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Israel's New Labor Leader Faces a Party in Decline

By ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — The election of a new leader of Israel's historic but severely diminished Labor Party prompted talk of a possible revival on Thursday. But analysts were predicting a modest comeback in the best case, with a special emphasis on socioeconomic issues.

Shelly Yachimovich, 51, a former journalist and a Labor member of Parliament since 2006, defeated Amir Peretz, a former leader of the center-left Labor Party and a former union leader, in a runoff ballot on Wednesday by 54 percent to 45 percent. Ms. Yachimovich is the seventh leader of Labor in a decade.

“The Labor movement built this country,” Ms. Yachimovich said early Thursday in a victory speech, harking back to the early state founders and builders from the once-dominant movement, like David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. She added, “Its time has come to rebuild the state of Israel.”

The Labor Party holds only eight seats in the 120-seat Parliament. Its primary race and Ms. Yachimovich's victory were heavily overshadowed by the diplomatic drama unfolding at the United Nations, where the Palestinians plan to request full membership and recognition of statehood in the face of vigorous Israeli and American opposition.

The timing only served to underline the decline of the Labor Party's influence in matters of international diplomacy, as well as the political redefinition under way within the party and, more broadly, in Israeli society.

The social protests that swept Israel this summer replaced, at least for a while, the more usual national discourse about security issues and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Protesters set up tent camps in cities throughout the country to draw attention to inflated housing prices and rent, the high cost of living and the widening gap between Israel's rich and poor. The demonstrations, some of the largest in the country's history, involved hundreds of thousands of mostly middle-class Israelis who took to the streets to demand social justice.

Ms. Yachimovich, a staunch social democrat who has long campaigned against privatization and for socioeconomic change, captured the public mood. But few believed that her victory would be enough to propel Labor back to power.

“On the one hand, she is catching the wave at the right time,” said Gadi Wolfsfeld, a professor of political science and communications at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of “Making Sense of Media and Politics.” On the other hand, he said, it is impossible to know whether the social issues will still be high on the public agenda by the time elections are held. The next general election is scheduled for 2013.

Ms. Yachimovich has been able to draw some young Israelis into the Labor Party, an essential move for its revitalization. But some veteran supporters have voiced concern about her lack of diplomatic clout and her lack of attention to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as well as her thin administrative experience; she has never served as a minister.

Her political rival Tzipi Livni, the leader of the centrist Kadima Party, now in opposition, has served in several ministerial posts, including foreign minister. Kadima, a capitalist party, did not benefit from the social protest movement, but it has a much broader base and a record of negotiations with the Palestinians.

When pushed, Ms. Yachimovich has expressed mostly mainstream positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in favor of a negotiated two-state solution.

But she angered many Israeli leftists when, in an interview with the newspaper Haaretz in August, she failed to criticize Israeli settlement construction, saying that she certainly did not consider Israel’s settlement project in the occupied West Bank as “a sin and a crime.” She noted that it was the Labor Party that founded the settlement enterprise after the 1967 war, adding that it was “a completely consensual move” in its time.

Gideon Levy, a leftist columnist at Haaretz, described her worldview as “fake left” and “social democracy without ethics.”

The Labor Party’s fortunes dipped along with those of the rest of the Israeli left after the peace process collapsed into violence with the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in 2000.

Although the Kadima Party won one seat more than the conservative Likud Party in the 2009 elections, Ms. Livni was unable to cobble together a parliamentary majority necessary to form a governing coalition. The Likud, under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has led a right-leaning coalition government since.

The Labor Party, which won 13 seats in the last election, joined that coalition under the guidance of Ehud Barak, the current defense minister and formerly an unpopular Labor Party leader.

But Mr. Barak, chafing at calls from within the party to quit the coalition over the lack of progress on peace, broke away from Labor in January. Taking four like-minded Labor Parliament members with him, he formed a small centrist faction that remained in the coalition. The eight remaining Labor Parliament members went into opposition.

Pointing to the possibility of a Labor recovery, some analysts have noted that Likud managed to come back from the doldrums. The conservative party won only 12 seats in the 2006 election. Three years later, it won 27.