

'Anyone but Bibi' Strengthens the Israeli Right Wing

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[Editors' note: *The Da'am Workers Party is an Israeli revolutionary socialist organization formed by Palestinian and Jewish activists in 1995. The party initiated the formation of the WAC-MANN trade union movement that aims to organize sectors and populations traditionally neglected by Israel's mainstream union federation, the Histadrut, and does so based on an explicitly anti-corporate, anti-austerity platform. It opposed the Oslo accords, but supports a two state solution based on the 1967 borders and the dismantling of all settlements. In the last Knesset election, Da'am ran with a Palestinian feminist, Asma Aghbaria-Zahalka, at the head of its list. This article was published on the Da'am website on Dec. 20, 2014.*]

Herzog and Livni join forces

We're headed for elections again. Less than two years have passed since the meteoric ascent of the "brothers" Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, who forced Binyamin Netanyahu into a coalition without the ultra-orthodox parties, and already Netanyahu is dismantling the government to seek a fourth term. His dream is to go back to the "ideal" composition of the previous government, which brought together the ultra-orthodox, Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, and Ehud Barak's Labor party. But it is not at all clear that Netanyahu will manage to make this dream come true. He now faces a broad alliance of his past victims, including the ultra-orthodox, Lieberman, Lapid, Tzipi Livni, Moshe Kahlon, and Labor head Isaac Herzog—all past ministers in his governments.

What brings Lieberman together with Herzog, or Kahlon together with Lapid? Only hostility for Netanyahu and the desire to bring him down. Other than that, they represent a mishmash of opinions, portending anything but a stable coalition. Therefore, these elections again herald a shaky coalition, with or without Netanyahu.

The Right has made up its Mind, while the Left Stutters

The impossibility of a stable coalition comes from current political forces' inability to decide on two central questions: the fate of the occupied territories and the place of Arab citizens in this country. These two questions are inseparable, as the fate of the occupied Palestinians projects directly on the fate of the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In these two questions, the Israeli Right under Netanyahu has made a clear decision: The Oslo Accords are dead, the idea of a Palestinian state is discarded, and the alternative is now Palestinian autonomy, entrenching the status quo. As for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Nation-State Bill put forward by the Right asserts that Israel is first and foremost Jewish, its democracy subordinate to the state's Jewishness. Therefore, the civil standing of the Arab citizens is subordinate to the state's Jewish character.

These two questions are no doubt always at Israel's doorstep. You cannot postpone them indefinitely

in favor of a social agenda, or to combat socioeconomic gaps, or to protest the price of cheese and housing. The European parliaments are now reminding us that the world is sick of Occupation and war. The total destruction of the four towers in Gaza, decisive in ending the past summer's war, has been termed a war crime by Amnesty International.

The recent events in Jerusalem mark the end of an era as well. The racism reflected in Amir Benayoun's lyrics has spread everywhere. Ministers and MKs' racist statements against Arabs also spur on the rise of extremist Islam, and mutual hatred makes life here intolerable for all those who wish to live in a normal country and to educate their children on the values of democracy and equality.

The Right, headed by Netanyahu and Bennett, has forced through a clear agenda, an agenda that challenges the Zionist Left. The Right says No to a Palestinian state, proposing that Israel be a racist state rather than a democratic one. And what does the "anything but Bibi" camp say? Nothing, essentially. In the face of the Nation-State Bill it proposes that we make do with Israel's venerable Declaration of Independence. As to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Labor head Isaac Herzog proposes "getting Abbas into Gaza" for regional peace. These answers are not substantially different from what the Right has to offer.

The Left's conciliatory and cowardly stance towards the Right has led to its diminishment and retreat. The Zionist Left is afraid to confront the Right, preferring to reach an understanding with the settlers at the expense of an understanding with the Arab citizens. The Zionist Left, including Meretz, is a Jewish separatist Left. Its isolationism bolsters the Right's position that there is no partner for peace, and that the root of the conflict lies in the Arab refusal to recognize the Jewish state.

