

## **Whither Arab Israeli parties?**

By Danny Rabinowitz

Haaretz Op-Ed Page,  
Thursday July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004

The sun hasn't shone on Hadash in recent years. The political list which formed in the 1960s as a coalition around the Communist Party of Israel (Maki) was, in the '70s and '80s, the principal political mouthpiece for the Arabs of Israel, with six Knesset members at its peak.

In 2003, Hadash ran in the elections together with Ta'al (Ahmed Tibi's Arab Movement for Change) and managed to get two representatives aside from Tibi into the legislature, Mohammed Barakeh and Issam Makhoul. Without Tamar Gozansky, who completed three terms as a Knesset member, the Jewish-Arab partnership that had always characterized Hadash diminished somewhat, while at the same time, the party's presence in the increasingly heated social-economic debate shrunk.

The lowering of Hadash's social-economic profile is tied to the end of the Gozansky era, but there are other reasons too. On the face of it, considering that the Arabs are the poorest group in Israel, a party that looks out for the weakest should win their sweeping support. But party politics is not only the banding together of individuals with the same interests; it is also a framework for the expression of a sense of identity, participation and solidarity. When it comes to this aspect, the captains of Hadash know, the Arabs in Israel today resemble their Jewish neighbors: their choice of a party primarily reflects their ethno-nationalist feelings.

The crumbling of the Oslo process, the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the events of October 2000 strengthened the Palestinian component in the identity of Arab Israelis. In the political playing field, the consolidation of Azmi Bishara's Balad and the United Arab List's Islamic bloc - two parties that offer their own interpretations of the

identity of Arab Israelis, the issue of their participation in the Israeli project, and their place in the Middle East in general - changed the political map of the Arab street.

It embroils the captains of Hadash in a rearguard battle for the survival of the party, in the framework of which they are fortifying a more nationalist position at the expense of social-economic issues. In back rooms, a few of them also refer to the Jewish-Arab partnership as an obstacle in the struggle for the Arab vote.

These dilemmas, which Hadash will have to resolve in the near future, are interesting in themselves. It is no less important to understand their relevance to politics in Israel in general. Benjamin Netanyahu, with the backing of Shinui, is implementing an aggressive economic policy that is shrinking the middle class and driving the weaker strata into the depths of poverty and alienation. The differences between him and the Labor Party in this aspect are marginal.

Shas, many of whose voters have stopped seeing it as a party of the righteous and of social justice and have begun to experience it as a junta of hedonistic associates, is weakening. In the political arena meanwhile, the willingness of Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert and Shaul Mofaz to discuss transferring territories to the Palestinians and dismantling settlements is unraveling more threads in the tapestry of the Israeli right's identity.

The combination of the economic maltreatment and the breaking of the political taboo is creating a new political expanse - the poor supporters of the Likud, Shas, One Nation and Labor whose political opinions are more compromising than they once were, and who are unable to find a single party that instills in them any hope of escaping their economic distress.

And this is where Hadash's ethno-nationalist base crosses paths with the base of the left in Israel. In its current composition, Hadash - the only party that offers an alternative to the

neoliberalism that characterizes all the others - fears the face of the Jewish public. An attempt on its part to reconstruct its good days in Tel Aviv, Givatayim and Haifa - the vast majority of Maki's voters in the 1950s were Jewish - could prove that the stigma of its branding as an Arab party is too strong for Jews in significant numbers to cross the lines and vote for it. In such an instance, the party could lose out in both sectors.

On the other hand, the Jewish public that Netanyahu is driving down into poverty, the same public that received legitimization from Sharon for political compromise and believes that political compromise will improve its economic lot, is likely to total a number of Knesset seats. The remainder could theoretically vote for a real left-wing party, dovish but devoid of a clear ethno-nationalist hue - in short, a party the likes of which is not to be found in Israel today, and whose chances of being established are low considering the climbing election threshold and the Party Funding Law.

Presumably, the Netanyahu-alienated and Sharon-liberated poor will again remain at home on the day of the next elections, and will not disrupt Israeli democracy on its celebratory day.