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Israeli State

Time for Israeli Social Protest to Make Political Choices, End Illusion of National Unity

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Less than a year ago, the whole Arab region, from Tunisia in the West to Yemen in the Southeast, was the arena of a gigantic and extraordinary popular uprising for freedom and democracy. The decades-old dictatorships of Hosni Mubarak and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali were thrown out in a matter of weeks, and the way for new democratic regimes seemed wide open. Not all the regimes of the region were challenged, but there was not a single country in the region that was not affected by the popular movements within or outside their borders. Except one – the State of Israel.

Israel looked as an island of stability in a sea of unrest and revolutions, and its leaders didn't hesitate for one minute to sell this stability to the Western governments: "To defend your interests in the area, you cannot trust even the toughest dictatorships that you are supporting with money and military equipment; sooner or later, popular movements might take over and jeopardize everything you have invested in these allies" said in substance the Israeli leaders to their Western counterparts. "The State of Israel is your only stable and trustworthy ally!"

Yet a few months later "Israeli stability" was overtaken by the biggest popular mobilization the country has ever known. According to the police, 350,000 women and men demonstrated in the main cities of Israel on the night of Saturday August, 6. More than 10% of the entire Israeli adult population! The 6 August demonstration was, until now, the highlight of a month long mobilization, but definitively not its end.

Housing – a burning issue

The movement started around a single issue: housing. After several decades in which an Israeli couple was able to access decent housing thanks to state-subsidized loans, the new neo-liberal economy makes it almost impossible. A young couple, in which both partners are earning a decent salary, cannot anymore buy an apartment. The cutting of state subsidies and cheap loans, privatization of lands and dismantling of the system of public housing make it almost impossible for a young couple to access a flat. This policy hits not only the poor, but most of the middle class too.

And indeed, the present movement started as a movement of the middle class. Only recently did the most weakened layers of society join the movement, in the main cities as well as in the so-call periphery. Let's remember that according to the Israeli National Insurance, 30% of Israeli children live under the poverty line, i.e. slightly less than one quarter of Israelis are considered to be poor... in a country which is wealthier than the European Union average.

Challenging neo-liberal choice

Very soon, however, the demands around housing developed into an overall challenge of the neo-liberal system as such.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been one of the world's most aggressive leaders in implementing neo-liberal economy; when he served as Finance Minister (1998-1999), market economy was his religion, private enterprise and "free" competition his holy Bible. And indeed, in few countries was the process of privatization and

dismantling of public services and properties so brutal and complete. Almost nothing remains from the old welfare (some would say even socialist) state and even the education system is gradually being privatized.

The return of Netanyahu to the prime minister's office signaled a new offensive but this time, instead of frontally attacking the poor and middle classes, Netanyahu choose another method: To give to the rich, especially by dramatically reducing income taxes for enterprises and high revenues. With Netanyahu the money-power connection went out in the open in a truly provocative way, and the personal friendship between Netanyahu, his ministers and senior officials, on the one hand, and the "tycoons" – local name for the oligarchs – on the other, are almost every day on the front-page of the local media

By shouting "social justice" and "against privatizations – welfare state!" the demonstrators are challenging the very heart of Netanyahu's economic and social philosophy and praxis.

"A government of the tycoons" is how the Israeli middle class perceives Netanyahu's government, and rightly so: all other layers of society are left aside, not only the poor.

New layers are joining – from the center to the periphery

After a couple of weeks of mobilizations, however, new social layers began joining the struggle, the ones called "Israeli periphery". Periphery has a double meaning: geographical periphery, i.e. living outside the three big cities (Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa), as well as social periphery.

During the first weeks, the most weakened classes were not part of the mobilization, and the movement's spokespersons insisted that they belong to the middle class, as if that sociological fact should provide them privileges compared to the poor. Moreover, they also insisted that, unlike the poor, they are "normative Israelis", which means in Israeli language, paying taxes and serving in the reserve army.

On Saturday night, 13 August, tens of thousands of "peripheral" Israelis took to the streets, in Netanya and Beersheba in particular, and by doing so changed the class nature of the movement. In parallel, two new sectors joined the mobilization: poor women (especially in Haifa) and the Palestinian minority. In both cases, new demands, specific to these sectors have been raised. It is worth noting, for example, that the Arab demonstrators were welcomed by the Jewish ones, some of them explaining that "they have no problem at all with Arabs, but they hate the Palestinians (sic)".