The Israeli Left, which aspires to a democratic, liberal, and egalitarian state, has no future if it does not join forces with those elements among Israel's Palestinian citizens who also espouse values of democracy and tolerance, opposing isolation and religious extremism. The religious extremism is not Jewish-Israeli society's problem alone. It has long been a boomerang, projecting into Arabic society and consuming all that is good in it. The Arab equivalent of the Jewish-Israeli Shas party is the Islamic party, and the Arabic twin of Zionist Messianism is the Islamic Messianism of ISIS and of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement. The extremists on both sides are thriving at the expense of the divided Jewish and Arab moderates.

Israel Has to Decide: Jewish or Democratic

The Zionist Left's decision to unite in an anti-Netanyahu bloc runs parallel to the aspiration among the Arab parties to unite and run a joint Arab ticket. However, make no mistake, even if the Islamic Movement runs with Balad while Hadash runs alone, this does not make Hadash a joint Jewish-Arab ticket. Hadash relies on Arab votes to pass the electoral threshold. It practices a nationalistic rhetoric in order to compete with the other Arab parties: in fact it speaks with two tongues, two messages, one in Arabic and the other in Hebrew

The differences between Hadash and the Islamic Movement reflect ideological and political divisions within the Arab world, between political Islam and Communists, whereby the Communists do not hesitate to support dictatorial regimes so long as they are secular. So for instance, in Palestine the Communists support Abbas; in Egypt they support General Sisi; and in Syria they support Assad, while the forces of political Islam work to topple him.

Hadash's electoral considerations in refusing to merge with Balad are not too different from those of Meretz in refusing to merge with Labor. The fact that Jews and Arabs run separately six decades

after the foundation of the state is a badge of shame for both the Zionist parties and the Arab parties. Both prefer narrow electoral interests over addressing the crucial questions facing Jews and Arabs alike.

The coalition which Herzog proposes with Livni, Lapid, Lieberman, Kahlon, and the Haredi Orthodox, does not portend real change—not economically, and certainly not diplomatically. The failures of Barak, Sharon, Olmert, and Livni to reach a peace agreement only strengthened the Right, which claims they were “willing to make all the concessions and still the Palestinians rejected them.” The truth is, these leaders negotiated with the Palestinians for one purpose only: to avoid deciding the questions left open in the Oslo Accords, which were supposed to be discussed in the permanent agreements—the status of Jerusalem, the future of the settlements, and the problem of the Palestinian refugees. They all worked as one to postpone the inevitable, creating more mistrust, leading to wars, and strengthening the Right wing, which bases its popularity on hatred of Arabs.

Those who now rush to vote for the Jewish “anything but Bibi” bloc or the “Arab parties” bloc have some serious soul-searching to do. The real question is not what will happen if Netanyahu assumes the role of Prime Minister yet again. The urgent question is what disaster we will inherit from an alternative coalition devoid of any program, lacking the courage to tell Israeli society what needs to be said: if we want peace and democracy, we have to evacuate the settlements and recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. If we want to fight racism, we first have to recognize the fact that Israel’s governments so far have deepened the discrimination and alienation of the Palestinians living in Israel.

Israel has to decide whether it is Jewish or democratic. The Israeli Right has solved this deep-seated contradiction, by simply declaring that the State’s Jewish character wins out against its democratic character. Compared to the Right, the Left stutters and tries without avail to square the circle.

The political platform we need is based on two clear principles: the end of the Occupation and an egalitarian state. The only way to handle Netanyahu and the Right is to form a broad Jewish-Arab front, based on these two principles. Running separately just strengthens the Right and widens the gap between Jews and Arabs.

Against the backdrop of rising racism and the diplomatic dead end, it is becoming clearer that the inevitable can no longer be postponed. Voices in Israeli society are growing stronger in calling for the creation of a joint Jewish-Arab front, an alternative to the Zionist and Arab parties alike. This is the order of the day, and every democrat and peace-lover, Jewish or Arab, must work to create a joint political framework for the benefit of Jews and Arabs alike.

- Translated from the Hebrew by Michael Sappir