

Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and less rights for «Arab Israelis» than those accorded to Jewish citizens. This shows that the new government is not so much a throw-back to the past, but a model of the Israel of the future, ever more reactionary and racist.

Simmering crisis

The extended period needed to form the new government, coupled with the events of that period, confirm that the stalemate was symptomatic of a deeper crisis in the Israeli political system that has yet to be resolved. In the last analysis, this crisis stems from the Israeli society's failure to come to terms with the reality of the Palestinian cause as expressed by the intifada. The Zionist state has been unable to crush the intifada and equally unwilling to make any real political overtures in relation to its demands. In the context of this stalemate, a myriad of other issues became the object of broad public protest on the one hand, and intense political maneuvering, backroom deals and squabbling among politicians on the other.

Susan Rolaf, editor of the Labor Party's monthly, *Spectrum*, wrote about the question of electoral reform in the *Jerusalem Post*, contending that reform would not change the influence of the small religious parties, because Labor and Likud leaders would still seek the rabbis' blessings before elections. She concluded: «...only when the tie between the two major blocs is broken - when there will be a majority either for Greater Israel or for talks with the Palestinians and territorial compromise - will the power of the religious parties return to its natural proportions, which in absolute terms is no greater today than it was in the early days of the state (today the religious parties have 18 Knesset seats - 40 years ago they had 16).» Rolaf explained the apparent impotence of the Israeli political system as follows: «the mainstreams in both political blocs are afraid of the possible consequences of the solution which they advocate to resolve the fundamental existential problems facing the state. That is why the Likud mainstream

never seriously considered annexing the territories. And despite all the talk, the Labor Party - even if it could - would be very wary about embarking on any process leading to the trading of territories for peace without a very extensive intermediate adjustment period» (reprinted in *The Middle East Clipboard*, April 5-11th).

On this background, we can analyze the most salient aspects of the internal Israeli political crisis: the mass movement for electoral reform, the credibility gap between the public and the politicians, and the power struggle between and within the Labor and the Likud.

Electoral reform

The movement for electoral reform blossomed in April and May, exhibiting an unprecedented public consensus on internal political matters. The movement spanned the Zionist political spectrum from Shinui (to the left of the Labor Party) to Tzomet (right of Likud), grouping elements from all political trends except for the religious parties and their ultraorthodox followers. It thus expressed the tension between religious and non-religious Zionists, and the majority of Israelis' resentment that the religious institutions consume large proportions of the state budget, while the orthodox can exempt themselves from army service on religious grounds. It is typical that the movement began with a hunger strike of army veterans outside the Knesset in late March.

A poll conducted by the Dahaf Institute showed that 80% of Israelis preferred changing the electoral law to replace proportional representation (which allows small parties to exert unproportional influence) with the personal constituency system: a 78 to 11 margin supported direct election of the prime minister, also based on the need to limit the influence of the small parties (*Yediot Achronot*, April 9th). A petition for such reform was presented to Israeli President Hertzog, signed by 500,000 - 22% of the electorate. By mid-May the Knesset had begun debating bills for electoral reform, supported by both Labor and Likud. The fate of these bills is uncertain however, as both the major blocs have dealt

with the issue of electoral reform in terms of their own partisan interests. For example, Shamir presented himself as responsive to the movement's demands during the period he was trying to form a government, but it was actually Likud that blocked the efforts last summer to enact electoral reform. Obviously, the two major blocs will continue to relate to the public demand for reform in an opportunistic manner. In view of the failure of either to gain a clear majority in the past two elections, both need the small parties to form a government.

There are other reservations about electoral reforms. A number of mainstream Israelis, mainly intellectuals with Labor Party sympathies, have expressed fear that making the prime minister less dependent on Knesset support could lead to the rise of a «strongman.» Seventeen university professors issued a warning in late March that reform would unwittingly serve to strengthen the undemocratic right and divert from the main concerns of peace and immigrant absorption.

The more basic problem however, is that the reform movement is after all for making the existing political system more efficient. It has not questioned any of the fundamental premises of Israeli politics, nor addressed the contradiction of maintaining a democratic system in a settler-colonial state. It is telling that another Dahaf poll revealed that 80% of Israelis, the same percentage who want electoral reform, think that the army is doing a good job in the occupied territories. This is an accurate gage of democratic thinking among the Israeli public.

Credibility gap

On April 8th, when 100,000 Israelis demonstrated in Tel Aviv for electoral reform, slogans were raised such as: «All politicians are thieves and whores.» Throughout the bargaining for forming a new government, there were displays of public disrespect for the politicians. According to polls throughout this period, most Israelis preferred new elections or a national unity government to one formed either by Shamir or Peres. The public was more concerned about electoral re-