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Israel

“Israel is a state that is moving rightwards, with more and more fascist tendencies”

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Thomas Vescovi has just published *L'échec d'une utopie: une histoire de la gauche en Israël*. (Editions La Découverte, Paris). Julien Salingue, editor of *L'Anticapitaliste* spoke with him about the political situation in Israel. This interview took place before the recent violent colonial aggression against the Palestinians.

L'Anticapitaliste: What lessons can we learn from the last legislative elections in Israel, which took place on 23 March 2021 and which, as we recall, were the fourth legislative elections in two years ?

Thomas Vescovi: We find ourselves for the fourth time in two years in the same schema, with a majority of MPs who are opposed to keeping Netanyahu in power, but who are unable to form a more or less credible government.

As a reminder, Netanyahu has built for himself, since 2009, a fairly significant political armour, which goes from the far right to the more traditional right, but there are several elements that have gradually weakened his power. First, his triple indictment, for breach of trust, embezzlement and fraud, which means that even within his own camp, we have people who are tempted to leave the ship, such as Gideon Sa'ar. [1] This shows that Netanyahu is no longer so hegemonic, even on the right. And in society we have a very strong protest, unprecedented in Israel in its scope and duration, with Israeli citizens who, since the end of 2018 and especially in 2019, have been demonstrating almost every week near Netanyahu's residence to protest against his continued maintenance in power.

But the opposition is very heterogeneous. Thus, at present, the two political figures who could potentially be prime minister are the centrist Yair Lapid, a figure of a sector of the progressive, liberal, and “secular” Jewish population, and Naftali Bennett, the settlers' candidate, a religious nationalist. The opposition is therefore above all an opposition to the person of Netanyahu, but not an opposition with an alternative political programme. So even if they managed to reach an agreement between them, one can doubt whether such a government could last for long, already because Netanyahu is not finished, contrary to what some people say, and he will not fail to destabilize them, and then because there is no agreement on economic and social questions, while Israel, an already very unequal country, is going through a major crisis. On the side of the centrists, it is thus envisaged to restart forms of the welfare state, at the very least state aid to the poorest citizens - without however attacking the dogmas of the market economy - while people like Bennett and Sa'ar defend the idea of using the crisis to create a new neoliberal shock, to go even further in dismantling the “socializing” heritage of the State of Israel.

It has now been almost two decades since at every election in Israel we have heard commentators say that the government about to take office is “ the farthest to the right in the history of Israel.” It is a formula obviously, but is there all the same a bit of truth in it, with a strong tendency to the rightward shift of the Israeli political spectrum. How is this expressed in the Israeli political arena, in terms of programmes and organizations? We get lost sometimes, since some of those who were presented yesterday as being far-right are now classified as being centre-right, even in the centre ...

To give you an idea, the first Israeli Parliament, elected in 1949, had 71 deputies (out of 120) who could be classified on the side of the “left”, whether Zionist or anti-colonial. Today we must have 72 deputies who are from the right or from the far right.

This is just an anecdote, but it is significant. I remember that in 2009, Avigdor Lieberman, with his party Israel Beytenou (“Our house Israel”), a Russian-speaking party], was considered as a representative of the most radical far right., nationalist, etc. Today Lieberman is presented as “centre-right”. Naftali Bennett, when elected in 2013, was

then considered to represent religious nationalists and settlers, embodying what was most extremist in the Israeli political spectrum. Today he is presented as being the “hard right”, and it is the Kahanists [2] who inherited this status of being far-right, racist, religious, belligerent, and so on.

So yes, Israel is a state that is moving rightwards, with more and more fascist tendencies, because for me there is no doubt that the Kahanists are fascists. The rightward shift is such that sometimes we no longer have the lexicon to characterize it, hence this formula about “the most right-wing government”...

What unites this hard right and this far right is the question of annexation and the exclusively Jewish state, without any form of concessions to the Palestinians, with less and less room for Palestinian citizenship in Israel or for the rights of the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

This bloc is also opposed to what can be called “the other Israel”. Today, in the Zionist political arena in Israel, the central debate seems to me to be that of the form of the state. A Jewish state with a synagogue separate from the state and a form of “secularism”, or a Jewish state with religious law, exclusive rights for Jews, etc. And within the framework of this debate are emerging more and more figures defending an exclusive Jewish religious identity, racist and colonial: rights for the Jews, and not shared rights.

And on the left and the centre-left?

