

Israeli Elections

On December 21st, seven weeks after the elections, a new coalition government was formed, with Y. Shamir as Prime Minister, S. Peres as Finance Minister, Y. Rabin as Defense Minister and M. Arens as Foreign Minister. The main points of the agreement between Likud and Labor are the following: adherence to the Camp David accords; calling on Jordan to begin peace negotiations with 'Israel'; no to talks with the PLO; no to the establishment of a Palestinian state; no changes concerning the sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza Strip are to be made unless both coalition partners agree; Jerusalem's status as the «united and eternal capital of Israel» is not to be changed. Moreover, the agreement stipulates that Shamir will remain Prime Minister the whole term, and that if one of the partners withdraws from the coalition, new elections are to be held. This government was formed due to the necessity of uniting to face the current situation. It serves to confirm that the position of the Israeli leaders hasn't changed as far as essentials are concerned.

The November 1st elections had been labelled the most important in the history of 'Israel', but their inconclusive result clearly indicates that 'Israel' is not and will not be ready for peace in the foreseeable future. With Peres clinging to the Jordanian option which had been marginalized even before King Hussein's decision to sever legal and administrative ties with the West Bank, and Shamir saying no to almost everything (an international peace conference, talks with the PLO, withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), the election campaign ended as it had started, not offering any new elements. Likud and Labor proved to be very similar in their complete failure to take a realistic position in the face of the new situation created by the uprising of the Palestinian people, and their almost identical response to the question of how to end it, i.e., more violence and more repression.

Faced with the uprising and its achievements, with growing international condemnation and the failure of the big parties to present a viable solution to the crisis shaking their society, Israeli still voted according to the patterns which have prevailed in the last decade. As a result, the balance between Labor and Likud remained even, allowing neither to hold the reins of power alone and making both dependent on the demands of the small parties, or on a renewed government of national unity/disunity.

The result of the elections allows us to draw the following conclusions:

The Israeli democratic forces opposed to Zionism are still weak; they have not yet reached the point where they can

have a real influence on Israeli politics. This fact, combined with the dispersion of the Palestinian vote, explains the disappointing results of the leftist and non-Zionist parties. Hadash (the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) obtained 4 seats, the same as in the 1984 elections; the Progressive List for Peace obtained one seat, as compared to two in 1984; and the Arab Democratic Party got one. Disagreements among these parties also contributed to this result, since they failed to agree on sharing excess votes, which cost them at least two seats.

- The majority of Israeli voters appear to have little or no regard for the opinion of the outside world, whether the international community's condemnation of Israeli human rights violations, or the deluded attempts of King Hussein and President Mubarak to put in a good word for Labor and peace.

- The Israeli society is facing a major crisis, not only on the economic level. The most salient dividing line runs between the secular majority and the religious minority, but there are many other points of conflict. Even if more Israelis have started to realize that only a major redefinition of the premises of their society will bring about a solution to their problems, first and foremost a chance for peace, this didn't reflect on the result of the elections.

THE MINORITY HOLDS THE BALANCE

With the two main parties' avoidance of seriously addressing the most pressing issue - the future of the 1967 occupied territories, the post-election scene was overwhelmed by matters that

are actually secondary to the Zionist project. With the 18 seats they attained, the religious parties became the winners of these elections. Though they have always participated in the Israeli political life, their role has increased a lot in the last decade. The development of their positions can be described as follows: While after 1948, the National Religious Party strove to combine religious observance with Zionism, Agudat Israel remained in theory anti-Zionist, but coexisted with mainstream Zionism and participated in elections. An important change took place in 1967. Many religious Jews regarded the war as a literally miraculous event, and gave the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip a religious significance. The religious parties became more and more involved in politics and started to step up their demands, while right-wing settler groups mushroomed, raising religious slogans in support of colonization in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1977, the National Religious Party, which had always achieved its objectives by joining forces with the ruling party, joined the Likud government. Agudat Israel joined the parliamentary coalition, but not the government. In the 1981 elections, Agudat with only four seats held the balance in the Knesset. Likud needed their votes for a parliamentary majority, and Agudat extracted increasing amounts of state funding in exchange. In 1984, Agudat Israel and Shas (formed by Sephardics who left Agudat in 1983) won 6 seats together.

Today, the National Religious Party is very close to the extreme right with its pledge to keep every bit of «Greater Israel» and its demand for more settlements. Shas, Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah keep their territorial attitudes deliberately vague and concentrate on «internal issues» like the amendment of the Law of Return or the implementation of strict Sabbath laws. Though some of the spiritual leaders of the Orthodox parties have said that a territorial compromise is possible, these parties can hardly be considered advocates of peace. The convergence between religious motivations and «security considerations» as opposed to concessions seems to be quite strong, and it came as no surprise ►