

Political Upset in Israel: Labor Leader to Follow Rabin

by Dean Andromidas

In a stunning political upset, Amir Peretz, chairman of the Israeli Histadrut Labor Federation, won the Nov. 9 election for the chairmanship of the Israeli Labor Party. The defeat he dealt former chairman Shimon Peres, and the old guard leadership, amounts to a political upheaval in the Labor Party, with profound ramifications for Israeli politics. Peretz's election is clearly one of the aftershocks of the ongoing political earthquake in Washington against Vice President Cheney.

At his victory press conference, Peretz announced that he will take the Labor Party out of the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He vowed to "to turn the Labor Party into an alternative that will conquer the next general elections." New elections will most likely take place in March 2006.

The 54-year-old Peretz is not only a fighting trade unionist who has organized general strikes against the austerity policies of the Sharon government, but also is a founding member of the Peace Now movement, and a tireless grassroots activist. His program will be to turn the Labor Party from the middle class liberal party which has been in a terminal state of decline since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, into a new social democratic party that will vigorously address socioeconomic issues that are affecting the lower 80% of the population, as well as getting the peace process back on track.

Within hours of his victory, Peretz visited the grave of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was murdered exactly a decade ago, and declared, "I came today to make a vow to Rabin, once again, that I intend to do everything I can to continue his way, I intend to do everything I can so that [Rabin's] assassin would know he failed to murder peace." Peretz went on: "I was by Rabin's side in the days he struggled for his place in Israeli politics, I was with him in his days of isolation, and also in the days of overwhelming support from the people of Israel when they flooded him with warmth and

admiration. I was also next to him on the dreadful night when we lost Yitzhak in the murder that shocked Israel, and sought to sever and end his life, and his way."

Declaring his intention to seek a peace settlement with the Palestinians, Peretz said, "We will not rest until we reach a permanent agreement that would secure a safe future for our children, and that would provide us with renewed hope to live in a region where people lead a life of cooperation and not, God forbid, where blood is shed. . . ."

Earlier that morning Peretz gave a victory speech where he attacked the free-market policies of the Sharon government, especially those implemented by former Finance Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu. "We will not allow the Prime Minister to duck responsibility for this [the economic injustice]. Even if he goes around from morning till night saying, it's not me, it's Bibi, Sir, you are the one who was Prime Minister, and gave absolute backing to harming the weakest sector in this nation."

As an immigrant from Morocco, Peretz is seen as a spokesman for the socially disadvantaged in Israel—the Mizrachi Jewish community (immigrants from Northern Africa and Southwest Asia), as well as new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia. Appealing for the establishment of a common bond between Mizrachi and Ashkenazi Jews (who originated from Europe, and have been Israel's traditional elite), he said: "This is the moment the ethnic demon in Israel is buried. Tonight our hopes came through. This was a night of dreams, the dreams of many ordinary people who thought they had no chance to become part of Israeli society. Almost a million and a half citizens live below the poverty line. Hundreds of thousands of children have lost a sense of belonging to the country. We embrace our brothers, the new immigrants, we embrace our brothers the Arabs, we embrace our brothers the Druze."

Peretz reached out to his defeated counterpart, Shimon Peres, saying, "Shimon, I want you by my side. Don't leave us alone, Shimon. If not for me, then do it for the party's sake; if not for the party, then do it for the country."

After the announcement of his defeat, Peres was pictured looking shaken and pale, having received 39.69% of the vote compared to Peretz's 42.35%. Peres at first refused to concede defeat and announced he would challenge the results, but Party Secretary General Eitan Cabel approved the election. On the next day, Peres extended his congratulations. Peres's defeat puts an end to his strategy of a national unity government with Sharon, in which the latter called all the shots, while the Labor Party has become more and more discredited.

The third candidate, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who received 16.82% of the vote, congratulated Peretz, as did all the leading Labor Party Knesset (Parliament) members, who pledged their support to the new chairman.

Former Labor Party Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who was convinced by Peres to drop out of the race and support him instead, expressed his bitterness about the Peretz victory, saying, "It's not as if the real members of Labor voted in this election," an absurd statement, since only card-carrying Labor Party members voted. He then turned against his former ally, Shimon Peres, and said, "Peres is to blame because he brought him [Peretz] into the party. He was the one who opened the floodgates."

