

Israeli election campaign reflects rightward shift

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The campaign in Israel for the January 22 parliamentary election is marked by an ever more rightward turn by all the main political parties as economic growth slows and social tensions rise.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud heads the most right-wing coalition government in Israel's history. He is widely expected to win the election and serve as prime minister for a third term, presiding over an even more right-wing coalition. This is despite the mass social protests in the summer of 2011 over soaring housing costs and social inequality, which his government has done nothing to address.

The elections prepare the political ground for a possible military assault on Syria and Iran, a guaranteed social and economic offensive against the Israeli working class, and the continued suppression of the Palestinian people.

Last week, Netanyahu warned Syria and Iran that Israel's "long arm" would strike forcefully against any threats against it. Speaking at the Israeli Air Force's pilot graduation ceremony, his belligerent speech came the day after visiting Jordan's King Abdullah to discuss the possibility of an Israeli attack on Syria, and weeks after telling the United Nations that the likely date of an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear programme was next spring or summer.

Last month, Netanyahu gave the go-ahead for the construction of 3,000 new housing units in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank and put 1,000 more on a fast track for permits. The decision to build in the E1 (East 1) area of the Maale Edumim Jewish settlement would cut the West Bank in two. Israel's illegal action, and its defence by the Obama administration, which has again vetoed a UN resolution condemning Israel, makes clear that even a truncated Palestinian mini-state of non-contiguous towns and

villages is totally unacceptable to Washington and Tel Aviv.

Netanyahu called early elections last October after failing to reach an agreement with the small ultra-religious parties in his coalition over an austerity budget for 2013 that would have eroded their support base among the poverty-stricken orthodox community. He had hoped to avoid an election by bringing Kadima, the largest party in the current parliament, into his fractious coalition last May, but that fell apart six weeks later.

Riding high in the polls and with Kadima trailing, Netanyahu calculated that he and other secular right-wing parties could gain sufficient seats to dispense with his religious partners and secure the passage of the budget. To this end, he formed a bloc with Avigdor Lieberman's fascistic Yisrael Beiteinu, the third largest party, to run a single list. Lieberman has been forced to resign as foreign minister after being indicted for fraud and breach of public trust over his involvement in helping Ze'ev Ben-Aryeh, the former ambassador to Belarus, to become ambassador to Latvia. He had been in line to succeed Netanyahu as leader of the alliance.

The combined list excludes those with any sympathy for a Palestinian mini-state and gives prominence to extreme right-wing settlers who have called for the annexation of "Area C", the 60 percent of the West Bank that is under Israeli military control and where all the settlements are located. Yuli Edelstein, Likud minister of information, claimed that the lack of full Israeli sovereignty over Area C played into the hands of those calling for Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. Moshe Feigin has called for the government to pay Palestinian families \$500,000 to leave the West Bank, using funds from social security.

Netanyahu has encouraged such statements, in part at

least because of the emergence of another new bellicose right-wing party, Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), formed out of the all but defunct National Religious Party, which has profited from the scandals surrounding Lieberman. Headed by former Likud member Naftali Bennett, a 40-year-old software tycoon and former political assistant to Netanyahu, Habayit Hayehudi is slated to win up to 14 seats in the 120-member parliament, the Knesset, becoming the third largest party. It is vehemently opposed to any Palestinian state and demands that Israel annex much of the West Bank.

Kadima, formed by former prime minister Ariel Sharon as his own political vehicle in a split from Likud, has all but collapsed. Following her defeat last year in the Kadima leadership contest, Tzipi Livni has formed a new party, Hatenuah (The Movement), whose main purpose is to reach a diplomatic agreement for a mini-Palestinian state. Her calculations are based upon the fact that within a few years, the Palestinians in the territories captured in 1967, together with Israel's own Arab population, will outnumber Jewish Israelis. As she explained recently, "I want to make permanent the Jewish character of the state. I don't want Israel to become a state of all its citizens, or of everyone who lives between the sea and the Jordan River." She added, "It is necessary to strike Hamas with one hand and negotiate with Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] with our left hand."

The Israeli Labour Party, for years the largest political party, was in every government until Likud, the political descendant of the terrorist Irgun movement, won the 1977 election. It too has fragmented. Ehud Barak, who joined the Likud government as defence minister, broke with Labour two years ago to form his Independence Party. Last November, he announced that he was quitting politics after Netanyahu replaced him in his new government and it became clear that he had no chance of winning a seat. His party has withdrawn from the elections.

Capitalising on the social protests in the summer of 2011 to champion "social values", Shelley Yachimovich, a 52-year-old journalist, won the Labour leadership in September 2011. She has distanced herself from her party's former programme of "peace" with the Palestinians, supporting Netanyahu's assault on Gaza and saying "I certainly do not see the

settlement project as a sin and a crime".

Yachimovich has agreed to meet with Livni to discuss forming a bloc in an attempt to unseat Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu. Following their defeat in the leadership contest, two former Labour leaders—Amir Peretz, a founder of Peace Now and former head of the Histadrut, the trade union federation, and Amram Mitzna—quit, joining Kadima.

Polls predict that the right-wing parties will gain a majority 67 seats, with 34 seats for Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu, a fall of 4, just 8 seats for Kadima, which currently has 28 seats, and 20 seats for Labour, up from 13. Otzma LeYisrael, a party with three former supporters of Meir Kahane in its top five slots, has passed the electoral threshold. Kahane's Kach party was banned in 1988 due to its racist and undemocratic programme.

There is a deep-seated alienation and hostility to all the major parties. Voter turnout, which fell to 64 percent in the 2009 election, is expected to slump to around 50 percent. The majority of Israelis face insecure low-paying jobs and struggle to make ends meet. The metropolitan Tel Aviv area, where nearly a third of Israelis live, is the most expensive city in the Middle East—outranking Dubai—with the cost of housing similar to that in London. The New Year brings an immediate increase in prices, as water, property tax rates, income tax, public transport, electricity and basic commodities rise. Economic growth has slowed to 3.3 percent in 2012, with even weaker growth in 2013.

The next Netanyahu-led government is expected to cut social spending and raise taxes in order to plug a \$15 billion deficit. At the same time, the armed forces are demanding \$15 billion for 2013, against \$13.5 billion in 2012—6.5 percent of GDP—not including the cost of the assault on Gaza last November.



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