

form and the organization of immigrant absorption than about many of the intricacies of the political bargaining going on between various parties. In particular, the public was disgusted by practices engaged in by Peres and Shamir, literally buying defectors from each other's camps, and the readiness of various factions to be bought.

On April 6th, the Israeli daily *Maariv* wrote: «The mountains of dirt amassed over the past few weeks have made the public sick... People are in a state of despair.» The credibility gap was not healed by the formation of the government, as was apparent from the 'happening' organized by the Movement for Political Change as MKs entered the Knesset to endorse the new cabinet. The building was surrounded by dogs, running in every direction and each adorned with a sign bearing the name of one of the new ministers.

However, as in the case of the electoral reform movement, public disgust with the politicians did not lead to any significant soulsearching about the deeper reasons for the political corruption. In the space provided by the credibility gap, Shamir's caretaker government pushed forward quite successfully, laying the foundations for a new right-wing offensive and rampant settlement drive. Fascist tendencies were apparent, not only directed against Palestinians but aimed at impacting on internal Israeli policy. The most obvious case was when Sicarii, the secret Israeli terror group that specializes in attacking «dovish» Jews, threatened President Hertzog and his family after he had prolonged Peres' mandate to form a cabinet (reported in *Jerusalem Post*, April 15th).

### **Internal power struggles**

Internal conflict appeared to wrack both the Labor and Likud blocs prior to the formation of the new government. This conflict reflected shades of difference in political positions, as well as the quest of certain individuals for more power.

Ultimately Peres could not form a government because he failed on two counts. He could neither unite Labor's own ranks under his leadership, nor attract factions from both the left and

the right of Labor, relatively speaking, at the same time. Throughout the bargaining, there were well-founded rumors that Rabin would either break ranks to join a Likud-led government or try to replace Peres as Labor's leader in order to form a new national unity government. Not by chance, an internal Labor document was leaked in May, blaming Peres for the party's failure in the November 1988 elections, and indicating that he had ignored polls showing that Rabin had been more popular among floating voters. Some polls this spring also showed Rabin to be more popular than either Peres or Shamir.

On the other hand, a wing of Labor led by MK Uzi Baram formed a lobby against any new partnership in government with the Likud. In addition to the Knesset deputies of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, Citizens' Rights Movement, Mapam, Shinui and the Arab Democratic Party, there are an estimated 15 Labor Party MKs for talking to the PLO under certain conditions (that the PLO has actually met). But the Labor leadership is not ready for any such departure from its traditional Zionist principles. Instead, Peres pandered to the religious right - and got slapped in the face. He failed to muster a majority in late April because two Agudat Israel deputies defected: Mizrahi went to the Likud because he opposed any compromise on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reportedly on the advice of a US rabbi; while Verdiger pulled out rather than vote for a government that would have had the support of Arab MKs. Shinui, on the other hand, had already declined to join any coalition based on what it termed defectors (a reference to the Liberal faction that broke with Likud and was negotiating with Peres) and religious coercion (the religious legislation favored by the orthodox parties).

Even after failing to form a government, and Rabin's call for Peres to resign on May 11th, the latter stuck to his rightist positions. He suffered an extreme embarrassment when he attended the Socialist International meeting held in Cairo, at the same time the May 20th Rishon Letzion massacre occurred. The meeting

adopted a resolution for Palestinian self-determination and statehood. In Jerusalem, the Labor Party quickly issued a statement, saying that: «Peres refused to support the decision draft in its adopted version regarding the right to self-determination and territorial issues linked to the PLO» (Associated Press, May 24th). About a week later, the Labor Party student organization's convention came out against a national unity government with the Likud and for talks with the PLO (Israeli Radio, June 2nd).

Likud also suffered internal problems, as Sharon and other ultrarightists challenged Shamir's leadership and pressured him to form a so-called Jewish national government, rather than reforge the coalition with Labor. It is, however, indicative that the Likud succeeded at last in crystallizing a coherent rightist government. The most reactionary Zionist tendencies are clearly on the ascent, and it is not logical to expect that Labor, from its new position in the opposition, can or will mount a real counteroffensive.

It should be obvious that the internal Zionist contradictions that have been described above are far from being of the sort that could be exploited to Palestinian advantage, and certainly not in the immediate political conjuncture. There are moreover two more basic elements that have been shaping Israeli strategic thinking during this spring of political stalemate. They are even more unequivocally mitigating against Israeli moves to meet the Palestinians even a fourth of the way, and they will be major elements in shaping the Israeli political scene in the future. These two issues are the waves of Soviet Jewish immigrants arriving in Israel and the boost this gives to Zionist colonization; and the parallel attempt to shift attention away from the Palestinian intifada in favoring of addressing the Arab regimes.

### **Does Saddam Hussein scare Israel? Shifting the focus**

The partial realignment in the Arab world, induced to a great extent by the intifada and Israel's aggressive, intransigent policy, has begun influenc-