Political Upheaval on the Left and Right

An economic advisor to Peretz told *EIR* that his victory must be seen in the context of what is "happening all over the political spectrum. Peretz's victory is an upheaval on the left, and on the right we see the upheaval with the 'Likud rebels'"—a reference to the extreme right wing of the Likud party that opposed the disengagement from Gaza, and is led by Israel's top neo-con, Netanyahu.

Peretz's advisor also said that despite efforts by the media and the Labor Party's old guard to paint Peretz as a radical, the election demonstrated that his idea of creating a true social democratic party has been able to garner support across the political spectrum. He pointed out that in the most affluent Labor Party districts, he received over 30% of the vote. The fact that Peretz is a member of the oriental Jewish community, lives in Sederot, one of the depressed "development" towns, and is a tireless organizer, means he can draw support away from the Likud, the base of which is in these same sectors.

Peretz has support from across the Labor Party spectrum. Among his advisors is David Kimche, a founding member of the Labor Party, former director of the Mossad, and former director of the Foreign Ministry. Others include veteran Labor Party Knesset Member Yuli Tamir, former ministers Uzzi Baram and Aryeh Lova Eliav, and former Histadrut leader Yitzhak Ben Aharon. Despite his anti-free-trade line, Peretz has support in the business community, including the active support of the well-known businessmen Benny Gaon and Erel

Margalit, as well as leading cultural figures, such as the poet Nathan Zach and actor Alon Aboutboul.

Veteran peace activist Uri Avnery coined a new term for the revolution Peretz is creating in Israeli politics, "Peretztroika".

Peretz is the only political leader who can challenge the secret behind the Likud party's success at the ballot box. That success cannot be attributed only to the "greater Israel" ideology, which has its roots in the fascist movement of the late Vladimir Jabotinsky. The Likud has been a populist party that was able to mobilize in the poor Mizrahi community, where people felt excluded from the overbearing elitist political structure that characterized the Labor Party and its predecessors, when they controlled the government from the 1950s into the 1970s. Peretz, in his victory press conference, underscored this point, when he compared his victory to that of Likud leader Menachem Begin, who brought the Likud to power in 1977.

"Menachem Begin succeeded in effecting a turnabout not under the banner of Eretz Israel Ha-Shalema [Greater Israel], but under the banner of Eretz Israel Ha-Shniya [the Second Israel]," Peretz said. This is a reference to the Sephardim (Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal by the Inquisition), who have remained the bedrock of the Likud.

Peretz expects that his opponent in the next elections will be Benjamin Netanyahu, whose economic policies have impoverished hundreds of thousands of Israelis, many of whom are members of the Likud. Throwing down the gauntlet to the Likud in preparation for the inevitable early elections, he appealed to new immigrants to join the party, and vowed to raise the minimum wage and put an end to the "slavery" of new immigrants working for "manpower agencies."

"This is your real home. You are all working people, you work day and night trying to sustain yourselves with honor. . . . They tell me that Likud voters will always remain Likud voters. That's not true. Tonight thousands of Likud voters know that it was not they who left the Likud, it was the Likud that left them, humiliated them, sentenced them to unjust punishments, and created social gaps that endanger the future of the state of Israel."

Netanyahu: The Big Loser

The Likud leadership really got the message. Only a few hours after Peretz's victory was announced, Sharon, speaking before a conference on exports, devoted his speech to a "war on the dimensions of poverty." Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, a leading member of the Likud, with pretensions of becoming Prime Minister, and who is also a Mizrahi, all of a sudden decided to visit his birthplace in Tunisia.

But the real loser is Netanyahu, who denounced Peretz as a "true danger to society and economy." What Netanyahu really meant was that Peretz was a "true danger" to his own political career. Netanyahu had been politically capitalizing on the anti-Sharon ferment in the Likud over Sharon's disen-

gagement from the Gaza Strip. The ferment had been led by the faction known as the “Likud rebels,” whom Netanyahu was banking on to help him capture the leadership of the Likud from Sharon. But now more and more of these rebels are lining up behind Sharon, knowing that if Netanyahu leads the Likud in the next elections, he will bring upon them a disaster because of Peretz’s attacks on the free-trade economic policies, for which Netanyahu is responsible.

