieberman party."

She called on Israel's "centrist" parties to unite to provide "an alternative to this extremist leadership."

But most commentators agreed that such a coalition was unlikely, despite the fact that the opposition parties are expected to take around 60 seats. As *Ma'ariv's* Shalom Yerushalmi pointed out, "There is no agreed-upon [opposition] leader and no consensus, and almost no union seems possible there".

More importantly, that Yacimovich called for a pact with Kadima—the personal political vehicle of former prime minister and war criminal Ariel Sharon who split with Likud in 2005—demonstrates just how right-wing Labour has become. Labour no longer has any independent political existence or *raison d'etre* and is incapable of articulating any opposition to Likud's domestic or foreign policy.

The same goes for all Israel's small nominally left parties, including Meretz, the so-called Party of Peace, and the Stalinist-led coalition Hadash, which have endorsed the call for a centre-left bloc against Likud-Beiteinu.

Just last week, Yacimovich articulated positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that are indistinguishable from Netanyahu's.

She said, "We support the form of territorial compromise, the two-state solution, keeping settlement blocs, and oppose the right of return".

However, settling Israel's economic problems—by which she meant the demands of Israel's financial elite's—came first. She also supported Netanyahu's attacks on Gaza which have killed at least seven people in the last week, saying, "These are complex operations that require a great restraint. I will not call the prime minister to initiate a military escalation, and I won't criticize him. I stand behind his actions."

Unable to articulate any policies to address the profound social and economic problems faced by Israeli workers, it is not surprising that Labour has made little headway in public opinion polls, despite the largest ever protests last year over housing costs and social inequality. There is enormous anger over the increasing poverty as wages have fallen in real terms for more than a decade, resulting in 1.7 million of Israel's 7.8 million population living in poverty and 837,000 children going hungry every night.

While the opposition parties may feign outrage over some of Israel Beiteinu's more blatantly racist and anti-democratic policies, they share the same standpoint, their commitment to Zionism. The Zionist project of establishing the state of Israel as a "homeland" for the Jews was based firstly upon the ethnic cleansing of close to a million Palestinians and systematic discrimination against those who stayed, and secondly, on capitalism where Israeli Jewish capitalists exploit, divide and police the working class of the region in its own interests and those of its patron, the United States. Such a state was and is fundamentally incompatible with democracy.

This perspective has left the former left parties incapable of challenging the more aggressive Zionist perspective that came to dominate under successive Likud-led governments. As both Zionist tendencies, right and left, recognised that the prospect of the Palestinians becoming a majority in a state whose citizenship is based upon religious identity constituted an "existential threat", the nominally left Labour party joined Ariel Sharon's Likud government, the most right-wing government Israel had known—and later Ehud Olmert's Kadima-led government. Labour's former leader Ehud Barak still sits alongside Netanyahu as defence secretary.



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