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Summer 2011 Social Protest in Israel: Possibilities and Challenges

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Sergio Yahni presents a comprehensive analysis of the social protests rocking Israel this summer.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/protest_camp-2.jpg]

A sign at a protest camp in Israel, saying "the market is free, we are slaves" (photo: Sergio Yahni, Alternative Information Center)

Stanley Fischer, Governor of the Central Bank, reduces Israel's social problems to four major phenomena: housing, cost of living, taxes and the government's (in)ability to provide services demanded by the public. The Ministry of Finance maintains that the social demands of the protesters would cost some NIS 60 billion. Media analysts and data published by both Israel's Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance indicate that state coffers could positively respond.

But the thousands of people camping out in the country's squares and the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets on Saturday, July 30 are demanding a fundamental change in national priorities, the elimination of Israel's neo-liberal policies and the restoration of the welfare state. Or, as the demonstrators themselves shouted: "revolution."

Israel's government lacks the political will to solve the problems highlighted by these protest, yet attempts to manipulate the protests and use them to deepen its neoliberal project.

In a Jerusalem press conference on 1 August, Stanley Fischer declared that the solution to the housing shortage would include the creation of committees to bypass the existing planning processes, the approval of construction and a reformation of Israel's real estate market. Between the lines: Fischer wants to hold large construction and contracting companies to fewer ecological and social constraints whilst simultaneously accelerating the privatisation of state lands.

Today, 93% of Israel's state lands are lands belonging to Palestinian refugees, and are thus protected by international guarantees issued by the United Nations since 1950.

Similarly, Prime Minister Netanyahu is promoting the opening of the dairy market to imports in response to the high cost of food and the privatisation of public services.

From the ranks of the social protest itself, however, comes a more radical suggestion: reduce the defence budget. On 31 July, during the monthly review with the Knesset's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Chief of Staff General Benny Gantz, referred to this proposal. General Gantz said that "we must take into account the period in which we are, in which threats are most significant, and we cannot compromise our ability to act. In this there can be no compromise."

He was referring to the demand of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that the UN recognize an independent Palestinian state. According to Gantz, a Palestinian non-violent protest movement is set to erupt in September "in conflict against the wall or against the settlements." He added that now the army is acquiring weapons to respond to a mass Palestinian mobilisation and developing intelligence networks in order to prevent such a movement.

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At a meeting of the Likud faction in the Knesset, which took place on 1 August, Prime Minister calmed the concerns of his Chief of Staff: "Despite the protest, cutting the defence budget. Is not on the government's agenda. "

The thousands of people who have occupied public space in the cities of Israel are not a homogeneous group and have no recognised leadership. They reject Israel's neoliberal regime, the privatisation of public services and the intimate relationship between capital and government. Beyond this, protesters do not agree on anything.

The protest has no national leadership. No one protest camp represents another. Within the camps themselves, there exists a consensual address to address problems and concerns. Any group of activists can make decisions like any other group, and the practice of conducting meetings in which decisions are made by consensus has yet to be introduced. However, the protest has established a space that serves as a reference for the local and international press. This space is on the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv.

While media activists are camped out in the Rothschild Boulevard, this does not mean that other protesters are being represented by them. The media focus is here not only because the first group of protesters sent up camp on Rothschild Boulevard, but also as Israel's mainstream media and politicians prefer to understand the protest movement as that of the middle class, even though most protesters are public housing tenants, single mothers, Jewish immigrants from Asia and Africa and migrant workers.

This middle class biased perspective rendered it easier for the Tel Aviv Municipality to try and forcibly evict the protesters camped out in South Tel Aviv's Lewinsky park. The protesters here are not from Israel's imaginary middle class, but residents of one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, including numerous migrant labourers. Significantly, the atmosphere prevailing in the social movement camped out in the Rothschild Boulevard and its solidarity marches convinced the municipality to desist from its eviction attempts.

The amorphous nature of this protest movement prevents it from being exploited by groups that have traditionally negotiated social protest in Israel, above all by the General Federation of Workers in Israel (Histadrut), which is the majority union and possessor of the sole right to negotiate with the government and employers.

In an interview with Israel Army Radio, Histadrut Secretary General Ofer Eini, acknowledged that the union does not lead this social struggle, but stated outright that if the purpose of protesters is to overthrow the Netanyahu government, the Histadrut would not participate. "We are a democratic country, we are not Egypt or Syria," said Eini. Eini was upset primarily by the grassroots demand that any and all meetings with the government be transparent to the public. The National Union of University Students also spoke against this demand. Molly Itzik, President of the National Union of University Students, told the press that they would be "responsible adults at the time of dialogue with the government." Members of the Student Union have said that the Rothschild encampment has been infiltrated by "anarchist elements that impractically raise the demands."

The leaders of the Student Union hope that the new academic year will open with a tangible victory it can present in the student elections. Ofer Eini knows that the public demand for greater transparency in negotiations with employers and the government is a danger. In March this year the Histadrut faced a wave of protests by social workers who were unwilling to accept the agreement negotiated by the organisation of workers in government and business after some three weeks of strike.

The main danger facing the Histadrut is not the Israeli government or employers, but the radical labour organisations Power to the Workers (Koach Laovdim) and Maan. These organisations are relatively new to the field of industrial relations and act to forge trade unions that horizontally represent the interests of workers, whilst the Histadrut are an organization which collaborates with both the government and employers.

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Israeli President Shimon Peres intervened in the crisis on 1 August in order to fill gaps in the protest movement and convince the group of Rothschild Boulevard to jettison the demands for transparency in contacts with the government. The situation is fluid, however, and even if this group would agree to enter into negotiations with the government, an alternative protest movement leadership could decide not to accept the dictates of the union bureaucracy and to reject the interests of the National Union of Students.

The issue that everyone considers and yet nobody discusses relates to the Palestinians. Protest movement activists fear that the Palestinian issue is or will be used by the government as a weapon against them. However, in all public presentations, speakers point out that Jews and Arabs are partners in this struggle fight, although no one is willing to define the immediate, practical meaning of this statement.

Activists are also aware of the possibility that the government could choose a military provocation to deflect pressure and attention. This could be expressed in an assault on Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory. There are numerous protesters who believe that the killing of two Palestinians in Qalandiya on the night of 31 July 31 was a provocation conducted for this purpose. In response to public pressure, Netanyahu stated that this killing was solely in response to military demands.

Barring exceptional developments, the groups will continue to fight together until late summer. But the division between Rothschild Boulevard and those camps situated on the social periphery, where people have no other options, will be exposed in September, when children return to school and the middle class will end their holiday rebellion. Those who will remain are those lacking all other alternatives. However, the summer of 2011 will be a watershed of 'before' and 'after' for Israel's social movements.

Translated to English by the Alternative Information Center (AIC).

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