

Olmert's Bold Stand

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Mar 19, 2006

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Given acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's commanding lead in polls before the March 28 election, some might tend to dismiss the current campaign.

One should not be misled by the steadiness of the polls despite such monumental events as Ariel Sharon's massive brain hemorrhage and subsequent comatose state and Hamas' landmark parliamentary victory.

In fact, it might be one of Israel's most consequential contests. The steadiness of the polls might suggest that big events are not budging Israelis from their convictions.

What makes this campaign so remarkable is that Mr. Olmert has turned Israeli politics on its head by taking a gamble: He has announced a controversial policy initiative in the middle of an election campaign. The traditional view in Israeli elections is that ambiguity is preferable in making campaign promises because explicit declarations could alienate potential voting constituencies.

At other times, candidates were not aware that they were heading to major decisions. Whatever the reason, big ideas were not presented to voters in an election campaign, whether it was Yitzhak Rabin shaking hands with Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, Benjamin Netanyahu meeting Mr. Arafat and yielding the biblical city of Hebron, Ehud Barak going to Camp David and offering half of Jerusalem's Old City or Mr. Sharon disengaging Israel from Gaza.

Since these leaders did not run on these ideas in their campaigns, their domestic critics would yell foul, saying the leader had "no mandate" for concessions, and they would follow this up with a call for a referendum. The result was constant political turmoil.

Mr. Olmert has broken from tradition. In a series of media interviews over the past two weeks, he made clear he wants Israeli settlers to leave most of the West Bank, an announcement that Mr. Sharon refused to make. Mr. Olmert said he wanted Israel to have permanent borders in 2010.

He even said some Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem would not be part of Israel. He made clear that Israel's security barrier would be the baseline, although he said it could be modified. An estimated 60,000 Jewish settlers live on the wrong side of the fence. Because they live in areas of biblical resonance and tend to be ideological, Mr. Olmert's task is very formidable.

But now his biggest rival and Likud leader, Mr. Netanyahu, has agreed that "the coming elections are a national referendum on the Olmert-Kadima plan." Critics no longer will be able to claim that an Israeli leader lacks legitimacy to implement his ideas.

What is driving Mr. Olmert's approach? It is a mixture of factors. Of course, one cannot exclude the fact that being a new leader with a new Kadima Party, Mr. Olmert did not have Mr. Sharon's ability to tell the public "trust me." Beyond this, Mr. Olmert is tapping into this sense of Israeli public fatalism about the prospects of Palestinian partnership in the foreseeable future, which was accelerated by Hamas' January victory.

Even on the eve of the Palestinian election, 77 percent of Israelis said there is no Palestinian partner -- a number certain to grow. This sense of the futility of negotiations for now has translated into the collapse of two, not just one, model. One model that shattered is the idea that a negotiated peace is around the corner. The other, nearly 39 years after Israel captured the West Bank, is that an indefinite status quo is demographically and economically tenable.

Instead, the public has coalesced around a third idea: namely, that Israel wants to initiate boundaries. They might not be final borders, because there is no grand peace agreement, but the lines that realistically approximate such eventual borders. In one interview, Mr. Olmert has defined the issue as taking the initiative, saying, "The days in which every terrorist held the key to the agenda of our lives are over."

Mr. Olmert's views have forced the Israeli public to react. Mr. Netanyahu has said the idea is disastrous because it would be a gift for Hamas, thereby forcing Mr. Olmert into a coalition with the liberal Labor Party. To avoid any interpretation that a civilian pullout of settlers would bolster Hamas, Avi Dichter, a top security aide to Mr. Olmert and former head of the Shin Bet, Israel's security service, made clear that he expects the Israeli army to remain to ensure that Hamas does not fire rockets at Israeli cities.

Many questions about Mr. Olmert's ideas abound and will need to be fleshed out, and there are myriad considerations ranging from U.S. reaction to Hamas' actions, which could have an impact on the details of a plan whose broad outline is just being presented.

Supporters and critics may disagree on the wisdom of Mr. Olmert's ideas, but they can at least agree it is healthiest when an election is a referendum on policy direction -- a choice and not an echo.

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