

Israel's Election: "Obamafication" of Israeli Oppression

By [Ajamu Baraka](#)

Global Research, March 18, 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Camouflaging the reality of elite domination with rhetorical sleight of hand techniques and symbol manipulation has catapulted Barack Obama over Ronald Reagan as the new "great communicator." And while this privileging of style over substance is not new in bourgeois politics, Obama's ability to demobilize opposition from the left sets him apart and is becoming a model for liberal accommodationist parties.

This version of Trojan horse politics is being deployed by the Zionist Union (ZU) in Israel in both its domestic campaigning and international public relations. Led by Isaac Herzog, the ZU, with its political and social base in the Israeli Labor Party, appears to have been successful in constructing a narrative that the ZU is a more moderate and reasonable change from the polarizing and pugnacious policies of Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party. With liberal Zionist money pouring into Israel from throughout the Jewish diaspora and a resuscitation of the public relations stunt called the two-state solution, the ZU became the party of "[hope and change](#)" for many Israelis fed-up with Netanyahu's alienating style – sound familiar?

Of course Isaac Herzog is no Obama and the public relations challenge is even more daunting for the Israeli elite when the reality of Israel's existence as a "Zionist state" depends on the political subordination of its Palestinian citizens, a rejection of the right to return for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled for their lives in 1948, and the colonization of more and more of the "officially recognized" occupied territories in Palestine.

Gideon Levy [points out](#):

"While Netanyahu's insistence on Israel's continued ruling over millions of Palestinians is expressed in aggressive, often religious and nationalistic language, Herzog's justifications for doing the same thing would sound much softer and easier to digest in the Western world."

The shift that liberal Zionism is attempting to effect with its support for the ZU is merely at the level of perception. On the substantive and essentially colonialist issues, the historic positions of the Israeli Labor Party – and now of Herzog and the Zionist Union – do not depart significantly from the positions of Netanyahu's Likud Party.

On the issue of settlements, one of the main issues that has continually undermined agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, Herzog and the ZU have not committed to building new settlements in the occupied territories of the West Bank but have expressed support for expansion in existing settlement projects. For Palestinians expanding settlements or new settlements both translate into more territory lost to the Israeli state.

On the right of return for the more than 700,000 Palestinian refugees displaced in the war of 1948, [Herzog is clear](#): “No right of return for the Palestinians to Israel in any way.” And on the issue of Jerusalem and the desire for a [contiguous Palestinian state](#) with East Jerusalem as its capital, Herzog and the ZU have not strayed away from the historic positions of the Labor Party or of Likud that “for Zionism to prevail and to succeed we must make sure that Gush Etzion and Maaleh Adumim (settlements that disconnect Jerusalem from the West Bank and make a contiguous Palestinian state almost impossible) will be part of Israel forever.

The consistency of the Zionist Union with the Zionist policies since 1948 should not be surprising. After all, they named it Zionist Union for a reason! However, there are many people in the U.S. and Western Europe who need to believe that the ZU represents some significant change in the Zionist project. This particular affliction emanates from an inability to accept that the Zionist project is a colonial project in which the appropriation of Palestinian land and the subordination and repression of Palestinian people and the denial of authentic self-determination is an inevitable by-product.

But for Palestinians there is no escape from the oppressive reality of Israeli occupation and the systematic denial of fundamental human rights. It is a lived reality. It is lived in Gaza where Palestinians live in [the blasted ruins of what were once their homes](#), shivering through the winter without adequate food, water, and the basic material needs of life. It is lived by the 1.4 million Palestinians living as second-class citizens in Israel and discriminated against in every sector of life, and it is lived by the millions of stateless, de-humanized, and degraded Palestinians living the hell of military occupation.

And while some Palestinians in Israel are participating in the electoral process, [others](#) decry the elections as an unprincipled “normalization” of the occupation. For those Palestinians, the elections are seen as a macabre joke.

Like the bait and then switch policies of the Obama era in the U.S that promised liberal reforms but delivered neoliberal austerity and permanent war, liberalism in Israel does not offer Palestinians anything more than the continuation of the same, except the added and more nefarious consequence that with a “liberal” Zionist Union in power there will be less international mobilization against the policies of occupation.

Ajamu Baraka is a human rights activist, organizer and geo-political analyst. Baraka is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington, D.C. and editor and contributing columnist for the Black Agenda Report. He is a contributor to “Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence” (Counterpunch Books, 2014). He can be reached at www.AjamuBaraka.com

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