

LA VANGUARDIA

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BY KENNETH W STEIN

Despite Ariel Sharon's personal history that included violence and war against the Arab world, stretching back to Israel's 1948 War of Independence, Arab commentators, politicians and satellite stations are reporting the status of his medical condition live from Israel. If this were four years ago, Arab outlets would all be jumping for joy on the roof tops at Sharon's demise. More than any other indicator, even the partial concern for Sharon's health indicates that the Arab world can, if necessary, stomach a Jewish state, and worry about who the Israeli electorate may choose in the scheduled March 28, parliamentary elections. Arab politicians now actually care that Sharon's policies of withdrawal carry-over to a successor.

Sharon's passing from the Israeli political scene comes at a moment when the Israeli body politic has crystallized its vision for the future. Sharon represented those views: disengagement from the Palestinians, preservation of Israeli national security at all costs, attending to the needs of the Israeli underclass, improvement in infrastructure and educational opportunities, and reversing social service cuts. Most important for Israelis, Sharon engaged in unilateralism. It was not just a policy of doing what was in Israel's best interest, but it was a policy of not waiting for others to constrain or deny Israeli political options.

Both Arabs and Israelis see Sharon has having engaged in a process; the question now is where does that process go and how fast? No matter who takes over the helm of Israel after the March elections, Israel's 12th Prime Minister will not enjoy the immediate level of confidence Sharon had accumulated. Thus the pace of change will likely be slower, at least at the start.

Sharon founded the Kadima Party in mid-November as a break away alternative to the Likud Party, which he helped found in the 1970s. At least 14 members of Likud joined him immediately as did other prominent politicians and former army generals. The party was built around Sharon's personality, charisma, recent political track record, and vision for the future. In his latest political incarnation, Sharon was perceived as a pragmatist, willing to make compromises for Israel's national security. This included the withdrawal last August from the Gaza Strip. Recently, Sharon indicated that he wanted his Kadima Party to address internal domestic issues such as poverty, unemployment, social welfare needs, and educational betterment. Without Sharon, the Kadima Party still has a full stable. There are experienced and highly talented politicians who can

protect the country's national interest, give encouragement to the economy, and continue the pragmatic reach to the Palestinians. Sharon's protege, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a parliamentarian for more than two decades and former mayor of Jerusalem has taken over as the interim Prime Minister. Like Sharon, Olmert has drifted over the last several years from the right to the center in the Israeli political spectrum. Olmert like Sharon remains particularly conscious of Israel's inability, capacity or desire to rule the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza areas. Olmert was a key adviser to Sharon's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip last August.

Conventional political analyses would have one believe that without him, the new political party Sharon founded is no going nowhere. That it will crumble, shrivel up, and go the way of other center parties in Israeli politics. A brief flash in the pan for an election or two, and then disappear.

I would argue otherwise: Israelis whom Sharon represented still want to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians, want to see the religious network lose its grip over civil procedure, marriage, and divorce, and seek better social and living conditions for all Israelis. Israel's public attitudes, present before Sharon passed from the political scene still remain. They will require representation in the next Israeli parliament, and Kadima seems to be that catchall. Former Likud Party members joined Sharon for two reasons: they liked him and they disliked the politics and personality of former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's Likud Party is the least likely to make additional territorial withdrawals and most likely to keep cutting social welfare programs. Netanyahu's politics and his Likud Party distinguish him from the center and left in Israel politics because of the high level of mistrust he places on Israel's neighbors. In addition, Netanyahu is remembered for political ineptitude as a leader, a man with an insatiable ego, but also enormously capable and talented in presenting Israel's case internationally. Adding spice to the coming election campaign, if Olmert heads the Kadima Party, is the deep seeded personal animosity that Olmert and Netanyahu have for one another.

Sharon's demise can only help Netanyahu and his party, but not restore Netanyahu to the popularity he enjoyed a decade ago. The question of course, is to what degree will Sharon's passing help Netanyahu? In the upcoming election campaign, Netanyahu will undoubtedly campaign on a platform that will claim the other candidates for prime minister will make unacceptable compromises over Jerusalem, make perilous withdrawals from the West Bank, make too many concessions to the Palestinians, while not watching out for the Iranian threat. In the weeks and months before the March 28 Israeli election, Netanyahu could benefit from a Palestinian election outcome, scheduled for the end of January which

gives Hamas a quarter or more of the seats in the Legislative Council. When there were terrorist attacks against Israelis prior to the May 1996 Israeli parliamentary elections, Netanyahu's candidacy benefitted then; the same could happen this time.

The Labor Party that held control of the state's politics for the first three decades is mere shadow of its previous self. Shimon Peres the long time party leader was defeated in a primary fight by a labor federation stalwart Amir Peretz. Peretz lacks background in national security and is considered by some Israelis to be both too left of center and in need of political seasoning. Peretz has less national experience than either Olmert or Netanyahu. Peretz's Labor Party is likely to be a key coalition partner with Kadima in forming the next government of 61 seats in the Israeli parliament.

Two additional conclusions are necessary. If Kadima emerges under Olmert's leadership, the next Israeli Prime Minister will likely be in his 50s, unless Shimon Peres orchestrates an improbable come back. And the easy transference of power to Olmert at Sharon's hospitalization occurred without a constitutional precedent, a credit to Israel's democracy and adherence to the rule of law.

Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches Middle Eastern History and Political Science and is the Director of the Institute for the Study of Modern Israel at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.