Within the Israeli Zionist left there is an inability to go beyond, so to speak, the question of Zionism. There have been profound changes in Israeli politics since the creation of Israel (in 1948, with a whole part of the left electorate gradually shifting to the centre, voting for economic and political liberalism. Jews of Russian origin have an increasing tendency to vote for an exclusive type of nationalism, which refuses to share rights with the non-Jewish population. On the part of the Eastern Jews, the vision that has prevailed is that of a Jewish identity which is not, as the left incarnates it, a cultural identity, but an aspiration for Israel to endow itself with Jewish laws.

In reality, we cannot understand Israel if we do not understand the existence of what can be called a pyramid of power: at the head of Israel, there are still many Jews of European origin, among the political and economic elites; at the bottom of the scale we have the Palestinians of Israel; and between the two, there is a form of competition between different sectors of the Israeli Jewish population, to be as close as possible to the top and as far as possible from the Palestinians. Thus, among the Eastern Jews, to whom it was made clear that in Israel it was necessary to be a Jew and not an Arab, which did not have much meaning for them since Jews and Arabs is what they were, for centuries, and they gradually separated from this Arabity, in favor of an exacerbated Jewishness, to the point of not wanting to share rights with the Palestinians and rejecting the Zionist left.

Finally, we must not forget that Israel has been, since 1967, a state that has colonized massively, mainly in the West Bank, and that this process of colonization crystallizes tensions in Israel itself. The right and the far right put the pursuit of colonization and annexation at the centre of political debate. The centre-left, without saying that it is necessary to stop colonizing, continues to maintain the myth of the two states, with a Palestinian state that would be next to Israel. But colonization continues, there are more and more settlers, and even though it is a myth, they do not want to hear about two states and the resumption of negotiations, and they are increasingly radicalizing their discourse.

The project of establishing a Jewish state in a territory overwhelmingly populated by non-Jews necessarily involved the disappearance, physical or political, of the natives. But they are still there. Isn't what we are witnessing, ultimately, the “logical” radicalization of a colonial society within a state which is fundamentally a settlement colony, but which has not succeeded in getting rid of the indigenous society?

In the title of my book, when I say “ the failure of a utopia “, it is because, without making a value judgment, I am assuming that people sincerely believed that they were going to be able to form a state for the Jews on, say, leftist bases. And in the book, we follow the trajectory of this project and we try to understand how, over the course of history, things have drifted and taken a completely different turn than what some had initially foreseen. And it turns out that this left-wing Zionist project, which had an emancipatory vocation for Jews who were victims of anti-Semitism, was nonetheless a fundamentally colonial project. Moreover, what the Zionist left does not seem to have taken into account is that their definition of what it is to be Jewish was not one that all the Jews in the world might have. And in creating a state that posits itself as a Jewish state or a state of the Jews, that definition is necessarily going to be central to the life of the state, as well as debates about what it means to be Jewish and to live in a Jewish state. Little by little, and we can see how things are today, a desire has emerged for the state to be Jewish in the sense of exclusively Jewish, and therefore increasingly colonial.

Jerusalem is an exemplary case. It is a place where colonization is still contested, and increasingly so. Today we still have nearly 40 per cent of Palestinians in the greater Jerusalem area, an area where colonization is very violent, with expulsions, expropriations, etc. And it is because this Palestinian presence is maintained that we see the development of extreme right-wing groups which carry out organized attacks on Palestinians, etc. They are confronted with a population which stays there, which does not want to leave, and which in addition fights for its rights. The authorities keep repeating that Israel is a state for the Jews, that Jerusalem is its “eternal and indivisible” capital, and at the same time there are tens of thousands of Palestinians, who sometimes wave a flag that is not that of Israel: hence the radical rhetoric on the need to expel all Palestinians, a condition for the principles to become reality.

The progressive Jewish camp is in the minority, but does not seem to understand that if you continue to be part of the Zionist project, to defend a state for the Jews, with more rights for the Jews and not full equality of rights, you cannot oppose the rise of Jewish identity but contribute, even in spite of yourself, to legitimize it.

The rhetoric of the “ fight against terrorism “ also plays its part ...

