



Adalah's Post-Election Commentary:

## In Israel's elections, racism is the winning ballot

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23 March 2015

The elections for the 20<sup>th</sup> Israeli Knesset was not lacking in drama: media ploys, political realignments, and several surprises as the right-wing Likud party, contrary to many expectations, defeated the Zionist Union, considered to be a center-left party in Israel. The elections also saw an unprecedented level of racist incitement against Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, a fifth of the population, which played a critical part in the election's events and results. This series of threats, intimidations, and attempts to delegitimize Arab citizens and their political participation, which occurred throughout the process, did not end until the polls closed on 17 March.

The Prime Minister announced the latest election after the dissolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> Israeli Knesset in December 2014. During that government's term (2013-2014), the Knesset amended the Election Law, which raised the threshold required to enter the parliament from 2% to 3.25%. The goal behind this new law was to substantially weaken or exclude the three main Arab political parties, which ran separately for the Knesset, with each attaining 3 to 4 seats. In response to the new law, the Arab parties decided to run together as a single slate – called the Joint List (*al-Qa'imah al-Mushtarakah*) in Arabic – despite their political and ideological differences.

Adalah and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) argued, as part of a petition to the Israeli Supreme Court, that the amended Election Law discriminated against the Arab parties, as the new threshold was forced upon them, and argued that the law reflected the imposition of the political will of the Israeli Jewish majority in the Knesset against the political participation rights of the Arab minority. However, the Court, in an 8-1 vote, [rejected the petition and upheld the law](#); the sole Arab justice was the only dissenting vote.

Following the unity of the Arab parties, the Joint List launched its platform to combat the racism in Israel. In a debate on Israel's TV Channel 2, former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) stated: "There is no difference between the Communists, the Islamists and the Nasserists. What unites them is hatred of the State of Israel, and they represent the terrorist organizations in the Knesset." Lieberman tried to portray the List's unity as a conspiracy, yet he forgot to mention that he was in fact a key sponsor for raising the electoral threshold that pushed the Arab parties to unite in order to overcome it.

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Lieberman's views were not just a passing statement. Even before the announcement of the Joint List's candidacy, the right-wing parties in the Knesset expressed their intention to disqualify it from running in the elections. A few hours after the Joint List officially submitted its candidates, Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu [filed motions for disqualification](#) against the Joint List and against MK Haneen Zoabi (Tajammu/Balad) to the Central Elections Committee (CEC). The CEC's hearings on the disqualification motions devolved into a hysteria of racist attacks and humiliation against the Arab representatives, including statements by many Israeli politicians and officials present that repeatedly interrupted MK Zoabi's speech in her defense against the motions. The politicians called MK Zoabi a terrorist and said that "her hands are stained with blood", and made chauvinistic insults against her including remarks about her clothing. The peak of these racist attacks occurred when, after MK Zoabi recited a quote in Arabic, a Likud party member yelled: "I am scared that you are going to say 'Allahu Akbar' and blow yourself up!" The CEC approved her disqualification with 27 votes to 6, and Adalah represented MK Zoabi before the Supreme Court. The Court [cancelled the disqualification](#) in an 8-1 ruling on 18 February 2015.

The series of racist incitement did not end here. In the run-up to the elections, Lieberman launched a public campaign entitled "Haneen to Jenin", calling for the expulsion of MK Zoabi to Jenin, a city in the occupied West Bank, and the revocation of her Israeli citizenship. Lieberman launched a parallel campaign slogan entitled "Ariel to Israel, Umm el-Fahem to Palestine", promoting the official annexation of West Bank settlements (like Ariel) while calling for the population transfer Arab citizens living in the Triangle area, including Umm el-Fahem (pop.: 52,000), the third-largest Arab town in Israel. During a debate on TV Channel 2, the head of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh, stated, "We Arabs in Israel are twenty percent of the state's citizens," to which Lieberman responded "For now."

The extreme right-wing politician Baruch Marzel (Yahad) also based his campaign on personal incitement against MK Zoabi, with the slogan, "Wipe the smile off her face." Right-wing activists on the ground were quick to answer the call. On 3 March 2015, at a forum on women's political participation at an academic center in Ramat Gan, right-wing activists attacked MK Zoabi by throwing liquid all over her. Worse yet, after they came out of the forum, Emily Muwati, a consultant for MK Zoabi, was attacked by activists with a metal rod and received injuries to her head that required her hospitalization. Baruch Marzel later wrote on his Facebook page: "We promised, we fulfilled, we will continue..."

Although Lieberman's remarks against Arab citizens were the most extreme – such as his statement that "Those who are against us, there is nothing to be done – we need to pick up an axe and cut off his head" – other Israeli parties and political candidates also expressed racist attitudes. Former Economy Minister Naftali Bennett (Habayet Hayehudi, or Jewish Home) stated during a speech: "People who drive to the Negev [home to 200,000 Arab Bedouin citizens of Israel] know that they cannot park their cars near popular tourist sites, because they will get broken into...in Petah Tikva too, and in the Galilee [the northern area which is over 50% Arab]," implying that Arab citizens would steal their cars. Moshe Kahlon, head of the Kulanu party and a former Likud Minister of Communications, despite campaigning primarily on a platform of social and economic issues, said that he "would not sit on a government that relied on the Arabs." Even the center Zionist Union, led by Isaac Herzog, head of the Labor Party, also displayed racist views. In response to accusations that Herzog was not a strong enough leader, the party released a video interview of his comrades during his military service, in which one of them commented "Herzog understands the Arab mentality...including through the crosshairs [of a sniper]."

Thus, over the long weeks before the elections, campaigns of incitement against the Arab citizens became a fundamental pillar for political popularity in Israel. The "Arab voter" became a part of the series of threats used by Israeli Jewish parties to scare citizens, including with a nuclear-armed Iran, Hamas-made tunnels, and Hezbollah rockets.

In the midst of this racist atmosphere, came Election Day. Sagi Kaisler, the director of the Samaria Residents' Committee, which represents the settlement outposts in the occupied West Bank, organized 1,500 settlers to participate as volunteers at voting stations in Arab towns and villages. Kaisler said:

"Wherever there are Arab villages, there is fraud. This is the way they work. They do this in their local elections, they are not doing this against the state, it is in their nature...the Joint List united in order to pass the electoral threshold, but primarily because they are evil parties that want to overthrow the right-wing government...We are in a battle for the future of our state, against Arabs, against Europeans, and against some American forces." To protect the settlers, an armed group carrying live ammunition, tear gas, sticks, electric strikes, and other weapons accompanied the volunteers to the voting stations. According to reports from TV Channel 2, these activities were conducted under the direct orders of Likud MK Yariv Levin, who is currently a leading candidate for the position of the Minister of Justice.

Finally, while these settler-militants were roaming Arab towns and villages on Election Day, Netanyahu, fearing that he was slipping in the elections polls, concluded the long trail of racist incitement by releasing a video message on his Facebook page stating that: "The right-wing government is in danger. The Arabs are going to the polls in droves. Left-wing NGOs are bringing them on buses." Judging from Likud's victory, these messages appeared to be successful.

The elections for the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset developed a new political representation for Palestinian Arab citizens – the Joint List – to challenge the Israeli political scene from Lieberman to Herzog. The Prime Minister, meanwhile, does not appear interested in abandoning his winning ticket: incitement against Arab citizens. Regardless of the debates that will unfold in the follow-up to this election, it is clear that racism was the most victorious ballot.