

After Likud “no” vote

Sharon vows to continue West Bank land grab

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Amidst all the speculation about what Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will do next following the May 3 rejection of his plan for unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians, what is most essential passes almost without comment.

Most media pundits have concerned themselves with estimating how big a defeat Sharon has suffered, or how embarrassing this is for his main backers in Washington—and for President George W. Bush in particular. But on a more fundamental level, Sharon has secured something of a victory.

In discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Sharon’s proposal to permanently annex more than half the West Bank, including Arab East Jerusalem, in return for the withdrawal of just 7,500 settlers from the Gaza Strip and four isolated West Bank settlements is now routinely depicted as the “progressive” and even “brave” option. The only other alternatives under consideration are the ravings of the far-right settler and religious parties demanding “no surrender” of a single settlement and what cabinet minister Natan Sharansky called “a no-compromise fight against terrorism.”

Sharon certainly made a tactical error in believing that Washington’s backing for his plan, coupled with his perfectly truthful description of it as a “mortal blow” to the Palestinians, would be enough to convince the majority of Likud to support him. But, though its rejection confirms Sharon’s difficulties within his own party, it is far from being fatal to his plans. It only confirms that Likud has become an extremist entity, dominated by fanatics and zealots who will accept nothing but the immediate and permanent seizure of the supposedly “biblical lands of Judea and Samaria.”

The vote, in fact, polled less than 1 percent of the Israeli population, which make up Likud’s 193,000 membership. It was rejected by 59.5 percent of respondents, but the turnout was as low as 35 percent. Thus, a group of extremists making up less than one sixth of 1 percent of the population, who in turn speak for settlers who make up just 3 percent of

the Israeli population, have confirmed their position as a dominant voice in Likud and their exaggerated role in Israeli political and social life.

Sharon is as committed as his opponents to a vision of a Greater Israel, only differing from them in seeking a realistic way of achieving this objective, with Washington’s backing, even if this means accepting partial seizures of land and confining the Palestinians to a ghetto “state.”

His opponents on the far right recognise Sharon’s essential sympathy with their own aims. None have called for him to resign, instead asking him to resume his traditional role as the settlers’ guardian and mentor. They all rallied to his side to defeat by 62-46 a no-confidence vote moved by the parliamentary left and Arab parties in the aftermath of the Likud vote.

Sharon will even use the Likud “no” vote to his advantage, as he presses ahead with his plans regardless. It will enable him to argue that he must offer even less to the Palestinians in order to win his party over.

He has already told Likud lawmakers that he will amend his Gaza withdrawal plan to prevent Israel from being threatened with an internationally imposed peace accord that would mean larger territorial handovers. But the plan would go ahead anyway: “If anyone thinks for a moment that these results mean deadlock, sitting around and waiting for what will come next, they are wrong,” he warned.

“I want to say in the clearest fashion there will be another plan that I will come up with.... I will come up with a plan that will get wider support.”

Predictions from within Likud are that he will now offer only a partial withdrawal from the Gaza Strip of only those of the 21 settlements “most exposed” to violence. The occupation of the Gaza Strip would be essentially unchanged.

Sharon’s existing plan already provides for continued Israeli control of a border strip between Gaza and Egypt, control of Gaza airspace, and naval patrols of the Gaza coast. Israel also reserves the right to retaliate for any attacks launched from Gaza. Sharon could also propose measures to

further strengthen Israeli control of the West Bank.

Sharon's setback certainly had the desired impact internationally, in that it prompted additional pledges of support and backing from the major powers. The White House reaffirmed backing for Sharon's proposals, calling them "a courageous and important step toward peace."

Britain's Foreign Office issued a statement insisting, "Our position remains unchanged.... The roadmap [based on a two-state solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict] remains the best way to peace and disengagement from the occupied territories can be an opportunity to return to it."

Meeting in New York the day after the Likud vote, the roadmap's backers amongst the "quartet"—the US, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations—reaffirmed their support for Sharon's plan. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called it "a step towards achieving the two-state vision."

Sharon also enjoys the backing of a clear majority of the Israeli population, most of whom, in the absence of any principled alternative being raised by the major opposition parties, have accepted his claims to be seeking a way to end conflict with the Palestinians in good faith.

Even Uzi Arad, an adviser to Sharon's main rival in Likud, Binyamin Netanyahu, concluded, "This will not derail him. He will seek other means of advancing, but he has not decided which way. He could arm-twist the cabinet ministers by telling them it is a question of confidence in his premiership.

"He could even pack the cabinet with ministers from Labour to alter the ratio in his favour. Failing that, he could bring it to the Knesset, where he could be reasonably relaxed about victory. He could also reshuffle the cabinet, or move towards fresh elections. He can also use the threat of these things to get his way."

Sharon could also decide to call a national referendum on the issue, which he would probably win.

A commentator on Israel's Channel One television has suggested that Sharon would try to discredit the Likud referendum and call for a national plebiscite in its place.

The fact that Sharon can turn to the opposition Labour Party to rescue his government without having to abandon any of his territorial ambitions is crucial in understanding the political confusion that exists in Israel.

Labour leader Shimon Peres has made a call for early elections explicitly framed in terms of supporting Sharon's proposals "to rescue the process of liberating us from the burden of occupation that most people want." And Labour will probably support Sharon even in the absence of an election. The party has already said it would join Sharon's government with the sole proviso that the prime minister be cleared of two corruption allegations.

While this horse-trading takes place, Sharon is continuing with his policy of creating "facts on the ground" in consolidating Israel's seizure of the bulk of the West Bank. Even as the Likud vote results were coming in, Israeli troops were bulldozing 29 houses in the Khan Younis refugee camp in southern Gaza, leaving more than 75 people homeless, on the pretext that the buildings were used as cover by gunmen who killed a pregnant Jewish settler and her four daughters on Sunday May 2. In the last few days, four militants from the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades were killed in an Israeli missile strike in the West Bank city of Nablus and a security guard was killed in central Gaza as houses were being demolished.

Settlers have also stepped up their activity in the aftermath of the vote. Concrete for the foundations for new homes in the Gush Katif settlement bloc of southern Gaza was poured, and more settlers also moved into Arab East Jerusalem.

Ominously, dozens of Israeli jeeps were reported to have sealed off Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah, and soldiers occupied buildings nearby. Immediately before the April 17 assassination of Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi by an Israeli gunship, Sharon publicly threatened Arafat, describing him as a "marked man."

The Palestinian leadership has no answer to Sharon's offensive. They are reduced to making a pathetic appeal to the very imperialist powers that are responsible for their people's terrible fate, to restart negotiations and for Bush to withdraw his guarantee that Sharon will not be asked to vacate the occupied West Bank lands he intends to seize.

Without an independent and unified political intervention by the Jewish and Arab working class for the creation of a genuinely democratic, secular and socialist society in the entire Middle East, all that will result from Sharon's present difficulties will be even worse repression and military violence directed against the Palestinians and the bloody retaliatory actions against Israelis this will provoke.



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