Israel, from its inception until, say, the 1980s, fought mostly in the name of its right to be recognized as a legitimate state. As things gradually normalized at the international level, in the 1980s we saw the development of a critique of the militarization of the state, of wars waged abroad, particularly in Lebanon, and the idea was little by little imposed that it would be possible to live with, alongside, a Palestinian state. But with the failure of the Oslo accords in the 1990s, there was a renewal of the Zionist discourse: the “ amicable ” separation advocated by Rabin had failed, they had before them people, Palestinians, who did not want peace, and therefore a separation by force and only on their conditions was necessary. Right-wing personalities like Sharon and Netanyahu were the incarnation of this discourse, with for example Sharon who repeated that it was necessary to stop pretending to be a “Jewish and democratic” state, because what mattered was to be a Jewish state. A Jewish state in civilizational struggle, outpost of the “ fight against terrorism ” (especially from 2001): this is what was explained to young people who were doing their military service, telling them that they were not an occupying army but a vanguard in the international fight against terrorism. We can understand why the right-wing Israeli press does not hesitate, concerning Jerusalem and the inhabitants fighting not to be expelled, to point the finger at Hamas, which has nothing to do with that... Sharon said in his time that Arafat was Israel's bin Laden. The question is therefore no longer so much, with the exception of speeches about Iran, the struggle for existence, as a civilizational struggle, in alliance with Western countries. A significant anecdote: in January 2017 a conference was organized at Tel Aviv University with Philippe Val and Frédéric Encel, the title of which was very clear: “ France-Israel: two democracies facing the Islamist scourge ”. The Palestinian national question is completely evacuated, and all the conditions are being created for a more and more radical identity discourse to develop.

Is there any future for a non-Zionist left in Israel without the Palestinians of Israel?

I would go even further and say that there is no future for the left in Israel in its plurality if it does not turn more to the Palestinians of Israel. If we go back a year, during the legislative elections of March 2020, the “Unified List” [3] bringing together the Palestinians of Israel, was the expression of a new strategy: this list, led by the communist Ayman Odeh, wanted to explain to the Palestinians of Israel that the strategy of the past of engaging in politics by declaring oneself an anti-Zionist and refusing any government negotiations with the left, including the Zionist left, was over and had brought nothing, and therefore it was important to take into consideration that since the progressive Israeli Jewish left was in the minority, it was possible to envisage alliances with it, however with conditions to be defined and on a clear programme. It turned out that this strategy, whatever one thinks of it, had underestimated an essential factor: even within the Israeli centre-left, where people declare themselves as Zionists, the contradictions are too strong when it comes to allying with the Palestinians. After the election and the good score of the Unified List, we saw a triumphant Ayman Odeh, admittedly criticized in his own camp, but many people wondered if he would succeed in his bet, and land an alliance with a number of guarantees., more rights, more equality, the end of demolitions, etc. But it was a failure, as the Israeli Jewish centre-left came under pressure on the theme, “You are going to form a government without a Jewish majority”. What therefore remains dominant, including among the progressive Jewish forces of the centre-left, is to put the Jewish character first, before the democratic content...

On the side of the non-Zionist left, there has always been a policy of building links with the Palestinians of Israel, especially around cities like Nazareth, Haifa, etc. Their problem is rather how to address themselves more to the Jewish population who, as we know, and we have seen in some cities, would be ready to vote for lists like the Unified List. So there is this difficulty: if you want to be able to address progressive Israeli Jews, you cannot limit yourself to explaining that all Zionists are colonialists, full stop, but if you want to address the Palestinians in Israel, you cannot put aside your radical criticism of Zionist institutions.

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[1] A former member of Likud, he was, among other things, Minister of the Interior in 2013-2014. Candidate for the Likud primaries in December 2019, he was defeated by Netanyahu and announced, less than a year later, his departure from the party and the constitution of a new organization, “New Hope”, which obtained a little less than 5 per cent of the vote in parliamentary elections in March 2021.

[2] Named after the extremist rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach party advocated the establishment of a Jewish theocratic state and the expulsion of the Palestinians, until it was banned in 1994. 27 years later, the Jewish supremacist Otzma Yehudit (“ Jewish Power “) claims its heritage, and has built a list (“Religious Zionism”), with two other far-right parties, which obtained more than 5% of the vote and had six MPs elected during the legislative elections in March .

[3] List comprising four political formations (Hadash, Ta'al, Raam and Balad) regrouping communists, nationalists, centrists and religious forces. It obtained 12.7 per cent of the vote and 15 seats (out of 120) in March 2020, after obtaining 10.6 per cent of the vote and 13 seats in September 2019.