Peretz has a long way to go from chairman of the Labor Party to becoming the next Prime Minister of Israel, and it will be an uphill struggle first in his own party and then in the tough world of Israeli politics. If elected, he will shift the political and economic agenda of Israel back to the peace process and the policies that address the general welfare of Israeli society.

Nonetheless, it is the political situation in the United States which is the key to peace and prosperity in the Middle East. The week of his victory coincided with the tenth anniversary of Rabin’s assassination. Various ceremonies and demonstrations (see *Documentation*) brought many foreign political leaders, whom Peretz was able to meet. Among them were former President Bill Clinton and his wife, Sen. Hillary Clinton. In an Israeli radio interview, Bill Clinton supported Peretz’s call for increasing the minimum wage.

Now more than ever, Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs need a partner in Washington, more than anywhere else.

Documentation

Amir Peretz: ‘I Have a Dream’

Martin Luther King was the inspiration for the speech of Amir Peretz at the Nov. 12 mass demonstration commemorating the tenth anniversary of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Peretz has remoralized the Israeli peace movement, and contributed to bringing 200,000 people to Rabin Square, the biggest peace demonstration of the last decade. Although only former U.S. President Bill Clinton and Shimon Peres were scheduled to speak, Peretz’s name was added to the speakers’ list at the personal request of Yitzhak Rabin’s daughter, Dalia.

A large part of Peretz’s speech was a direct address to the assassinated Rabin:

“Ten years ago your voice reverberated across this square,

setting new goals for the state of Israel. You have aroused hopes, you made the young start dreaming of a changed country. Yes, your voice echoed and reverberated, until the assassin’s bullets silenced it. Ten years ago, on that fateful night, you said that violence undermines the foundations of democracy, not knowing that a violent death awaited you just around the corner. Ten years on, and the violence is still very much with us, Yitzhak. The country is full of violence. We have not succeeded in isolating it. It has spread beyond the areas of confrontation with the Palestinians, it has become rooted among us. . . . If we had left the Territories, stopped the violence which issues from there, at its source, we would have also overcome the violence in our midst.”

Peretz called for a Moral Roadmap: “Continued rule in the Territories is a recipe for sinking into a morass, a loss of values and morality in Israel. We need a Moral Roadmap, whose guiding star is respect for human dignity. A Moral Roadmap is ending the occupation and signing a permanent agreement. A Moral Roadmap is defending the value of each and every person in Israel—their dignity, their families, their livelihood. . . . The passage of ten years has in no way lessened the sharpness of longing for you, Yitzhak. You were not a man to boast and make arrogant and fanciful promises, but to take hard decisions, stick to them, and implement them. You are not with us today, but your way is vibrantly alive. Some try to deny it, others decry it in a multitude of ways, but it will not avail them: The way of Oslo is alive, it continues the life which was denied you, cut off. It is alive in every corner, everybody knows that it offers our only hope.”

Peretz concluded on a personal note: “I am the child who came to Israel fifty years ago, at the age of four. I am the child who grew up in the time of the Fedayun [cross-border infiltrators of the 1950s], and nowadays lives with his family under the shadow of the Qasam rockets. The children of my hometown, Sederot, have their sleep troubled by the fear of the Qasams, while their contemporaries in Gaza wake up with the sonic booms and the anti-terrorist preventive acts. I have a dream, Yitzhak. I dream that one day the no-man’s-land between Sederot and Beit Hanun will flourish. I dream of factories going up there, and recreation areas, and playgrounds where our children and the Palestinian children will play together, and build a common future. When this dream comes true, I could go to your grave, face you, and say: Rest in peace, Yitzhak. You have earned your final, undisturbed rest. You were murdered, yet you won!”

Bill Clinton said of Rabin, at the demonstration, “If he were here, he would say, ‘If you really think I lived a good life, if you think I made a noble sacrifice in death, then for goodness sake, take up my work, and see it through to the end.’ However many days Rabin had left, he gave them up on this spot for you and your future. He knew he was risking giving them up, and he gave them up, too, for all the children of the Palestinians, who deserve the benefit and the blessings of a normal life, as well.”



Amir Peretz