The movement

In its first stage, the protest movement was reminiscent of the World Social Forum initiatives in the first decade of the present century: no program, no leadership, no joint agenda beyond the two overly-used slogans. Everyone was the movement and raised his or her own demands and concerns. Tel Aviv's Rothschild Avenue, where the first tent site was established, quickly became a huge forum of discussions, exchange and dialogue, in addition to cultural activities; well known artists came to express solidarity and contribute to the mobilization.

The demonstrators insisted that they were "neither left, nor right" and indeed many Likud voters are part of the

movement. They also insist in making a difference between a “social” movement and a “political movement”, strongly denying that they are “political”. No one can deny, however, that the movement is openly challenging neo-liberal economics and calling for a return to the welfare state. In that sense it is a break with the consensual policy of all the Israeli major parties – Likud, Kadima and the various splits of the Labor party.

The real nature of the movement and its spokespersons will be revealed when they will have to answer the question that was already raised by Netanyahu and the Finance ministry directors – more money for housing, health and education, from where to take it? The question is relevant... and the answer obvious: from the huge budgets for settlements, from the defense budget, from the tax exemptions for big enterprises and banks. There is plenty of money, but the decision is political.

Netanyahu's reactions

Benjamin Netanyahu's first reaction to the movement was no surprise: “The movement is politically motivated and manipulated by the left”, but soon after, his close advisers made him understand that if the movement is the left in Israel, the left is the great majority of voters. Netanyahu therefore changed his argumentation, and claimed that changing budget's priorities would weaken Israeli security. Ehud Barak, from his penthouse in one of the most expensive buildings in Tel Aviv, was even cruder: “Israel is not Switzerland” said the kibbutznik that became a millionaire.

As usual in Israel, the next answer of the government was to establish a commission. Led by Professor Trachtenberg, the commission's mandate is very limited and its members unable – and unwilling, for most of them – to relate to the main demand of the protest movement: the end of the neo-liberal economics, and a return to some kind of regulated capitalism. In the best case it will focus on a critic of concentration of capital, denounce the “tycoons” and suggest some measures to limit their financial power.

The next step of the present ultra-right wing government may well be inspired by Ehud Barak: Heating the border with one of Israel's neighboring countries or even provoking a series of terrorist activities in Israel, hoping that “security” will recreate a spirit of national unity against a foreign threat. It will not be the first time that an Israeli government uses this dirty strategy. It seems, however, that Israeli public opinion is smarter than in the past: When government spokespersons recently raised the security issue, the answer of the demonstrators has been: “housing, education and health are our real security”., showing in a way that they are well aware of this old trick. Will it be sufficient to deter the Israeli government from initiating a war? No one can answer that question. The great publicity given by the Israeli right to the visit of the American war-mongering Glenn Beck and his racist statements are definitely not a good sign.

An overall alternative program

The demonstrators reacted to the government's initiative by establishing their own commission, made up of progressive economists, sociologists and social activists. This alternative group has a very heterogeneous composition, including the former deputy governor of the Bank of Israel, and quite many activists have expressed their hostility to the alternative commission.

Every one in the progressive camp would agree that any alternative should include

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- * a dramatic increase in the budgets for health, education and welfare;
- * the implementation of the existing law concerning public housing and the allocation of budgets for the building of social housing all over the country;
- *an emergency plan for development of the “periphery”;
- *increase of taxation on big companies
- *expropriation of empty dwellings all over the country;
- *dismantling the Land Authority Administration;

But this is not enough, and additional demands are definitely not included in the consensus of the movement, which tries hard to remain neither left nor right. One should understand, however, that like democracy, social justice cannot be divided. It is a matter of either, or.

Priority should be given to the most deprived communities, in particular the Palestinians and the ultra-orthodox communities; these communities are not the main concern, to say the least, of the middle class spokespersons of the protest movement;

In order to finance the legitimate demands of the protestors, one must demand big cuts in the budgets for settlements and “security”;

Sooner than later the movement will have to put an end to its “apolitical” claim. Right and left are opposite directions, one leading to more poverty and social discrimination and the other to a more just distribution of wealth. One of the most popular slogans of the demonstrators, “REVOLUTION”, is a very ambitious program. To achieve even a small part of it requires the making of choices and an end to the illusion of national unity.

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