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The taboo that won't be broken

By LARRY DERFNER

(June 15) - Nearly 95 percent of Israeli Arabs voted for Ehud Barak, who insists that he wants to be prime minister for everyone. So why won't he have an Arab party in his coalition?

Before the elections, speculation was that if Ehud Barak became prime minister, he might break the taboo against admitting Israeli Arab parties into the government and appoint an Arab cabinet minister. But, after three weeks of coalition negotiations, it seems almost certain that under a Barak administration this taboo will remain in force.

The lack of attraction is mutual. Barak has made it clear he doesn't want the three Arab parties in his coalition. The Arab parties have responded in kind. Only one, the United Arab List, tried to make a deal with Barak, but now that the prime minister-elect has shown he's not interested, the UAL, led by the Islamic Movement, is making out like it never wanted to join in the first place.

Nevertheless, Israeli Arab politicians say they feel insulted. While they object to Barak's emerging policy guidelines as prohibitively right-wing, they insist he should at least try to reach a meeting of the minds with them, as he does with the Likud, the National Religious Party and Shas, who are also at odds with him politically.

"Barak should invite us into the government and negotiate with us, and we should then have the right to refuse - on the basis of his guidelines," said MK Issam Mahoul of Hadash.

IN THE election Barak got 94.6 percent of the Arab vote, which accounted for roughly three-quarters of his 12% margin of victory. "I heard Barak say that he saw Meretz as a natural partner in his coalition because 90% of Meretz voters also voted for him. So what does he have to say to Israeli Arabs, who gave him 95% of their votes?" said Saleem Salameh, deputy editor of the Israeli Arab newspaper *A-Sinara*.

Disenchantment is setting in among the citizens who made up Barak's largest, most solid bloc of support. "As far as Barak is concerned, 'The nigger did his job, now the nigger can go home,' " said Khalim Taha, standing behind the counter of his grocery store in Kafr Kasim, an Arab town near Rosh Ha'ayin. This sentiment was echoed along Al Sultan Street, Kafr Kasim's main drag.

"Barak plays up to the settlers and tosses us aside. If the elections were held again today, there's no way I would vote for him again," said a man sitting outside a hardware store.

"If Barak does not bring Arabs into his government, he will have betrayed us," said Caroline Issa, a clerk in a housewares store.

Many Israeli Arabs have concluded that the pre-election suspicions they had about Barak have now been confirmed. Barak's emissaries, led by One Israel MK Yossi Beilin, had their work cut out convincing voters that, despite having spent his adult life fighting Arab enemies, Barak is genuinely committed to the peace process and to Israeli Arab equality.

In the end, the Israeli Arab vote "was more anti-Netanyahu than pro-Barak," said Salameh.

Whatever their motivations, the Israeli Arab turnout for Barak was massive, much greater than expected.

"Barak owes an enormous debt to Israeli Arabs," said a source close to the prime minister-elect.

Add to this Barak's constant talk of wanting to be "everybody's" prime minister, the Oslo Accord's "normalizing" effect on Israeli-Arab relations, and the increasingly widespread recognition that Arabs are second-class citizens in Israel, and the time seemed ripe for giving them a seat at the head table.

But it isn't. Israeli Arab parties remain politically beyond the pale for the incoming prime minister. It's easy to understand why.

All three of them support Israel's return to the 1967 borders, the dismantling of all settlements and the sharing of Jerusalem as a capital for both Israel and Palestine. All three have come to accept Balad leader Azmi Bishara's idea that Israel should not be a Jewish state, but rather a "state of all its citizens." The Islamic Movement includes elements sympathetic to Hamas terror. Balad MK Ahmed Tibi was, until a couple of months ago, an adviser to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. In virtually any Israeli-Arab political dispute, the Israeli Arab parties can be depended upon to vocally take up the Arab side.

"Barak was never of a mind to include the Arab parties in his government, or to appoint an Arab minister. His attitude [towards them in the coalition negotiations] is very much in character for him," said the source.

THE SOURCE added another reason why Barak wouldn't take the Arab parties in: because the National Religious Party said it wouldn't sit in a government with them, and Barak wants the NRP as a partner.

