

Peace Candidate Wins Israel Labor Vote

by Dean Andromidas

The Israeli Labor Party's chairmanship—and candidacy against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the Jan. 28 general elections—went to Haifa Mayor Amram Mitzna in a landslide on Nov. 19. Mitzna, who is also a reserve major general, ran on a policy modelled after that of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He called for immediately restarting peace negotiations with the Palestinians, and won 54% of the vote, trouncing hawkish Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who had been defense minister in the now defunct unity government with Sharon, and the third contender, Haim Ramon.

Mitzna's election will help create the conditions for defeating Sharon's Likud and the group of fascist parties euphemistically referred to as the "nationalist right wing," that make up Sharon's current caretaker government. Now that Mitzna will lead Labor, both Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, who will compete in the Likud Party primary on Nov. 28, have become a little less confident about the January election. Their confidence will fall further as it is exposed that funds for their Likud campaign are coming from Unification Church ("Moonie") sources.

With a high turnout of 60% of registered Labor Party members, Mitzna was able to overcome the strong party machines of both his rivals, particularly Ben-Eliezer. Moreover Mitzna, who has been portrayed by his detractors as an Ashkenazi elitist, in fact won majorities in all sectors—including immigrant Russian and Sephardic—and in the poor development towns. Ben-Eliezer, who was born in Iraq, tried to play the "Sephardim card," but new Sephardic Labor members voted *en masse* for Mitzna. Importantly, Mitzna won large majorities among Israeli Arab members of the party. This reversed the situation where the Israeli Arabs had all but abandoned the Labor Party, since October 2000 riots where 14 Israeli Arabs were killed during the Labor Prime Ministry of Ehud Barak.

Muhammad Zeidan, a leading political figure in the Israeli Arab community, told the *Jerusalem Post* (Nov. 20), "Mitzna's declarations about pulling out of Gaza are courageous, and signal a new approach and policy which offer a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel in terms of seeking to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict."

Mitzna's success partly reflects his achievements and popularity over ten years as mayor of Haifa, Israel's third largest city, and the one most representative of the diversity of Israeli society, with its mix of secular and religious Jews and Israeli Arabs. It is also a city of large working class and

immigrant communities. Zeidan commented, "Mitzna, as mayor of the largest Jewish-Arab city, proved he was a mayor of all of Haifa's residents. . . . He also succeeded . . . in helping to preserve the good relations between Jews and Arabs in the city despite the very difficult times. If he can copy his actions in Haifa on the national political map it will be a very fine thing."

Mitzna's character showed when, as a senior officer during the 1982 Lebanon war, he denounced then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon publicly, when the Kahan Commission determined that Sharon was "indirectly responsible" for the massacre of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps.

From the pro-peace Meretz party, one retired officer, who had been a collaborator in formulating Rabin's peace policies and knows Mitzna personally, said the new Labor Party chairman "is the best follow-up to the policy of Rabin" since the latter's murder in 1995. While a Labor victory in the general elections will still be an uphill battle, the source said that with Mitzna, it is no longer impossible.

Will Not Make Coalition With Likud

Mitzna has made clear that he will immediately pull out of the Gaza Strip, and seek the dismantling of the Israeli settlements there. No Israeli politician has made such a commitment since the assassination of Rabin. Mitzna also wants unconditional negotiations with the Palestinians. If talks failed, he would unilaterally withdraw from most of the West Bank.

Further, if he doesn't win, the candidate intends to seek to keep Labor in the opposition, not in a coalition with Sharon or Netanyahu. Yossi Beilin, the architect of the Oslo Accords who supported Mitzna, is working to bring together a coalition of parties he has dubbed the "Rabin Bloc," to form a government in the event of a Labor party victory in the general elections. It would include Labor, Meretz, the secular anti-ultra Orthodox Shinui, the trade union-linked One Nation, and the Arab parties.

Within only two months, Mitzna has to unite a party whose majority has been demoralized and despairing of ever coming back into power. He faces an opponent who enjoys high ratings in the opinion polls. Perhaps more decisive is Sharon's support in the Bush Administration, as well as among the Christian fundamentalists and Jabotinskyite Zionist circles in the United States, from which large amounts of campaign funds can be mobilized.

Uri Avnery, journalist and founder of the peace group, Gush Shalom, gave Mitzna some advice in *Ha'aretz* Nov. 17, just prior to the Labor Party primary. He warned that the only way Mitzna could hope to win the general elections in such a short period was on "one condition: that his message is unequivocal, direct and finely honed, without stuttering, without demagoguery, without gimmicks. Election consultants and various 'strategists' will say that he must first use left-wing language to capture the leadership of the party, and then

switch to right-wing language to win votes from the center. If he chooses this path, he will fail.” Avnery said that “message must be simple and uncompromising: The state has no future without peace. Peace is possible if we are ready to pay the price. There is a partner for peace. Most of the Palestinian people want peace. Yasser Arafat wants peace.” Avnery added the well-known price: a Palestinian state alongside Israel; Jerusalem as the capital of both states; evacuation of settlements from all Palestinian territory; transfer of blocked funds to promote economic growth and fund social services.

