

Monday, May 31, 1999

An Arab party in the coalition

Busy trying to put together a coalition, Ehud Barak has not yet called upon the Arab parties to join his government. Despite his election campaign slogan, "The nation wants a change," one gets the impression that, while he has introduced a new style in coalition negotiations, he is still unable to break the taboo that denies legitimization to the idea that negotiations can be conducted with Israeli Arabs on the possibility of partnership in the government.

This is a disappointing state of affairs that is casting a shadow over Barak's leadership: when he vied for the prime ministership, he courted Arab voters, who succumbed to his overtures and gave him almost unanimous support at the polling booth. Israeli Arabs deserve the same treatment as the Jewish citizens of this country. However, Barak is giving them a raw deal: whereas he considers the Jewish parties to be legitimate candidates for membership in his government, he is giving the Arab parties the cold shoulder.

A legacy of prejudicial thinking that has accumulated during Zionism's 100 years of existence makes it hard for Israeli Jews to accustom themselves to the idea that an Israeli-Arab party can be considered a worthy coalition partner. It is difficult to banish this collective mental block overnight; however, Barak is at a point in time that would be very suitable for the initiation of demolition activity against this mental block.

The Israeli Arab community at the turn of the millennium is different in terms of its hopes, self-image, symbols of identification and political awareness from the Arab population that remained here after the War of Independence. Today's Israeli Arab community is variegated and its members have different views on how they define their link to the State of Israel. In many respects, this community is no different from the mosaic of Israel's Jewish communities. From the standpoint of coalition partnership, very little separates the anti-Zionist stance of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties from the goal of Arab parties to have Israel define itself as a country that represents all

its citizens.

Before we begin using a microscope to find the differences in attitude between the Arab parties that obtained seats in the 15th Knesset and to determine to what extent their platforms are compatible with the Zionist consensus, we should demand that the prime minister-elect give them the same status enjoyed by the country's Jewish parties.

Barak must declare his readiness to view the Arab parties as potential coalition partners whose membership would be conditional on their acceptance of the government's guidelines. Such a declaration is vital for several important reasons, even if there is no guarantee that any Israeli Arab will join the coalition. (The odds of this scenario becoming a reality in this Knesset does not seem too likely in view of the refusal of at least some of the members of the three Arab parties to join the government.)

In the past, the Israeli-Jewish establishment saw nothing wrong with granting token jobs to isolated representatives of the country's Arab community and thought that, in doing so, it was helping to heal the wounds of deprivation that have been causing Israeli Arabs so much pain during all of Israel's 50 years of statehood. We must reject as obsolete this method of appointing Uncle Ahmeds to serve as deputy cabinet ministers or as judges. The Israeli Arab community deserves to be treated with respect by the Jewish parties, especially the one that will be forming the next government. Barak should remember that the perception of the Arab parties as potential partners in the management of this country is more than just a moral imperative. It is also important for pragmatic reasons: In the final analysis, they are natural allies in the promotion of the peace process.