

Israeli media rallies behind Sharon's Kadima party

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10 January 2006

Israel's media and political establishment has gone into overdrive in an effort to ensure that Ariel Sharon's party Kadima survives its founder and forms the next government on March 28.

Sharon is being kept alive by a team of doctors after suffering a massive stroke that is expected to leave him severely brain-damaged and possibly paralysed. Doctors have been reduced to making statements to the effect that Sharon can breathe unaided and that there is "some sort of activity in his brain," but his political career is finished. Meanwhile, every moment has been used to shore up Israel's stability as the bourgeoisie's key representative inevitably leaves the stage.

The first task for the ruling elite is to preclude the emergence of any domestic opposition to the annexation of much of the West Bank and the whole of Jerusalem that Sharon initiated behind the smokescreen of his unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. This would leave Israel free to impose its agenda on the Palestinians, under conditions where there is rising militancy as a result of the depredations imposed by military occupation and economic encirclement.

Secondly, there is a need to establish a consensus around the right-wing economic and social policies Sharon imposed when he was still leader of Likud.

Thirdly, Kadima's victory would go some way towards curbing the influence of the settler movement and the ultra-religious parties that came to dominate within Likud and the government and that are viewed by big business as an obstacle to the consolidation of secure borders of the significantly expanded Israeli state. This would also aid in imposing major social cuts and rationalising military spending, both of which are opposed by Likud's social base.

Kadima was created by Sharon just last month, after he concluded that the influence of the settlers and ultra-religious not only threatened his power base but also the strategic orientation he had mapped out in alliance with the Bush administration in Washington.

As a military man and a pragmatist, he saw the withdrawal of a few thousand settlers from the Gaza Strip as a small price to pay for US agreement that West Bank land—including East Jerusalem—occupied since 1967 and that now fell within the militarised border wall he constructed, would become a permanent part of Israel. In effect, all pretence at a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians had been done away with. The Oslo process was a distant memory, and the only part of the so-called "Road Map" towards the negotiated creation of a truncated Palestinian state that remained was the insistence that the Palestinian Authority end all resistance to Israel and clamp down on militant groups.

For the settler and ultra-religious groups, however, Sharon had betrayed the struggle for Eretz Israel, and they responded by

threatening him with death. Likud's right wing, under the leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu, joined them in opposing withdrawal from Gaza.

Sharon also faced opposition to Likud's social cuts. This was successfully exploited by Amir Peretz, head of the Histadrut trade union federation, to win the leadership of the Labour Party from Shimon Peres, who had taken Labour into Sharon's government.

Kadima was a vehicle for continuing the strategy Sharon had developed in alliance with the Bush administration. It won the support of key Likud Knesset members as well as the defection of Peres from Labour. But its chance of popular support depended on illusions in Sharon's supposed readiness to end military conflict that have been cultivated by the media, top Labourites such as Peres and Haim Ramon—who also joined Kadima—Oslo Accords negotiator Yossi Beilin who is now leader of the Yahad party, and other nominal "doves." The party was widely predicted to win a substantial 42-seat majority prior to Sharon's stroke.

With his life in question and no chance of him ever assuming a leadership role again, all the stops have been pulled out to convince the Israeli electorate that Kadima still represents the best hope for the future, and that Sharon's heirs offer the only realistic path to peace. A generally negative picture has been painted of Likud under Netanyahu, which is criticised for being in thrall to the settler lobby, and Labour under Peretz, whose policy of a negotiated peace is denounced as having failed.

The leadership of Kadima was immediately transferred to Sharon's deputy, the former mayor of Jerusalem and finance minister and now acting prime minister Ehud Olmert, who can constitutionally hold this position for 100 days—i.e., until after the election. There was still the possibility of damaging infighting for the vacant leadership spot between Olmert, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz (a former chief-of-staff who approved air strikes against Palestinian militants, incursions and house demolitions and urged the expulsion of former Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat), Justice Minister Tzipi Livni (a former lawyer for Israel's secret service, Mossad), and other former Likud hawks.

Peres never had a real chance of winning the leadership—his role is to provide a fig leaf for a party that is essentially a rebranded Likud. A senior Kadima figure was quoted in *Haaretz* stating, "Should, heaven forbid, Peres lead Kadima, everything will fall apart immediately." But if he were wooed back to Labour, it would deal severe damage to Kadima.

Anxious to avoid damaging their electoral chances, however, most of the 14 founding Kadima Knesset members who make up the party's council agreed to back Olmert as party leader and candidate for prime minister. Kadima Knesset Member Roni Bar-On declared,

“We have unlimited faith in Olmert’s ability to lead the state. This is a national government, and we can’t get into politics now.”