Sharon: Banking On an Iraq War

One day later, a commentary by Aluf Benn exposed Sharon's true election strategy: supporting a U.S. war on Iraq. “Sharon and his cronies are now asking voters for an extended period of grace, and are promising that next year will be the year that counts,” wrote Benn in *Ha'aretz*. All their hopes and expectations are pointed toward Washington: an American attack on Iraq is seen as the lever which can extricate Israel from its economic, security and social quagmire. . . . It is hoped that the removal of Saddam Hussein from power will set in motion a domino effect, will end the Palestinian Intifada, bring about the end of Yasser Arafat's regime and eradicate the threat to Israel from Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Billions of dollars in aid from the United States will raise the Israeli economy from the depths to which it has sunk.”

Israeli national security adviser and former Mossad chief, Efraim Halevy, underscored this Likud strategy: The coming 12 months will be “the most crucial in the history of Israel,” Halevy said, and promised that “one way or another, Arafat will disappear.” Sharon's bureau chief and lawyer, Dov Weissglass, was in Washington in early November, and claims to have convinced U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to freeze any action on the so-called Bush “road map” for a political settlement, until after the elections in Israel, if at all.

Sharon appears to have an advantage over Netanyahu in the Likud Nov. 28 primary. Sharon has made several moves to outflank Netanyahu, winning the endorsement of Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister and former chief of staff Shaul Mofaz, both of whom had been expected to support Netanyahu.

Olmert's endorsement could be extremely important, because of money rather than votes. He reportedly spends almost as much time in the United States—especially, New York—as in Jerusalem. He enjoys unusually strong relations with the Christian fundamentalists and the Jabotinskyite well-springs of Likud Party financing, tapping these sources through his New Jerusalem Fund. His collaborator in this project is Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, whose International Fellowship of Christians and Jews has also been raising millions of dollars from Christian fundamentalists throughout the United States. While the New Jerusalem Fund cannot legally donate to an election campaign, illegal financing has been suspected.

In the midst of the election campaign, the Christian Coalition, one of the biggest groups of American “fundies,” has a delegation in Israel. Led by chairman Roberta Combs, the delegation has met Israeli politicians and visited the settlements.

Sharon's own major financial supporter in the United States is Israeli-American businessman Arie Genger, who functions as Sharon's back channel to the Bush White House. Genger has been linked to the business interests of Meshulam Riklis, another major Sharon backer and a former associate of the late Jewish organized crime boss Meyer Lansky. Sharon is already under police investigation for illegal financing related to his 1999 Likud primary campaign; but Israeli Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein announced that no indictments will be announced against any candidate during the election period.

Sharon Brings in Outlaw Faction

Sharon has brought into the Likud party the faction of Jewish fanatics led by Moshe Feiglin, who leads a movement that wants to establish a Zionist state based on biblical law. In the 1990s Feiglin formed *Zo Artzeinu* (“This Is Our Land”), which organized demonstrations against the Oslo Accords. He was key in creating the incitement that motivated Yigal Amir to assassinate Prime Minister Rabin. Feiglin has been able to establish the so-called “Jewish Leadership” faction within the Likud. In elections for the party's 3,000-plus-member central committee, he won 100 delegates, a not insignificant faction. Among its members can be found former, and convicted, members of the terrorist Jewish underground and the outlawed Kahane Hai—including Baruch Kahane, son of assassinated Kach leader Rabbi Meir Kahane.

At a public event earlier this year, Feiglin declared, “Sharon is the best figure on the Right that anyone could imagine. There has never been a greater military leader than him in Israel, and it would be difficult to find in Israel a politician who has made a greater contribution to the settlement cause.”

But by all rights Sharon belongs in jail, both for war crimes and for many ongoing criminal investigations. In the latest, *Ha'aretz* on Nov. 16 reported that Sharon intervened directly with the director of the Israel Lands Administration, Yaakov Efrati, to give preference to a request he made concerning the transfer of a parcel of land near his Negev ranch. This is as if President Bush called the governor of Texas to intervene in litigation involving his ranch. In a second case, Sharon's office has frozen an increase in the price of agricultural water, after it had been approved by the government, the Water Council, and the farmers' “Objections Committee.” A third matter is Sharon's personal importation of Asian agricultural workers while his government conducts a big campaign to expel 50,000 of them. *Ha'aretz* concluded that these scandals “will probably not cast a shadow on [Sharon's] success in the opinion polls”—but Mitzna's peace campaign may.