

After the Israeli elections*

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This talk is a sequel to an article published earlier this month ('Netanyahu's double gamble' *Weekly Worker* March 5), in which I tried to explain the reasons for the elections, and conjecture what was going to happen.

First of all, I would like to dispel certain misconceptions about the results. The general feeling has been that they denoted a shift to the right. This is somewhat misleading: while the new government will be more right-wing, the electorate shifted to the left – although it depends on how you measure 'left' and 'right', because this is not a simple question in Israel. If you take a very narrow view and include what Israelis consider left and right, which is largely based on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and 'security', including foreign policy, then there is a slight shift to the left – about two seats out of 120 in the Knesset.

But if we give more weight to what is traditionally seen as left and right elsewhere – that is to say, on socio-economic issues – then the shift to the left is much greater than two seats. This is because the party that came fifth in the elections, Kulanu, led by Moshe Kahlon, which is fairly right-wing on the Palestinian issue, is also considerably to the left of Binyamin Netanyahu and even the Labour Party on economic issues. This is why Kahlon originally left Likud.

However, most of the shift in the narrower sense is due to the increased turnout among the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, particularly in votes for the Joint 'Arab' List (which is not actually purely Arab, since it includes the former Communist Party, which has one Hebrew member of the Knesset). Because the component parties were forced to form a joint list for the reasons I explained in my previous article, they actually managed to get more votes from Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, as well as some Hebrew votes. There was a greater turnout than formerly, and the Joint List increased its overall representation from 11 to 13 seats. Its platform is far to the left of any other in every respect, including socioeconomic issues.

Another claim that has caused some confusion is that Netanyahu's victory in the election was a surprise. Well, yes and no. It was not a surprise in the sense that he and his allies would gain sufficient votes for him to become the next prime minister. That was clear quite a long time ago from the opinion polls. In the same issue of the *Weekly Worker* where my article appeared, there was another piece by Tony Greenstein on the same subject, and he managed to get several things right. I will deal with the things he got wrong below, but his forecast of the result was correct - both of us could read the polls and they did not lie in terms of the likely overall division between left and right, in the narrow sense.

However, there was a surprise in terms of the distribution of the votes and seats *within the extreme right*: that is to say, between Netanyahu's Likud and his ultra-right-wing partners. The polls indicated that Likud might not get a plurality of

the vote, or the biggest number of seats, but might come behind the Zionist bloc of the Israeli Labour Party led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni. According to the Israeli quasi-constitution, if Netanyahu had not won the biggest number of votes, then Herzog would have had the first shot at trying to form a coalition. It is quite unlikely that he would have been able to do so – he would have had to give political bribes to some improbable partners and any such coalition would have been difficult to hold together. But it was still a remote possibility.

Netanyahu suddenly got a fright, when polls showed he might not get a plurality of the votes, and he made a last-minute, desperate appeal to his more extreme-right partners. Israel has an electoral system that is very proportional, apart from the need for all parties to reach a minimum threshold to be represented in the Knesset. In this kind of system tactical voting is normally pointless and people tend to vote for the party that most closely represents what they believe in. By contrast, 'first past the post' is highly pathological and raises the need for tactical voting, which usually does not arise in Israel. On this occasion though, there was a need for such tactical voting on the ultra-extreme right: they had to make sure that Netanyahu would get first shot at forming a government, which would include them. So Netanyahu made an appeal to them after the last opinion polls had appeared (they are not allowed for three days before an election), and he managed to persuade some of these extreme-right supporters to vote for Likud.

There were three very typical right-wing arguments that he used. Firstly he promised not to allow the formation of an independent Palestinian state – although anybody who previously believed he was going to allow it must have been very naive. Officially he had been semi-committed to such a state, subject to several impossible conditions that would make it non-viable. But just before the election he said, 'No, not under my government'. Secondly, he promised to continue with the increased colonisation of the West Bank, including east Jerusalem. This attracted some of those on the extreme right who vote for settler parties, and especially the Jewish Home Party of Naftali Bennett. Thirdly, on election day he claimed on Facebook that the Arabs were being bussed in by the left and voting in droves.

