

Unsettled Politics As Usual in Israel

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Nobody should be surprised by the "abrupt" end of the 20-month alliance between Israel's Labor Party and the Likud government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

This sort of thing has happened before in Israeli politics. This time, though, there is a difference: The national unity government is collapsing not over the peace process but over West Bank settlements.

The end began when Labor ministers, led by Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, resigned Wednesday evening. Technically, the resignations take effect 48 hours after they were submitted.

With his coalition considerably narrowed, Sharon could begin feeling pressure from smaller, right-wing parties for additional settlement funding. Yet a sharp shift rightward could alienate swing centrist voters in 2003 Israeli general elections.

Another constraint involves Sharon's relationship with President Bush.

The Israeli leader has promised the White House that Israel will avoid any unnecessary actions on the Palestinian or Iraqi fronts that could complicate a possible U.S. attack against Iraq, just as he earlier promised not to harm Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Ben-Eliezer and more dovish challengers for his top Labor Party leadership post saw their party's participation in the Sharon government as sanctioning both Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank and the cutting of social programs at a time of economic downturn.

The doves are not convinced that they can beat Sharon in next year's elections, but they believe that a Likud government forced to function alone will eventually lose public support, even if it wins in 2003.

To insulate himself from various pressures, Sharon knows that he must keep left-of-center Israelis and the U.S. inside the political tent.

Ironically, Arafat once accomplished this purpose for Sharon. By not halting violence and rejecting then-President Clinton's peace initiative, Arafat led to Sharon's February 2001 election landslide, serving as the glue keeping the disparate factions of the government together, bringing the U.S. and Israel closer than ever and moving Israeli opinion to the right.

For the Palestinians, this self-defeating approach has been disastrous, as Arafat aide Mohammed Dahlan admitted recently in the London-based Arabic daily Al Hayat: "We should have turned into a popular [or nonlethal] intifada and stopped the armed activity, but we didn't because we don't have the courage as a leadership to so."

After a controversy erupted, Dahlan denied making the statement.

As for Sharon, the current dissolution could still yield dividends for him. He clearly wants the hawkish Ben-Eliezer to win as Labor leader in that party's Nov. 19 primary, believing that Ben-Eliezer is the key to bringing Labor back into the unity government after the next general election. Sharon also is counting on Arafat's continued leadership to seal his own reelection as prime minister.

Both Sharon and Ben-Eliezer view the settlement issue as pivotal in ensuring their political survival and enabling them to stave off insurgency bids from within their own parties.

Sharon views fealty to settlements as enabling him to woo away or to neutralize the Likud right-wing ideological core. These party faithful have been swayed by former Premier Benjamin Netanyahu's charge that Sharon should be tougher against Palestinian terrorists.

Labor's focus on settlements transcends the peace issue and reflects demographics. Jews now make up a mere 53% majority of Israel plus the West Bank and Gaza areas, despite the influx of close to 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Union and subsidies to encourage growth among the ultra-Orthodox movement, whose adherents tend to have more children. By the end of the decade, demographers such as Hebrew University's Sergio DellaPergola predict, Jews will be a minority, jeopardizing Israel's raison d'etre as both a Jewish and democratic state.

Thus, settlements and demography matter in the long term. But in the short term, lack of Palestinian Authority action in halting suicide bombs is likely to lead Israelis rightward.

Labor's best chance for a victory in the 2003 general elections is if the Palestinians oust Arafat and the idea of peace can be viewed again as a real hope, not a mirage. ❖

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