Sharon News Raises Political Stakes

By Kenneth W. Stein

The economy's continuing downturn, the republic's failure to make peace, and the mounting toll of a seemingly endless war in the Middle East has left Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in an unusual juncture.

The 80-year-old Sharon, who holds the title of prime minister, is also the leader of the Likud party, which controls the government. His party has faced a series of setbacks in recent months, including a string of political scandals and a loss of support in the latest opinion polls.

Sharon, who has been in office since 2001, is facing a tough re-election campaign in 2006. His challengers include the incumbent, Benjamin Netanyahu, who is the leader of the rival Kadima party.

Sharon's popularity has been hurt by the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which has sparked widespread anti-Israel demonstrations worldwide.

The economy, however, remains a major issue in the campaign. Sharon has promised to continue his economic reforms, which include reducing the government's role in the economy and promoting free-market policies.

Sharon's opponents, including Netanyahu, have criticized his economic policies, saying they have not done enough to help the country's poorest citizens.

The upcoming election is seen as a key test for Sharon's political future and the future of his party. If he wins, he will likely continue as prime minister; if he loses, it could signal the end of his career in politics.

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