This apparently worked. Votes shifted within the right – which can be seen by comparing the result with the last opinion polls. Something like five to eight seats that would have gone to his right-wing partners ended up with Likud. This gave it 30 seats overall, which is far more than anybody else.

There is also a small question of the exit polls. They also indicated that Likud may not come first, and this is actually very instructive: some people lie about how they actually voted – especially if they voted tactically. That may explain the difference, but on the whole it is not surprising at all. In this respect, Netanyahu's electoral gamble worked. He succeeded in pulling it off.

Torpedo Iran deal

Netanyahu was not forced to call the election: he did it by choice because he had calculated that a new government, which he is now going to get, would be desirable. So if you want to know what his new government is going to do, you

have to ask why the elections were called.

I said that Tony Greenstein got some things right in his article, but he got this particular thing – the reason for calling the election – wrong. He was not alone in this though; I was quite surprised by the fact that many commentators, even well-informed Israeli commentators, could not actually explain why Netanyahu called the election. There was no government crisis really – he engineered one.

Tony Greenstein says the reason was connected to a proposed law to declare Israel ‘the nation state of the Jewish people’. Tony also says this law was mainly about “racism” – directed against the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and designed to make them even more discriminated against than they are now. Well, again, yes and no. There certainly is plenty of racism in Israel and Netanyahu’s declaration on election day is evidence of that. Certainly Israeli Palestinian citizens are very badly discriminated against. But the law is mainly about their *national* rather than *individual* rights, so racism is not quite the right way to describe this.

Be that as it may, this was not the reason for calling the election. Last week I gave an interview to an American left-wing radio station run by Suzi Weissman. She is a professor in California in political science, who used to attend *Critique* conferences. I found out that she had previously interviewed Yoav Peled, a well-known Israeli anti-Zionist. He gave her quite the wrong answer as well. I think the real reason is staring you in the face. After all, Netanyahu had stood before the American congress holding forth and he made it clear what was behind it: Iran. Yoav Peled said this was just electioneering: it was some kind of electoral ploy. However, he got it back to front. I do not think Netanyahu’s show in Congress was performed for that reason. The elections were called to make it possible for him to *make* this speech in Congress.

Of course, what he told congress about Iran is obviously a lie. Nobody believes that Israel is in danger of being wiped out by Iranian nuclear weapons (I do not think even Sean Matgamna of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty believes this any more – and if he still does, he is the only one). But the fact he lied does not mean the performance is not significant. When Tony Blair stood in parliament and put forward his ‘dodgy dossier’, he also was lying, but that also was not insignificant. When Colin Powell stood in the United Nations with similar false evidence of weapons of mass destruction, it was also a lie, of course (although he may not have known it was a lie: it may have been fed to him). If you go to a shifty car salesman and he tells you the mileage is this and the engine is that, he may be lying about these things, but he is not lying about wanting to sell you the car. That is something you can actually hold on to: the lies are being told for a purpose. In the case of Netanyahu it was about trying to torpedo any deal with Iran that was supposed to be concluded at the end of this month. The timing of the election was quite in line with this.

He spoke to the right people, and a few days after his speech 46 senators wrote to Iranian parliamentarians a very demeaning and patronising letter. It claimed that they “may not understand our constitutional system”, but you cannot trust Obama, said the 46: any agreement with him is not worth the paper it is written

on. It was obviously an attempt to sabotage the agreement with Iran.

Pecking order

You can take it for granted that Netanyahu considers this issue very important, but it is well known that he does not have full agreement from the Israeli military/intelligence establishment for his line. For example, the former head of Mossad came out with a very startling statement, which I quoted in my article, to the effect that Netanyahu is the greatest security danger to Israel at the moment.

Of course, this line on Iran and his latest turn in Israeli politics – making an explicit alliance with the American right – is new. The traditional policy has been to strive for good relations with both the Congress and the White House, with both Republicans and Democrats. His former partners in the Israeli coalition, whom he sacked, Tzipi Livni and Yair Lapid, did not agree with this new line, and it was that which was the cause of the crisis in the coalition, which in turn brought on the election.

