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Israeli State

450,000 Israelis take to the streets demanding social justice

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Saturday night, September 3, was the test Israel's protest movement needed to show that social justice can and should be stronger than fear. Around 450,000 people took to the streets in Tel Aviv and throughout Israel to demand a real change from the neoliberal policies imposed by successive governments over the past 30 years.

Some 60,000 people marched through the streets of Jerusalem on Saturday night, demanding social justice (Photo: Marta Fortunato, AIC)

"The tents are only the wrapping," National Student Union Chairman Itzik Shmuli said to the huge crowd. "The people of Israel are at the heart of this movement. We will not stop this protest until you, Mr. Prime Minister, give us real solutions."

All the speakers, in Tel Aviv and the other cities, agreed that the protest will enter a new phase, with new forms of actions but the same level of mobilization. "It could be that the campsites become more concentrated and consolidated, but they won't be folded up. The protest will keep going and only get stronger until our demands are met", the spokesman of the leaders of the tent-city in Rothschild Boulevard, Roe Neuman, told the media during the march. In Jerusalem, the decision was different. The chairman of the Hebrew University Student Union, Itai Gotler, told Haaretz that they are closing down the main camp in Jerusalem, but vow to keep the struggle and the protest alive.

The huge crowd that assembled in just a few hours in Tel Aviv's Kikar Hamedina reassured leaders of the movement that they have the necessary strength to confront the government. "My generation always felt as though we were alone in this world, but now we feel the solidarity," a very pleased Daphni Leef stated. She was the first one to pitch a tent in Rothschild Boulevard and one of the leaders of the movement who received increasing criticism in the last few days from Israel's conservative media.

"After six weeks of protests, this movement has become mature", Idan, an active organizer of the demonstrations, told the Alternative Information Center (AIC) in Jerusalem. "People have become aware of the situation. For the government stability means ignoring what is happening in the Israeli streets, but now Netanyahu is obliged to listen to our protests and to act. "

Social justice and equality are the slogans of the demonstrations. Nothing has changed since the end of July, and political consciousness has not grown. The main question is whether this movement might be the beginning of a new political party and of a structural change within the Israeli political scene that is able to challenge the colonial policies of the Israeli governments. What is the future of the movement? What are the plans and the hopes of the Israelis who took part in the protest?

"I don't know what will happen after this protest, I can't predict the future," said Eyal, a young father in Jerusalem. "I don't think this movement could become politicized, as our demands are just economic and social demands". Many other protesters who were demonstrating in Jerusalem yesterday shared this vision. "I have no political vision, what I ask is just social justice," Idan added.

Angela, who is active in the Grassroot Jerusalem movement is very critical. She held a small banner in her hands: "Also the Palestinians demand social justice." "We have to start talking about the Palestinian issue, the military

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occupation and the colonial policies of Netanyahu”, she said to the AIC. “I don't know what will happen in the next few days because even though most of the organizers of the demonstrations are leftists, they have deliberately avoided talking about the Palestinian issue and any other political issue in order not to divide or destroy the movement.”

The Palestinians who protested last night in Jerusalem were very few: there were a few Negev Bedouins, far away from the demonstrators, like a separated body. "Israel has stolen the lands of its Arab Negev citizens" a big banner said.

"Israel wants to shift the focus from internal protests to the issue of security," said Dana, a university student - After the attacks of Eilat some demonstrations were canceled but the fact that today we are back together and we are more numerous means that we want to continue this protest." The future? "Anticipated elections."

However, according to recent polls the Israeli right hasn't lost votes and if anticipated elections were held, religious and nationalist parties would gain more than half of the Knesset seats.

The lack of a common political vision, the tacit consent of the colonialist and militaristic policy of Netanyahu and the fact that in October many students are to start university lessons and that many young people are to serve in the army raise the question of what could be the future of this movement.

The word solidarity was also used several times in Haifa on Saturday night. In that northern city, social justice went hand in hand with social solidarity and union among Jews and Palestinians from the start. At the foot of the Bahai Gardens, the chairman of the University of Haifa's student union, Yossi Shalom, addressed 40,000 people: "There is no more beautiful sight than social solidarity. As a student, this is the most important lesson I have learned in recent months".

One of the founders of the main Palestinian camp in Haifa, Shanin Nasser, was also very moved by the number of people that showed up. Just a few weeks ago, when 15 people died in Eilat in the triple attacks and then another 15 in the Israeli bombings on Gaza, Nasser and his friends from the neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas were worried about the damage this could do to the new partnership they were trying to build with the Jewish youth in Haifa.

Yesterday their hopes were restored. "Today we are changing the rules of the game. No more coexistence based on hummus and fava beans. What is happening here is true coexistence, when Arabs and Jews march together shoulder to shoulder calling for social justice and peace", the young journalist highlighted.

Government warnings about possible rocket launching from the Gaza Strip left Beer Sheva, Ashdod and Ashkelon without any marches; but protesters from these southern cities moved to the north or the center of the country to join other tent cities.

The long awaited 3 September march was a success by all accounts, but now comes the difficult part. The popular movement has to use these 450,000 voices to sit the government down at the negotiation table and obtain concrete changes; no committees or promises, but solutions. In three weeks the Israeli government, society and probably the whole world will have their eyes peeled to the United Nations building and the Palestinian bid to have their state recognized. After that comes a month of intermittent Jewish holidays starts. The moment is now.