

**THE "TENT" REVOLUTION IN ISRAEL:
ROOTS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES**

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Israel has recently witnessed a mass protest movement, unprecedented in its history, calling for the introduction of a radical change of priorities directing the policies of Netanyahu's government toward the Israeli public and an urgent solution to the economic and social crises that have burdened Israelis, especially the increase in prices and taxes relative to the low wages that people are receiving. This movement has been inspired by the slogans of the democratization revolutions that have swept the Arab world, thus chanting, "people want to achieve social justice."

In spite of the fact that these protests - which became known as the "Tent Revolution" – seemed at first glance as demands with a socio-economic background, the analysis of the internal debate on it shows unequivocally that they are likely to affect the internal political reality in Israel and the conflict with the Arabs, specifically with the Palestinians, if domestic and regional circumstances are ripe enough to sustain the protests.

We shall discuss the roots of the "Tent Revolution" and its implications and assess the chances of its success and its repercussions domestically and at the level of conflict with the Palestinians.

Despair over the Market Economy

Benjamin Netanyahu is the politician known for his high enthusiasm about the market economy and privatization. As Minister of Finance in Sharon's government in 2003, he drove the train of privatization, based on the argument that became the foundational springboard of understanding his socio-economic ideology, where he said: "The slender man (referring to the private sector) carries the heavy man on his back (public sector), so the heavy man must go on a diet to reduce his weight through privatization". (1) When he returned to power as prime minister in 2009, he was keen on transferring the supervision of many of the services provided by the public sector, such as health, education and social welfare, to the management of the private sector which led to the dismissal of many workers on the one hand, sharply curtailed the wages on the other, and at the same time reduced taxes on private-sector companies. His economic ideology is based on the assumption that providing facilities for investors will lead to more job opportunities, generate more tax revenues to the state treasury, and bring about greater competition between different economic facilities. In return, however, he ignored the fact that the considerations that manipulate capital do not often conform to the interests of the public as capital is aimed at maximizing profits, and this causes it to reduce the number of employees and workers who are working in public sector institutions prior to the transfer of these institutions to the private sector..

Furthermore, private sector employers have resorted to reducing monthly wages to achieve the same objective. Contrary to Netanyahu's expectations, the privatization process has resulted in the monopoly of the most important economic facilities in the Zionist entity by a number of major companies, some of which are controlled by wealthy families. Thus, the privatization process did not result in competition, but rather, in the domination of limited capital over economic facilities which led to a significant rise in prices, especially of apartments, food and fuel. There is no doubt that the real estate sector was most affected by Netanyahu's policies of economic development, as the most important reasons for this was the extremely high prices of land. Although the average annual per capita income in Israel is \$19,000 USD, most of the Israeli working youth group holding academic qualifications can no longer afford to buy an apartment as the average price of an apartment is \$300,000. (2) Still, Netanyahu's government continued to offer facilities to investors and, while prices have increased considerably, stopped subsidizing commodities, thus rendering the Israeli public vulnerable to the scorch of rising prices. It cut the budget adopted by previous governments

to help young couples to buy apartments, by a quarter, which prompted the Israeli journalist, Nadav Eyal, to say that the average worker in Israel would need 129 salaries per month to afford buying a flat.

The Middle Class Revolt

The most prominent indication of the mass protest movement sweeping Israel these days is the refusal of the middle class in particular, to remain indifferent towards the economic and social policies pursued by Netanyahu's government as the vast majority of participants in the protests are classified as members of this class. The elite behind these protests raised a series of demands to the government, saying they could only call the protests to a halt if Netanyahu responded to them. The demands are as follows:

1. A full review of the agenda of national priorities and resetting it on new bases.
2. Gradual abolition of indirect taxes, and investment of tax surplus in providing services to the public.
3. Provision of accommodation in reasonable conditions, and the state's responsibility for the provision of residential apartments in all parts of Israel.
4. Raising minimum wage by 50%.
5. Tightening control over the application of laws relating to working conditions.
6. Application and enactment of the Free Education Bill from the age of three months and the reduction of the number of students per class to 21.4 students per class. (3)

Protest leaders also called for a comprehensive review of economic and social policies, particularly privatization and structural reforms that took place during the past two decades, as they found that these policies, instead of serving the interests of the Israeli public, have mainly served the interests of a limited set of capital only.