So what is it about Iran that bothers Netanyahu? There is, of course, no existential danger to Israel from Iranian nuclear bombs. Most people agree that at the moment there is no evidence at all of Iran attempting to produce nuclear weapons – leaks from Mossad have admitted as much. The talks taking place with Iran are about Tehran's nuclear ambitions only in a symbolic sense: the underlying issue is the place of Iran in the pecking order of the Middle East. Everybody knows that at the top there is the United States, and immediately below is Israel. All the other states come below Israel in the pecking order, but the question is where.

Netanyahu and his co-thinkers on the American right think that Iran should be right at the bottom. In order to achieve this they have to actually defeat Iran – humiliate it in fact – and this may indeed require the use of force. Nobody is crazy enough to want to invade Iran by land, but there are plenty of other ways to attack Iran and force regime change. This is the kind of thing that the American right for its own reasons would like to see, as would those with interests in the military-industrial complex. Possibly oil interests are also looking for a conflagration, because it is an observable fact that every conflict in the Middle East causes the price of oil to rise, at least temporarily, and with it the profits of the oil companies.

Any deal with Iran that Obama may be willing to countenance – which might give Iran a respectable place in the pecking order and acknowledge it as a regional power – would, relatively speaking, downgrade the importance of Israel. That is something Netanyahu finds unacceptable and he will do whatever is necessary to stop it. It is because an agreement with Iran is now on the cards that we have seen a joint effort by Netanyahu and the American right to scupper it. They want to engineer regime change in Iran through some form of force.

It is this aspect that gave the Israeli elections their main importance – more than the Israeli position or relations with the Palestinians generally. They may turn out to have triggered a conflagration in the whole region, something of global importance. So I would not be surprised if it transpired that, rather than going to

Capitol Hill and giving this performance as a ploy for the elections, this was actually pre-arranged between Netanyahu and the Republican right. It may have been when this was fixed that Netanyahu engineered the cabinet crisis.

Ethnic cleansing

There was another issue on which he did not have complete agreement in the previous coalition, and that was openly and bluntly saying no to a Palestinian state, no to a two-state solution. This is a departure from previous governments, and certainly from the policy of the Labour Party and the ministers that he sacked from the government in December.

Not that they would agree to a really sovereign Palestinian state. There is no mainstream Zionist party that would accept such a thing in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The only group that would is Meretz – which is what remains of the former, rather bigger Zionist left. Meretz has now ended up with just five seats and is the smallest faction in the Knesset. But its reasons for wanting to see a Palestinian state are not necessarily creditable. Some are in fact racist: ‘We don’t want to be together with the Palestinians’ or ‘We have to divorce’ (‘divorce’ in Hebrew is the same word as ‘expulsion’, so the meaning is a bit ambiguous). But Meretz does not want to engage in any major ethnic cleansing, unlike the other parties.

What do those other Zionist parties, such as Labour, want through negotiations and the ‘peace process’? By the way, Hebrew speakers find it a bit difficult to distinguish between long and short vowels, so Israelis can sometimes be heard talking about the ‘piss process’, which is a much more accurate description. It has been going on for decades now, and it could be compared to negotiations over how to divide a pizza, while one of the parties involved eats piece after piece. It creates the illusion that some kind of agreement is going to take place – provided the Palestinians meet various conditions, which they would not accept. And if they do accept them, then just impose some even more impossible ones.

Netanyahu is fed up with this process. But he certainly does not want one single state if it includes a large number of Palestinians. Demographic projections predict that the Palestinians are going to be a majority within a decade or two, if not before. So what does he want then? There is only one other possibility, and that is to take the territory without most of its Palestinian-Arab population. That means major ethnic cleansing.

This is not merely a logical deduction: there is documentary evidence that this is being planned. *The Sunday Telegraph* of April 28 2002 carried an article by an Israeli military expert and the introduction read: “Leading Israeli historian Martin van Creveld predicts that the US attack on Iraq, or a terrorist strike at home, could trigger a massive operation to clear the occupied territories of their two million Arabs.” He went into detail about how this could happen. In fact a combination of a “US attack on Iraq” and “a terrorist strike at home” would be ideal. But it did not work out that way back then.

