Behind a Looming Sharon Victory

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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Brief Analysis

The deadline has now passed for Ehud Barak to step aside in favor of rival Shimon Peres in Israel's prime ministerial face-off next Tuesday, February 6, against Likud leader MK Ariel Sharon. Analysts have already written off this election for Barak, as Sharon's lead in the polls has barely budged from a 16 to 20 point margin over the last two months. Given that Barak won a landslide victory by a 12.1 percent margin less than two years ago, the scope of his probable defeat is striking perhaps the most lopsided electoral debacle since Menachem Begin's Herut lost to the Labor forerunner Mapai in 1959 by a margin of 24.7 percent. Barak's electoral free-fall is especially remarkable given that his opponent is someone long regarded as unelectable, due to his advanced age, right-wing political views, checkered past, and evident discomfort with the new media age. Nevertheless, Barak has pressed on, insisting that the real campaign has only just begun. His decision to stay in the race has heightened speculation that he may plan on joining a Sharon-led "national unity government," despite carefully worded protestations to the contrary.

Arafat v. BarakThere are many reasons for Barak's sagging political fortunes but none is greater than Yasir Arafat. It is no exaggeration to say that Arafat has crowned Sharon as Israel's likely next leader. This is because Arafat chose to counter Barak's Camp David proposals not at the bargaining table but in the streets of Nablus, Ramallah, and Gaza. The "al-Aqsa intifada" proved to many Israelis that offering far-reaching concessions would not end the ArabIsraeli conflict but only create a deadly new baseline for physical vulnerability. The "Barak paradox" was that the greater the concessions by Israel, the greater the violence from the Palestinians.

To be sure, even if Arafat were an ideal negotiating partner, Israelis would not have easily accepted Barak's deep concessions on issues like territorial withdrawal and the fate of Jerusalem. Yet, Arafat's truculence made public support all the more elusive. (A few weeks ago, support among the Jewish population of Israel for the peace proposals did not exceed 37 percent.) Arafat did not just pull out the rug from under Barak; the Palestinian leader undermined the political activism of that large chunk of Israeli society essential to any peace deal. Indeed, even after the two sides negotiated a communique in Taba that declared a peace agreement closer than ever before communique designed to boost Barak's flagging electoral prospects Arafat hours later denounced Israel for its "fascist" policies in a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Amid the violence and denunciations, Barak engaged in what some have called a "noble kamikaze mission." Barak is

proud that he unmasked Arafat in the eyes of the Israeli left as an obstreperous adversary, yet at the same time, he has broken the shibboleths of the Israeli right by demonstrating the true territorial price of peace. Yet, this "truth-telling" has not exactly won Barak plaudits from either side, nor has Barak been able to generate significant support for his withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon last May. Even this achievement has been criticized by those who say the Arabs interpreted the Israeli move as weakness amid Hizballah violence, thus contributing to the intifada.

Barak v. Barak VotersOn the domestic political scene, Barak is suffering the consequences of having alienated key voting blocs that contributed to his victory in 1999. Much of this is unrelated to the peace process and is the product of self-inflicted wounds, especially Barak's personal decision-making style that, for many, radiated arrogance and over-centralization of authority.

Barak's political decline is most clearly evident when comparing his 1999 performance with recent polls. According to several pollsters (including Tel Aviv University's Ephraim Ya'ar, the 56 percent of voters who supported Barak in 1999 included 20 percent traditional center-left Labor voters, 8 percent Meretz/leftist (Jewish) voters, and 9 percent Arab voters. In addition to this base of 37 percent, Barak added two key groups 8 percent from immigrants of the former Soviet Union and 11 percent from center-right voters, many of whom voted for Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996. Today, Barak's real problem is not that he is wobbly within his base (though he is, especially with the Arab vote) but that he has lost the support of those immigrants and center swing voters.

Israeli Arabs constitute about 12.3 percent of the electorate. In 1999, they turned out at a rate of 76 percent, which was high (though still lower than the estimated 90 percent turnout for Israelis present in the country on election day). Of Arab voters, Barak won 94.3 percent. Next week, however, Arab turnout is expected to drop below the 50 percent mark, with some choosing to submit a blank ballot rather than vote for Barak. Overall, this could cost Barak 3 to 5 percent of his total vote. The key here is that an Arab boycott could hurt Barak but will not be the decisive factor in his likely defeat.