The elites overseeing the protests tried to convey to the ruling political elites that the failure to respond to these demands may push the protesters to begin gradual civil disobedience. Some leaders of the protests warned Israeli leadership that not responding to these demands will encourage the middle-class to leave Israel. This was clearly and explicitly expressed by the young actor and theatre director, Uni Jaba, who is also one of the leaders of the protest, when he said that Israeli youth is thinking seriously to migrate somewhere "where the monthly salary can pay for reasonably-priced rent and food, and where decent public transportation is available."(4)

Protests and the Crisis of the Israeli Right-Wing

One of the most important repercussions of the unprecedented protest movement sweeping Israel is that it has pushed to the heart of public debate in Israel the settlement project which Israel has established on the Arab territories occupied in 1967. The leaders of the protests and their supporters from the elites have emphasized the fact that the Netanyahu government's right-wing abandoned the middle-class and is not willing to help them access adequate housing, while the government is expanding direct and indirect taxes on them. Prompted by purely ideological motives, the government is pouring money into establishing settlements in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the occupied Golan Heights. Based on this fact, they believe that they cannot accept this situation and are demanding the re-formulation of the list of "national" priorities on new bases where a completely different list of priorities is to be adopted by the government.

Many have resorted to the language of numbers to emphasize the fact that the list of "national" priorities is based on non-logical standards, due to the enthusiasm of the ruling right-wing for the settlement project which made it inclined to disregard the suffering of the masses as a result of the exorbitant cost of the settlement project (as the overall total civil and

military cost of maintaining settlements reached \$ 1.5 billion annually.) This has left many wondering why the state should burden the Israeli public with taxes to finance the construction of settlements. There are those who point to the fact that the existence of settlements prolongs the conflict with the Arabs, which means the increase of security costs at the expense of budgets to be allocated to civil services such as education, health, and social welfare. Since the outbreak of the intifada in late September 2000, the amount of money added to security costs to secure the settlements has reached \$13.5 billion. (5) This provoked sociologist Shlomo Spiritsky, theorist of the protest movement, to say that the state has wasted huge budgets on building settlements while it is not doing anything to help the other groups of the population, which makes the government suffer from "schizophrenia." It is clear that the Israeli right-wing, both religious and secular, is the biggest loser in the protest movement in the sense that it is the only political trend which is most associated with and enthusiastic about the settlements project and, thus, it is in a position of self-defence, fearing that the protests may affect the outcome of the next general election. The most outstanding indication that the protests reveal the crisis of the right-wing is the fact that the only party that dared to declare its support unreservedly for Netanyahu was the so-called "Council of Rabbis of the West Bank," a structure which includes the most extremist and racist rabbis. (6)

Netanyahu is aware that the rise of the right-wing in his leadership to power in 1996 was precisely because of a clear change in the direction of the middle class in Israel. A study conducted by the Israeli Institute for Democracy has indicated that the middle class at that time switched from supporting Labour to supporting the Likud, and accordingly, Netanyahu is aware of the serious consequences that can result from the protest movement organized by the middle class against the policies of his government; the same people who brought him to power are the same who are laying a long list of charges against him. (7)

In his own defence, Netanyahu has followed two clear tactics: on the one hand, he demonstrated an understanding of the protesters' demands and began to respond to some of them. He began distributing donations to professional organizations which have not yet participated in the protests, in a move to persuade them not to join, and ordered the formation of a committee of experts to review "national" priorities. On the other hand, however, he attacked the elites leading the protests and accused them of being "left-wing anarchists, motivated by narrow political motives in order to overthrow his elected government." Right-wing theorists tried desperately to utilize the protests to promote their ideology, as they claimed that the housing problem could be resolved through intensive construction in the settlements in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights on the grounds that land prices there are cheap compared to those in central Israel.