Consequently, some harsh expressions are being voiced against the prime minister-elect. His refusal to court the Arab parties carries "a whiff of racism," said Tibi.

Bishara, who withdrew his candidacy for prime minister two days before the election so as not to hurt Barak's chances, said: "I'm not disappointed in Barak because I had no illusions about him. He's a right-winger. He wants to bring about a reconciliation among the Jewish public, not with the Arab public." Despite his lack of enthusiasm for the One Israel leader, though, Bishara said he does not regret his withdrawal from the race because Barak is still preferable to Netanyahu.

Even Nawaf Massalha of One Israel said he is disappointed with Barak. "I told him he should invite the Arab parties into the government, and I told him I wanted to be appointed a minister. I haven't gotten any answers from him."

Asked why he thought Barak was reticent, Massalha replied, "He shares the Jewish majority's misconception about Israeli Arabs. They're afraid we can't be trusted on matters of security, which has long proven to be untrue."

Despite his ambitions, Massalha, who was deputy minister of health in the Rabin government, has no chance of becoming a minister under Barak, said the source. As head of One Israel's campaign in the Arab sector, Massalha "didn't deliver the goods," added the source.

Furthermore, appointing Massalha wouldn't offer much of a political payoff. "There probably isn't a single Israeli Arab who considers Massalha as his political leader. To them, it would be like appointing a Jew," said the source.

Regarding the Arab parties' refusal to join the coalition, their stated reason - that Barak's policy guidelines are unacceptable - seems unconvincing. The guidelines of any government are almost meant to be disregarded, and given Barak's hope of forming a coalition with such disparate partners as Meretz, Shas, Yisrael Ba'aliya, Likud, NRP and/or Shinui, the guidelines of a Barak government would seem especially meaningless.

Tibi explained that the guidelines are merely a sign of what's to come; the real problems with a Barak government are its prospective members and likely misdeeds.

"Ahmed Tibi is going to sit in a government with the Likud and NRP?" he asked rhetorically. Along with MKs from Hadash and the United Arab List, Tibi said he would much prefer a partnership with Shas, which is more dovish than the Likud or the NRP, and which, as head of the Interior and Labor ministries, gets high marks for its treatment of the Arab sector.

The other problem for Arab parties, said Tibi, is that if they join the government, they bear "collective responsibility" for everything that government does. "I would bear collective responsibility for the destruction of illegally built homes, for the humiliation of Palestinians at IDF checkpoints. Whereas if I stay out of the government, I'm free - I can vote for what I want and vote against what I don't want," he said.

Still, doesn't it seem a waste for Israeli Arabs to have given Barak so much support, and now for Arab parties not to demand decision-making power, power to control budgets - power to take equality, not ask for it - in return?

"You could look at it that way," acknowledged Hadash MK Mahoul. "But we cannot lend a hand to policies that violate our deepest principles." He and other Arab MKs maintain it is the responsibility of the Israeli government - not their own - to end discrimination against Israeli Arabs.

SO BARAK, like all Labor Party prime ministers before him, will be counting on the Arab parties to support his government from the opposition, on the assumption that the threat from the Right should keep them effectively on his side.

But Tibi warned, "Barak should not make the mistake of taking us for granted."

"We are not in his pocket." Bishara added, "We cannot bring Barak down in the upcoming Knesset, but if he acts against our interests, we will try to bring him down in the next election."

The source said that in lieu of including Arab parties in the government or appointing an Arab minister, Barak himself will have to ensure that Israeli Arabs get their due. This, the source said, includes recognizing some 40 "unrecognized" Israeli Arab municipalities, which would give them state funding and services for the first time; raising the quality of Arab schools; increasing municipal budgets to the levels enjoyed by the Jewish population and hiring many more Arab academics in the public sector, where they are glaringly underrepresented.

Two weeks ago, after Barak held a perfunctory meeting with the heads of the Arab parties - called in response to protests from Arab MKs and in the media - Bishara said he detected one bright spot. "Barak told me that Israeli Arabs are entitled to equality even if none of them voted for him," Bishara recalled.

Said the source: "I think Barak really means what he says. Now he has four years to prove it. And if he doesn't - if he doesn't give the Israeli Arabs something tangible to show for their votes - then the next time he goes looking for their support, they won't be there."