

Palestinians in Israel at the Polls

September 28, 2019



Who could have missed Ayman Odeh's eloquent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, where he rightly asserted that "Arab-Palestinian citizens have chosen to reject Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his politics of fear and hate, and the inequality and division he advanced for the past decade"? Or his explanation of why he and the coalition he leads chose to nominate Benny Gantz—an IDF chief accused of war crimes against fellow Palestinians—for prime minister. It was on this promise, and with the full knowledge that the Joint List will never be part of the emerging future ruling coalition, that sixty percent of Israel's Arab citizens voted, making the Joint List coalition of Palestinian-Arab-led parties the third-largest list in the Knesset and the leading oppositional force in Israel.

This needs some unpacking. Palestinian-Arabs within pre-1967 Israel face Jewish chauvinism on two levels: as individual citizens and as a national minority. The Declaration of Independence and the Basic Laws of Israel, however, preclude the construction of apartheid, a condition characterized by institutional restrictions imposed on *individuals* due to their racial, gender, religious or national origin. Resident Palestinian-Arabs, in contrast, have the right to be citizens; to obtain an education; to participate freely in the political life of the country; to practice their religions; to retain the right to immigrate and emigrate; and the right to choose where to live and one's job and place of work.

That these rights are often poorly enforced or enforced in bad faith, or with a blind-eye toward specific violations, does not change the fact. The legal system of Israel stipulates its non-apartheid character, which is why Palestinian political life in Israel is not primarily oriented around the struggle for civil rights.

Palestinian oppression inside Israel is primarily and systemically rooted in the national question, at the level of the collectivity, not of the individual. In context, all existing Arab majority states arguably oppress both on an apartheid (individual, e.g., by withholding equal gender or religious minorities rights) and on an Arab chauvinist (communal/national, where minority Kurds and Berber communities, for instance, have no national rights) level. Israeli Palestinian-Arab parties reject the Zionist character of the Israeli state for its failure to their community as a legitimate *national*

minority.

The Communists seek a non-national state, a state of its citizens such as exists in the U.S.—where the state defines the nation, rather than where the dominant nation defines the state. The other parties exist to advance an assertion of Palestinian nationalism in one form or another. That is the common reason why the ruling Zionist parties have always refused formal electoral coalitions with these groups. It is understood that a Zionist coalition with any Palestinian party would be a slippery slope functional concession to the bi-national reality of Israel. It would challenge the existing Jewish power monopoly over political life, a challenge that the Zionist structure of Israel seeks to suppress. Israel is not an apartheid state, but it is a *Jewish chauvinist state*.

That is not to deny that Zionist parties, even settler parties, have and have always had Arab lists. But these slots exist to cement loyalties based on patronage. Israel functions as a Jewish chauvinist state, not as an apartheid state, precisely because its dominant Jewish circles are unwilling to adopt the conditionality of any Palestinian-Israeli party's *national* platform as a basis for an electoral alliance. Israel is willing to accept, and at times even actively promote, the social and economic integration of Palestinian-Arab citizens, but draws a line at their *political* integration.

As long as Israel remains in a cold war with its Arab minority, it will be unable to reach real peace with the Arab world. Not even if it successfully navigates formal power accords from on high with neighboring Arab ruling classes. Real peace between separate states no less than between nations within a bi-national or multi-national state framework can only be cemented from below; not by superior force of numbers or of arms, but by democratizing the relations among peoples.

That unwillingness to seek a democratic accord internally effectively locks out the Arab community from full participation in the governance of society and deprives that community from an equitable distribution of state funds—both developmentally and culturally—needed to put it on an equal footing with Israel's Jewish majority. This democratic deficit has habitually bred a cynical contempt—even resignation—on the part of the Arab community within Israel that no gains can be leveraged through electoral participation and has been reflected time and again in low voter turnout. Avenues of advancement could only be personal—through credentialization, entrepreneurship, or artistic and athletic achievement.

That is, until now.

The point is this. It was not the seemingly endless occupation that brought Palestinians to the polls in near record numbers. If that were the decisive issue, they might have been electorally engaged and committed long ago. They might have selected to support dovish Zionist parties that were in a position to place the occupation center stage as they did years ago when they backed Rabin. A poll conducted in April notably found that far more of them prefer to self-identify as Arab Israelis than as Palestinians.

No, it was rather on a far more intimate level that the loathsome Netanyahu regime threatened its Arab citizens. With the Nation-State Law, and with his attempt to permanently restrict and circumvent the legal system as a check against legislative excess—and to inoculate himself against serial law breaking—Palestinians began to see the outline of Netanyahu's ultimate nullification of the legal proscriptions against apartheid. Finally fed up with Netanyahu's Arab-baiting, racialized "othering" and unhinged chauvinist demagoguery, a continuous incitement that portended an immanent rollback of whatever social gains Palestinians have attained, Israeli Palestinians took matters into their own hands.

The election was a fight-back. Palestinians sought to preserve and extend their hard-fought

individual rights in the only way they could, by asserting their collective political rights to a shared future with Jews in this part of their common homeland.

Such is the background to the Arab vote. But before romanticizing this choice, it is necessary to understand that this is a devil's bargain. Benny Gantz, the leader of Kahol Lavan, who 11 out of 13 Arab parties on the Joint List recommended to form the next government, is no leftist, no liberal and no centrist. He is a soft Likudnik. The party he leads is a right wing party led by generals, and certainly not dovish generals. Gantz boasted in his campaign about the hundreds killed under his command in two Gaza incursions. He is hardly likely to restart peace talks with the Palestinian Authority and is ambiguous, in the most optimistic of readings, at a future two-state solution.

That the Joint List's Balad party refused to recommend him is cynically, but realistically seen as a feather in Gantz's cap, saving him from the charge of being an "Arab-lover" and thereby burnishing his hardline appeal. The Joint List's recommendation, even in its dissent, are two-prongs of a desperate ploy to put an end to the Netanyahu era.

Israelis—Jewish and Arab—are undoubtedly among the most misled peoples of any democracy. With the decades old dismantling of Israel's bureaucratic collectivist social democracy—in a process not utterly unlike that which transpired in Eastern Europe and Russia—state and Histadrut (Israel's Mapai-controlled labor union federation) properties were auctioned off at bargain basement prices to would be oligarchs. Celebrated in the long aftermath as a "start-up" economy, it is now one of the most unequal among advanced economies in the world. Its wealth is concentrated within a handful of families, who dominate the political process to the detriment of any progressive social agenda. The manifest inability to find affordable housing has driven hordes of Israelis, who have no real ideological or religious commitment to colonialization, to settle in the occupied territories.

And the Arab parties are really not much more appealing. Its leading faction, Hadash, led by the now celebrated Ayman Odeh, is, as are most Arab Communist Parties, staunchly pro-Bashar al-Assad. It even staged a demonstration in Tel Aviv calling for the investigation into the world wide "conspiracy against Syria." The rest of the Joint List also contains an amalgam of Nasserists and Islamists, some of whose prominent representatives are repugnant even to Jewish leftists for their repeated public celebration of the murder of innocents Jews as a legitimate form of national self-expression and their retailing of blood libels such as the harvesting of Palestinian organs.

Still, and for better or worse, these parties are the legitimate representatives of the overwhelming majority of Israel's Arab population, and certainly no more odious than Jewish-Israel's long dominant political parties.

It seems likely that this election will end in a unity government led by Gantz and Likud. But if it were a Likud shorn of or with a massively disempowered Netanyahu, Israelis Arabs would have done themselves, Israel and the world a tremendous service.