

Livni's election and the ongoing shift to the right in Israeli politics

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26 September 2008

Tzipi Livni, foreign secretary in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima-Labour coalition government, narrowly won the vote for the leadership of the Kadima party after her predecessor was forced to resign over mounting allegations of corruption.

Livni has been presented almost universally by the media as a candidate untainted by corruption, someone who can restore faith in Israeli politics and the best chance of securing a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. In reality the entire Kadima election contest, Livni's own politics and the broader situation in Israel heralds a further rightward shift within ruling circles, escalating the danger of a Middle East war and presaging explosive class conflicts in Israel itself.

With a bitterly divided party, Livni now faces the daunting task of uniting Kadima under her leadership and persuading all its coalition partners to accept her as prime minister. She has six weeks to try to form a government. Should she fail to do so, then a general election must be called within three months. That, on the basis of opinion polls, would result in a victory for Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party.

Despite tendering his resignation, Olmert remains for the meantime as caretaker prime minister.

Whatever happens regarding the formation of a new government, three main political parties, Kadima, Labour and Likud, are united on the fundamental issues: a state based upon religious exclusivity that operates in the interests of a narrow financial elite committed to expansionism, militarism and the suppression of the Palestinians and its own working class, and which survives courtesy of its sponsor in Washington.

President Shimon Peres, the architect of the Oslo Accords who renounced his long-term membership of the Labour Party in 2005 to join Sharon and his Kadima party, but has since jumped ship, greeted Olmert's formal resignation as prime minister with nothing but praise for the corrupt politician.

"I respect the dignified manner in which [Olmert] is transferring authority," Peres said. "This is not an easy decision, and I am sure it was not a simple thing for him to do." He thanked the outgoing prime minister "for his service to the nation and state during many years of public activity, as mayor of Jerusalem, government minister and prime minister."

"Israel's security and the well-being of its citizens stood at the centre of the prime minister's activity," he continued. He rejected the assertion that the current government was not among the "country's greatest," describing Olmert in a radio interview as "one of the best prime ministers that there has been."

Peres then said he intended to begin meeting immediately with the heads of various Knesset factions in order to set a date for forming a new government and a timetable for Olmert's gradual departure from office. "Israel faces serious, complex challenges to its security, economy and society. All of these demand continuity of leadership," the president said.

Livni's political history gives some indication of the character of any government that might be formed under her leadership. The 50-year-old comes from an ultra-right-wing family. Her parents were fighters in the

Irgun, the terrorist organisation responsible for atrocities against the Palestinians—most notably Deir Yassin—and the British in the 1940s and the precursor of today's Likud party. For two years, Livni herself was an agent of Mossad, Israel's notorious secret service that specialises in kidnappings, assassinations and skulduggery in the interests of the Zionist state and on behalf of Western imperialism.

She worked as a lawyer before entering the Knesset, Israel's parliament, as a member of Likud in 1999 after its then leader Benjamin Netanyahu had done his best to torpedo the Oslo agreement that was supposed to have established a Palestinian state and thus end the long-running conflict.

Livni was a fervent supporter of Ariel Sharon, whose provocative actions in September 2000 precipitated the last Palestinian uprising and the subsequent savage military repression by Israel. She joined Sharon's cabinet in 2001 when he won the elections. She supported his dismemberment of the Palestinian Authority, the isolation and virtual imprisonment of PLO leader and Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat, the expansion of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the building of the militarised "Security Wall" that has grabbed much of the best land for Israel.

In 2005, she supported Sharon's unilateral disengagement from Gaza, aimed at securing Washington's support for Israeli expansion in the West Bank. She was one of the first to quit the Likud and with Olmert join Sharon's breakaway Kadima party. For this, she was rewarded with the third place on the Kadima list that ensured her re-election to the Knesset in the 2006 elections.

When Olmert was appointed caretaker prime minister in the wake of Sharon's stroke that left him in a coma in January 2006, and Kadima later won the largest number of seats in the already scheduled elections, he appointed her foreign secretary in his Kadima-Labour coalition cabinet.

Despite the attempts to portray her as a dove, she has firmly resisted any measures that will ease Israel's relations with the Palestinians or pave the way for a Palestinian entity. She supported Israel's war in 2006 against Hamas in Gaza, its threats against Iran and attacks on Syria.

She incurred the wrath of Israel's far right over her position on the 2006 war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, when she called for a negotiated ceasefire and the deployment of an international force in South Lebanon to keep the peace. Her attempts to reach a deal with Syria are also vehemently opposed by the far right, which refuses to cede an inch of territory conquered in the 1967 war.

Far from being a peace move, however, the purpose of the deal is to secure an end to Syria's close relationship with Iran and its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. This would serve to isolate Iran diplomatically in the event of an assault by Israel, with US backing. Alternatively such a deal would force Iran to accept US hegemony in the region.

In May last year, Livni called for Olmert's resignation in the wake of the publication of the Winograd Commission's interim report into the handling of the disastrous Summer 2006 war against Lebanon and challenged him to a leadership contest if he did not. Despite this, she

stayed on in his cabinet when he refused to resign.

Insofar as she counts as a dove within official Israeli politics, this is because she does not espouse the transfer of the Palestinian population out of Israel and the occupied territories as some right-wing politicians do.

