

'McCarthyism' Rises in Israel

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JERUSALEM, Aug 26, 2010 (IPS) – Rightwing Israeli groups financially supported by Jewish and fundamentalist Christian groups from abroad are on a campaign to undermine free thought in Israeli universities. Collaterally, a move is under way by right-wing parties in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, to limit the freedom of action of civil and human rights-minded NGOs.

Under the semblance of seeking “no more than balance”, the right-wingers are pressuring hard for a clampdown on professors and lecturers who are deemed to have an “anti-Zionist tilt”.

The first target was Tel Aviv University with the country's largest student body.

An organisation called the Institute for Zionist Strategies is demanding that the TA University president survey the reading material proposed by a number of sociology lecturers with a view to balancing them with other lecturers who hold stridently opposing views.

The Institute which alleges that most prominent Israeli universities have “a post-Zionist bias” in their sociology, history and political science departments defines post-Zionism in its own published documents as “the pretence to undermine the foundations of the Zionist ethos and an affinity with the radical leftist dream.”

Another ultra-rightist group, Im Tirtzu, has taken the lead in a widespread campaign against the Ben-Gurion University based in Beersheba. It said in a letter to university President Prof. Rivka Karmi that if the “anti-Zionist tilt does not end”, it will persuade donors, both in Israel and abroad, to stop contributing to the University.

The organisation gave the university one month to accede to its demands. If there is no satisfactory comeback, it would also advise students to boycott the university, the organisation said.

The chairman of Im Tirtzu, Ronen Shoval, said in his letter to Karmi that nine of 11 permanent political science faculty members were involved in “radical leftwing political activities” such as encouraging young Israelis not to serve in the Israeli army.

Karmi, however, is standing her ground — for now, saying she would not respond: “As a matter of principle, I don't respond to threats or extortions, or in this case, of a witch hunt.”

But, alarmed at the sudden assault and surge of such “McCarthyist pressure”, as one university lecturer put it, the heads of Israel's seven leading universities did respond. In a

joint statement, they urged “condemnation of this dangerous attempt to create a thought police.

“No Israeli university has to prove its staff’s love of their homeland to any organisation, and certainly not to a political one that is trying to present a tendentious political position to advance its own public relations.

“As is proper in an enlightened democratic country,” the statement continued, “Israeli academia is not a political body, and members of faculty are selected solely according to objective criteria of excellence in research and teaching.”

What has disturbed many academics is the at least partial backing accorded by Israel’s education minister Gideon Sa’ar to the right-wing campaign against academic staff. He took an especially harsh position earlier this year when there was a call for the dismissal of Prof. Neve Gordon, a department chairman at Ben Gurion University, who had urged a “social, economic and political boycott of Israel” to end the Occupation.

Yossi Sarid, a former education minister in the ‘peace governments’ of the ‘90s lambasted Sa’ar for jumping on the Im Tirzu bandwagon, and for giving succor to the advocates of “thought police”.

“We should be aware of a disturbing trend,” wrote Sarid in his column in the liberal Tel Aviv paper, Haaretz. “When Israeli academia is besmirched and slandered, it is liable to capitulate and include in its syllabus ‘The Science of Occupation’.” And, he continued, “Only unabashed rightists or unadulterated patriots will be allowed to teach such a course — their supreme contribution to the glory of the State of Israel and its global legitimacy.”

Tel Aviv University president, Prof. Joseph Klafter, asked whether academic freedom in Israel was under threat, said bluntly: “There have been some frightening attempts to harm academic freedom. I hope it is still possible to contain this phenomenon.”

He added, “Anyone who criticises our universities for lacking concern about the values of Zionism does not understand that maintaining a pluralistic environment is the cornerstone of the Zionist and democratic vision on which the State was founded. Only through discourse is it possible to educate generations of citizens who are aware of such basic democratic and liberal values.”

That would not seem to be the main purpose of right-wing legislators who are preparing a parallel campaign to clip the wings of liberal Israeli NGOs.

A bill that would require Israeli NGOs to report every donation they receive from foreign governments, or from any source mostly funded by a foreign government, has been approved for first reading by the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee. The bill would subject NGOs that fail to report such donations to a NIS 30,000 (8,000 dollar) fine.

Coalition whip Zeev Elkin of the dominant Likud party explained that the new legislation is aimed at “preventing a recurrence of the Goldstone report, which is mostly based on material provided by Israeli organisations...financed by foreign states. NGOs often cooperate with foreign elements which use them to infiltrate messages or carry out acts that are opposed to basic national Israeli interests.”

Some critics believe the new bill will not in fact be able to supervise NGOs and would be

only a “bureaucratic nuisance”, but left-wing parties, labeling the proposed legislation “McCarthyist”, say it is clearly meant to intimidate NGOs whose positions are opposed to that of the right-wing coalition.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel is concerned that the bill would undermine the legitimate activity of NGOs based on their political positions: “Freedom of association is not subject to political horse-trading; it is the preserve of anyone who wants to organise to advance civil causes, whether a given party or political majority at any given time likes it or not,” an ACRI spokesman said.

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