In a larger sense, of course, the fact that so many Arabs are likely to boycott an election is highly significant, reflecting a decision to give primacy to domestic concerns above solidarity with the Palestinians. Despite the fact that leading Palestinians, including Arafat himself, have stressed the importance of a Sharon defeat, Israeli Arabs seem more concerned with matters closer to home: outrage that Israeli Police killed thirteen Arabs in the rioting during the early days of the intifada; chafing at the disparity of Jewish and Arab municipal allocations; and a broader complaint about their overall status in the Israeli social strata. Turnout will be further depressed by the fact that this will be the first election in Israel's history in which no Arab prime ministerial candidate or Knesset list is on the ballot, forcing Arab voters to make the "unpalatable" choice between two Zionists.

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union,constituting 17 percent of the electorate today, are probably the most important voting bloc in Israel. They have been with the winning side in each of the last elections. Precisely because they have no entrenched allegiances, parties ignore them at their peril. Indeed, in each of the last three elections, these immigrants punished the incumbents. (Of course, they are not the only ones to do so, as no Israeli party has won two elections in a row since Begin's Likud in 1977 and 1981.)

For the immigrant vote, the main question is whether the election is fought over security issues or cultural issues. Labor succeeds when culture religious versus secular is the main issue; Likud succeeds when security is the top priority. In 1999, Barak was able to fracture the "outsider" coalition (Sephardic Jews, new immigrants, and orthodox) that Netanyahu had put together three years earlier in his fight against the "insider" Mayflower/secular/Ashkenazic "elite." Barak was able to persuade the immigrants that he would give them not Sephardic Jews control over the Interior Ministry and its power to determine questions of Jewish lineage. As a result, he carried 55 percent of the immigrant vote.

However, the 2001 vote is shaping up as a referendum on security issues, as was the case in 1996, when Israel went to the polls in the shadow of four rapid-fire Hamas bus bombings in Israeli urban areas. According to the latest poll in the Russian immigrant sector, Sharon is currently ahead of Barak 43 to 27 percent. Barak's problems have been exacerbated by his inconsistent support of civic reforms, which have been dubbed the "secular revolution." Having already lost the religious vote, Baraks "zig-zags" on civil reforms sometimes working with the Sephardic Shas party, sometimes vowing to fight Shas have undermined his credibility with the immigrants. (For his part, Sharon is so afraid of alienating the immigrants that he deemed it necessary to declare that the sensitive education portfolio considered pivotal in setting the cultural tone in the country would not go to a member of the religious parties, who are considered to be virtually unconditional backers of Sharon.)

Centrist, security-minded, swing voters, who constituted approximately 11 percent of the electorate in 1999, are a strong bloc that could also determine the outcome of Israels elections. Pollsters believe that Barak has lost a large majority of these voters due to Arafat's recalcitrance and their loss of faith in Baraks ability to control the security situation. These voters are particularly shocked by Barak's violation of his commitment not to divide Jerusalem. Polls show that the more the Israeli public knew about the Clinton proposals tabled in December, the less they liked them. Approximately 61 percent said they were against the proposals, while 57 percent believed that Barak was engaged in diplomacy for self-interested reasons of political survival.

A disillusioned public seems to believe that neither Barak nor Sharon can bring peace, since Arafat won't permit it. Yet, Barak has not been successful in convincing voters that Sharon will lead Israel to war, nor has Barak been able to channel public attention to Sharon's checkered past (e.g., his role in the 1982 Lebanon war or his opposition to the 1994 JordanIsrael peace treaty). Sharon continues with his mellower "Grandpa Arik" campaign, avoiding public statements wherever possible and reaffirming his support for a national unity government, which is highly popular.

Unity GovernmentSharon seems to receive a political boost from his repeated calls for a grand coalition involving Labor in general, and Barak, in particular. The credibility of Sharon's call rests on the fact that the public believes it dovetails with his self-interest. He will need to govern with the "old math" of the 1999 Knesset, a proposition as unappetizing to Sharon as it was to Barak when his coalition disintegrated. It may be possible that Sharon could build a support base on 58 out of 120 members of Knesset, adding five others originally associated with the collapsed Barak coalition, but this is a shaky reed. Such a narrow government could easily fall, a prospect that Sharon party-rival Binyamin Netanyahu reportedly believes can occur as early as this summer. Hence, to stave off Netanyahu and the impending hostile regional reaction, Sharon is likely to ask Labor to join.

As he parsed his words this week, Barak certainly left open the possibility of joining a Sharon-led national unity government. Barak can justify being Sharon's defense minister by asserting that he has his foot on the brakes of an unpredictable leader. It may be his only chance to avert the night of the long knives inside Labor and a downward spiral into political oblivion. Those inside Labor favoring a unity government will undoubtedly argue that such an arrangement is preferable to a full-election this summer for both premier and parliament. Such an election could help Netanyahu reconfigure a comfortable governing majority that is far less to Labors liking than the overall split that exists today. Alternatively, those disinclined to join a unity government believe Sharon and his policies will be repudiated, and that the pendulum may soon swing back.

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