This was called the Sharon plan – Ariel Sharon was the prime minister of Israel at the time. It did not work out, because in order to exploit this kind of opportunity

some great conflagration is needed, but the Iraq war did not lead to this. It ended too quickly, in the sense that George Bush was standing on his warship saying 'mission accomplished' too early from an Israeli point of view. Obviously the fighting continued for some time, but it did not ignite the whole region. It did not produce the desired opportunity for ethnic cleansing.

There is an older piece of evidence as well. A junior minister back in 1989 made a speech during the Tiananmen Square incident, bemoaning the fact that Israel did not make use of the opportunity, while the attention of the world was elsewhere, to get rid of a large number of Palestinians. The name of that junior minister was Binyamin Netanyahu and his speech was published in the *Jerusalem Post* of November 19 1989. He was at that time a deputy foreign minister. So he has a long-standing record of wanting to use an international crisis to expel a large number of Palestinians.

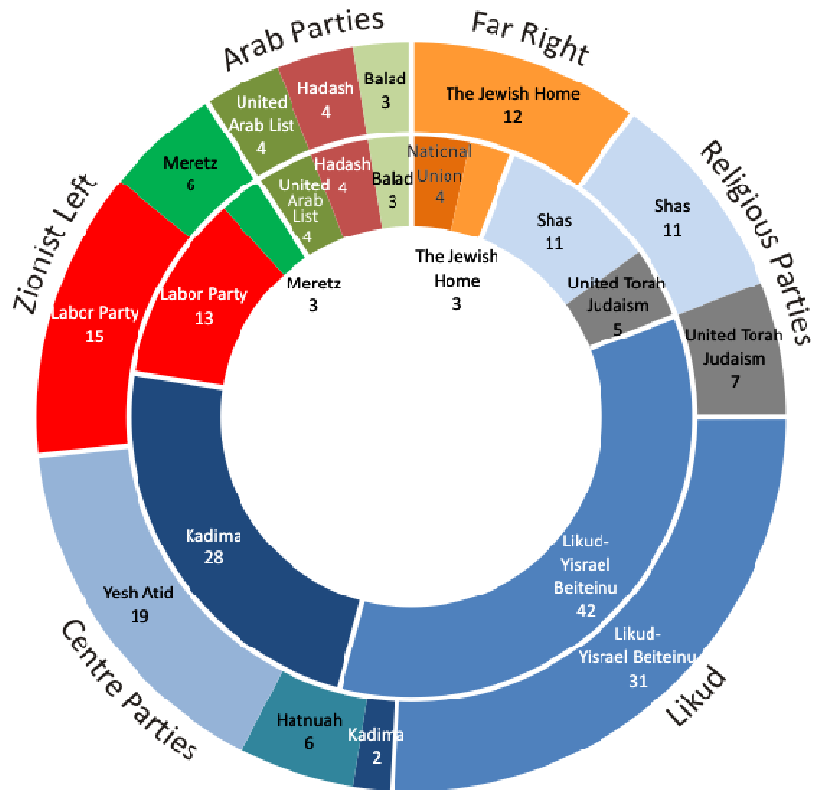
It would require something big, and a war against Iran could provide the opportunity. It would also have to be accompanied by upheaval in the West Bank. And what Netanyahu is effectively saying to the Palestinians is: 'Look, it's over. You have no hope.' He envisages a situation where the Palestinian Authority crumbles and there is a new intifada in the West Bank. If that was combined with a war against Iran, then it might offer a pretext for ethnic cleansing. Now this is, of course, speculation, but it is not *just* speculation, because this is obviously what the likes of Netanyahu have in mind.

We have to be vigilant. Something quite dangerous is brewing through this collaboration between the Republican right and the new Israeli government.

* Edited version of talk hosted by Communist Platform, Left Unity, 22 March 2015.

Appendix: Election Results

The pie chart below shows the distribution of the 120 seats in the Knesset before (inner ring) and after (outer ring) last Tuesday's election.



from: <http://www.allthatsleft.co.uk/2013/01/israeli-elections-so-close-to-something-positive/>