She has led the talks with the Palestinians and favours a two-state solution to the Palestinian question, but on terms that are totally unacceptable to the Palestinian people—a policy many Israeli politicians would prefer to openly jettison were it not for Washington's need to maintain the support of its Arab allies in its pursuit of the region's oil resources.

The Kadima leadership election in which Livni squeaked into first place was precipitated by Olmert's resignation. He had been a lame duck prime minister ever since Israel's defeat by Hezbollah in 2006. His political standing was further compromised by the recent humiliating exchange of hundreds of prisoners for the bodies of the two soldiers who were the official pretext for the war.

Olmert's name is, in addition, synonymous with graft and corruption going back to the 1970s and particularly during his period as mayor of Jerusalem in 1993-2003. He has been dogged by corruption scandals since coming to power in 2006 and is currently facing investigation into six separate incidents. Recent polls showed that he had approval ratings of only 14 percent and three out of five Israelis thought he should resign. Half of those polled considered him corrupt.

Livni's main opponent in the leadership contest was Shaul Mofaz, deputy prime minister and transport minister in Olmert's cabinet. A career soldier, he had been appointed chief of the general staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in 1996 during Netanyahu's premiership. Mofaz predicted that Israel's policies would provoke a response from the Palestinians and prepared the IDF for intense guerrilla warfare in the West Bank and Gaza.

He was responsible for the brutal and aggressive tactics against the Palestinians that included house demolitions, detentions and targeted assassinations following the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada. According to a book by two Israeli journalists, Mofaz gave orders to kill 70 Palestinian militants per day. He oversaw the military offensive in Jenin in April 2002, raids in the Gaza Strip, and the continued isolation of Yasser Arafat.

When Mofaz left the IDF in 2002, he joined the Likud party and almost immediately became defence minister under Sharon. Mofaz's support for an agreement with the Palestinians presupposed the "liquidation" of Arafat and the elimination of any opposition to Israel from militant groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. He was reappointed as defence minister after the 2003 elections, even though his recent position in the IDF disqualified him from seeking election to the Knesset in the elections.

Initially, Mofaz rejected Sharon's invitation to join his new party, Kadima, in November 2005 and instead announced his candidacy for the leadership of Likud. But he soon withdrew from both the leadership race and the Likud to join Kadima.

He is one of the most bellicose members of the Olmert government against Iran. Last June he said that "if Iran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it. The sanctions are ineffective. Attacking Iran, in order to stop its nuclear plans, will be unavoidable."

This was the most explicit threat against Iran from a member of the Israeli government and one which, if carried out, would plunge the whole region into war. Mofaz also said that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "would disappear before Israel does."

Mofaz's remarks came as he and several other senior members of the Kadima Party were preparing for a leadership contest in the event of Olmert being forced to step down. In his bid for the Kadima leadership, he courted the most right-wing elements both within and outside the party. It

s a measure of just how right-wing Kadima is that Mofaz lost by just 431 votes to Livni. She won 16,936 votes over his 16,505 on a low turnout.

Kadima, little more than the personal vehicle for Sharon's political ambitions and those of a small coterie around him, is bitterly divided and the narrowness of her victory leaves Livni in a weak position.

After at first indicating that he would seek a recount, citing election irregularities, Mofaz conceded defeat and, rather than serve under Livni, quit the government. Another deputy prime minister, Haim Ramon, a former Labourite who defected to Kadima in 2005, is thought to be on the point of leaving Kadima.

Livni had hoped to persuade Olmert to declare himself temporarily incapacitated, which would have automatically made her acting prime minister for 100 days, but to no avail.

To survive, she needs the support of at least 61 members of parliament, which means making sordid backroom deals with the right-wing forces that she purports to oppose. She has appealed to all the existing partners in the coalition to remain under her leadership and invited other parties to join, including the Likud party—an offer Netanyahu immediately rejected.

At the moment, Livni has the support of Meretz, the left of centre party, and eight members of the Pensioners Party, a total of 38 members. The survival of the coalition depends, therefore, upon Labour's continuing support. Here, Livni has already run into difficulties.

Labour leader Ehud Barak has repeatedly called for an emergency unity government with Kadima and Likud. When Netanyahu refused to countenance that, Barak and the Labour party forced Kadima to get rid of Olmert in order to forestall an early election.

Even after her election, Barak pointedly snubbed Livni and met first with Likud leader Netanyahu, who controls 12 seats in the Knesset, to see if he could work out a power sharing Likud-Labour government.

Netanyahu, for his part, has also held talks with the ultranationalist and religious parties to seek their agreement for an immediate general election.

Barak's price for remaining in the Kadima coalition includes changes to the recently agreed 2009 budget, Livni's agreement not to call an election before 2010, the removal of the justice minister, Daniel Friedmann, whose judicial reforms Labour has opposed, and the scrapping of his proposals.

Another coalition partner is Shas, the largest ultra-orthodox party, which has 12 seats in the Knesset and represents impoverished Sephardi Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. It has demanded the restoration of child allowances for large families that form the basis of its support, an end to any deal with the Palestinians based upon some limited sharing of Jerusalem as their capital and no curbs on Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Nearly all the ultranationalist and religious parties have indicated their support for an early election.

Whether Livni is able to form a new government or a general election is called, working people in Israel face the domination of an even more right-wing regime than the present one.



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