

New Party Seeks To Re-create Israel's 'Rabin Opposition'

by Dean Andromidas

In an effort to unite the Israeli peace camp and channel the rising ferment against the brutal economic policies of the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a new Israeli party, Yahad, has been formed. On March 16, Yossi Beilin, one of the initiators of the Geneva Accord peace initiative, was elected its chairman. Meaning "Together" in Hebrew, Yahad is a merger of the Meretz party, which has six members in the 120-seat Knesset (parliament), and Beilin's Shahrar (Dawn) movement.

Speaking at Yahad party headquarters after his victory, Beilin declared: "The peace camp has had its say. This means yes to peace, yes to the Geneva initiative, yes to social justice and a welfare state. The left will be an alternative to the great chasm of the right. The Sharon government is the worst government Israel has ever had." Referring to Sharon's brutal assault on the Gaza Strip that same day, following a suicide bombing in Ashdod port, Beilin said: "Look what happened today: more assassinations for terror attacks, which will be followed by terror attacks following assassinations. Nobody is telling them to stop this stupidity. Is there nobody in the right that can see the endless cycle of violence? It is like a blind horse falling into a ravine, again and again."

Calling on the Labor Party to join with Yahad, Beilin urged the formation of a "Yitzhak Rabin Opposition," which he declared could bring back the "victory and coalition that ceased to exist after three gunshots"—a reference to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. He then called on Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres to establish an "opposition management" in order to "shorten Sharon's days in office." But he warned that "should the Labor Party form a national unity government with the Likud, we would fight it even more than we would fight the Likud."

Beilin defeated Ran Cohen, a Knesset member and a key leader of the Meretz party, for Yahad's chairmanship, by a margin of 9%. Of the 21,000 party members eligible to vote in this race, 16,000 cast votes.

Beilin's 100-Day Plan

With the announcement of his victory, Beilin immediately began implementing his "100-Day Plan," which includes a fundraising drive, a membership recruitment campaign, and

a convention, planned for March 31. Beilin is committed to creating a fighting opposition which will make a decisive difference in bringing down Sharon's government and paving the way for early elections.

His call for the creation of a "Yitzhak Rabin Opposition" harks back to the election of 1992, when Rabin, at the head of the Labor Party and the opposition, won a decisive election victory, throwing the Likud out of government for the first time since 1977. The key to Rabin's success was to take the campaign into Israel's economically depressed "development towns" and to immigrants who had voted in the past for the populist Likud and other right-wing parties. He promised to change the nation's priorities, from supporting the settlements in the Occupied Territories, to creating jobs and economic opportunity for all Israelis. As a minister in Rabin's government, Beilin negotiated what became the Oslo Peace Accords, the first official agreement between an Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Rabin's support for the accords led to his assassination by a Jewish fanatic.

Three years in the making, and with the lessons of Rabin in mind, the Yahad was conceived as an attempt to create a new party along European-style social democratic lines, which could create a coalition government to finish the job that Rabin's death left unfinished. This is no easy task in the context of Israeli politics, where the leftist parties such as Labor and Meretz are considered the political homes of the middle class and the elite, and are seen as alienated from the poorer, primarily Sephardic Jewish community which constitutes 50% of Israel's electorate. The Likud, controlled at the top by an elite steeped in the right-wing and often fascist ideology of the late Hitler-supporter Vladimir Jabotinsky, has formed a populist base among the poorer Sephardic community. After so many years in power, the Likud has maintained and expanded its base through politically motivated economic largesse at the expense of the government budget. With the current collapse of the Israeli economy, however, the ability of the Likud to deliver such payoffs has been dramatically curtailed.

Beilin and others see that three years of the Palestinian Intifada, and one year of Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's brutal economic reforms, have ravaged the economy. For the first time since the foundation of the state, Israel has experienced negative economic "growth." Real unemployment is between 12 and 16%, and over 25% of Israelis are living below the poverty line.

Likud Party in Crisis

It is widely believed that Sharon's days are numbered, and that he will leave office either for health reasons, or because of indictment in one or more of three ongoing criminal investigations. There is a real possibility that elections could be held a lot sooner than the scheduled date of 2007, and everyone is expecting a reshuffling of the political deck, with the Likud being the big loser.

Recognizing this, Beilin, in his election victory speech, said, "The Likud is in a deep and true crisis." Yahad is hoping to capitalize on this by reaching out to the new grassroots social organizations that are popping up all over Israel, in reaction to Netanyahu's brutal economic policies. Beilin's former rival, and now partner, Ran Cohen, is said to be in a good position to successfully draw support from these layers.

Beilin also took aim at the Shinui party, which he referred to as the "Archie Bunker party," which won 15 Knesset seats in the last election and landed in Sharon's government. Its leader, Tommy Lapid, who looks like "Archie" and is just as bigotted, created Shinui as a party of yuppie accountants and lawyers, whose populist program was aimed at fighting corruption and the influence of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. But now that it is a member of a government coalition led by a Prime Minister under police investigation for bribe-taking, Shinui is also expected to be a big loser when elections are held.

While no one in Yahad is expecting the party to win enough seats in the Knesset to become the predominant party, its partisans hope to gain enough seats to play a decisive role in creating an alternative governing coalition, which can end the occupation of Palestinian territory, forge a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and bring economic recovery to the nation.

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