The Future of the Protest Movement

There are many factors that represent a source of strength for the protest movement and, in return, there are factors which represent a source of weakness. Some of the factors of strength are its expansion and ability to attract new segments of the population in addition to the fact that there is a consensus on the credibility of claims that are submitted to the extent that the right-wing did not dare to criticize or challenge them. At the same time, Netanyahu's behaviour during the protests provided further evidence of his lack of qualifications of leadership, making him incapable of managing conflict in the face of the protest movement. He anxiously hurried to present attractive offers to representatives of trade unions to sway them from joining the movements of protest. On the other hand, there are factors of weakness which may limit the ability of the protest movement to sustain its momentum. Despite the widening of the protest spectrum, which has been characterized by ethnicity, participation has been confined mainly to the Israelis of Western origin that represent the middle class, while indications demonstrate that the Israelis of Oriental origin, who were predominantly representing the poor and vulnerable groups in Israeli society, are absent. They are, on the

one hand, reluctant to come out against the right-wing, as the overwhelming majority of the Orientals are traditional supporters of the right-wing, and, on the other hand, sensitive to any mass protest led by Westerners.

In spite of the amount of criticism against Netanyahu these days, there is a consensus nonetheless among observers that he has no real competitors, as the popularity of the opposition leader Tzipi Livni is at its lowest. In addition, the governments in which Livni had participated bear, in the eyes of protesters, a large part of the responsibility for solidifying the distorted priority list that resulted in economic and social crisis experienced by the middle class.

Palestinian Resistance and the Future of the Protests

What Netanyahu needs most, under these conditions, is to be able to prove to the Israeli public that the growing protest movement is overstressed and that Israel is facing strategic threats which require that the protests be halted so as to face the external enemy. It appears that some groups affiliated with the Palestinian resistance have validated Netanyahu's attack on the protest movement. At the height of the demonstrations, some of these groups launched rockets attacks into southern Israel, causing the Israeli media coverage of the protest movement to shrink while the leaders of the Israeli right-wing dominated the Israeli media to talk about the significance of rocket attacks in light of the protest movements. They saw that the incident requires that the parties reach a quick agreement with the government to resolve the crisis so that the government can have a full-hand to handle the threats of rockets. However, the media coverage of the rocket attacks subsided because the Gaza government was quick to deal with the rocket launchers, which reduced the ability of the right-wing to exploit these attacks.

Meanwhile, the attacks of Palestinian groups during the intensification of mass protests indicate the crisis of lack of awareness by some of the Palestinian resistance movement groups, as these groups, in many cases, lack sensitivity to the circumstances of time and space. They do not link resistance operations with regional and international circumstances, which cause resistance operations, in many cases, to reflect negatively on the Palestinian cause.

It is true that the recent public protests did not raise questions about the settlements and did not object to the Zionist policies of the right-wing, not for moral reasons, but for socio-economic considerations. Nevertheless, it exacerbated the crisis of the Israeli right-wing's political discourse which is greatly enthusiastic about keeping the settlements and the occupied territories, and is now threatening the legitimacy of the settlement projects in the eyes of large segments of the Israeli public opinion. Simultaneously, this movement may contribute to the erosion of the state of Israel, as it shows Netanyahu's false claim that the position of his government towards settlements represents the Zionist consensus. Moreover, the protests movement is a great embarrassment to the forces colluding with right-wing government, especially the U.S. administration as it would be difficult for the United States to justify its opposition to any attempt to condemn Israel at the United Nations because of the settlement construction when large segments of Israeli society oppose the continued investment in the construction of settlements, although for economic and social rather than moral reasons. Therefore, Palestinian resistance must be more careful about choosing the time, place, and means to carry out resistance operations.

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