Olmert held secret talks with Peres, probably offering him the post of foreign minister and possibly even the deputy leadership. In return, Peres has backed Olmert in ringing terms, stressing that the “far right” and the “far left” had become minorities. “Today there is a wide basis for peace with the full support of a new strong party of people who got tired of old definitions,” he said, adding that Sharon’s vision will be continued, whether or not he recovers.

With the matter of succession resolved, the media has been able to concentrate on its campaign to boost Kadima as the only game in town.

The *Jerusalem Post*, strongly associated with Likud, has backed Kadima. On January 6, Amotz Asa-El wrote that Kadima should not be confused with “previous centrist experiments.” Its candidates were not “non-entities” or “anonymous lawyers” but “a serious group of old hands in the political, academic and military establishments. Sharon’s following was not only, or even mainly, because of the disengagement from Gaza, but because he fought terror fearlessly and efficiently.”

He continued, “Secondly, beyond the political and technocratic experience they bring, Kadima’s candidates share a conviction, which is to unilaterally create a de-facto border between Israel and the Palestinians. More deeply, this addresses a widespread and deep-rooted yearning for the restoration of the pre-’67 consensus, by eradicating the futile war of nearly four decades between the Greater Israel and Land-for-Peace schools of thought, which most Israelis have learned to reject as naive utopias.

“Kadima really can nurture its image as the consensus party, the one that blends military resolve with diplomatic flexibility, capitalism with compassion, and Judaism with liberalism.”

Writing of Sharon’s legacy, Herb Keinon describes a “paradigmatic shift in the way the country views the conflict with the Arabs and its possible solutions” that has “received the imprimatur of US President George W. Bush in his seminal speech on the Middle East in June 2002” accepting “the idea that first the Palestinians must put an end to the terrorism, and then negotiations toward a two-state solution would follow.”

Positively gloating over how this new reality has “permeated Israeli political discourse,” he continues, “look at how quickly Labour Party leader Amir Peretz jettisoned Oslo as a campaign theme after being advised to do so less than a week after he was elected.”

An editorial comment that same day dismisses Peretz for his “inexperience in defence-related issues, indeed his lack of any ministerial-level experience” and states that Likud’s return to its “traditional positions” will leave behind an electorate that “embraced what they saw as Sharon’s pragmatism.... Between those Labour and Likud poles, the same electorate that was so masterfully wooed by Sharon now waits and worries.”

On January 7, Eliot Jager insisted, “Kadima can yet make history by reflecting a 21st-century political realignment of the Israeli body politic—one that gives expression to the country’s pragmatic mainstream.”

Even more significant has been the role played by *Haaretz*, a paper that has long been seen as an essential supporter of the Labour Party.

Together with Channel 10, it commissioned a poll that was meant to prove that Kadima would still win between 38 and 42 seats whoever led it and that Olmert was second-most popular after Peres. It cited a senior Kadima official stating that the “victory line” for the party was

30-32 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, adding that this “would enable it to head a coalition made up perhaps of other secular centre and centre-left groups like Shinnui, Labour and Arab parties.”

In a January 8 editorial, *Haaretz* declares, “Over the last two years, the personal revolution that Sharon underwent has been shared by a large segment of the public. The settlement enterprise, which he led for years, has lost its prestige; the settlers have turned from trend-setters into a stubborn minority; and the evacuation of settlements suddenly seems feasible. The relief that the public felt after the evacuation of Gaza is what generated the momentum for Kadima’s establishment....

“Thus Kadima is not just Ariel Sharon, but the basis for establishing a moderate coalition. It is the party of national sobriety, which, together with Labour, Meretz, Shinui and the Arab parties, could continue dividing the land between Israelis and Palestinians and establish a border between them.”

It concludes, “Granted, it was approved as an official party only two days ago, and it has no established political traditions to help it survive in the absence of its creator. But on the other hand, Kadima has a clear diplomatic message and a vital role to play in the stormy days to come.”

Such statements are an exercise in deceiving the public and lulling it into accepting Sharon’s plan for annexation as an alternative to war. None of these journalists is unaware that Sharon’s perspective for “peace” and that of his successors is based on confining the Palestinians to a well-guarded and impoverished ghetto. But behind all the platitudes about the “peaceful coexistence of two states,” this has been more than enough to win the support of the Labourites and much of the Zionist and pacifist left.

However, it is in reality a recipe for continued conflict with the Palestinians themselves. Olmert, Sharon’s closest political ally for most of the past decade, will continue where his mentor left off. He has insisted that there will be no return to the “Green Line” that defined the border prior to the 1967 and that Israel will in future “include Jerusalem as a united city under our sovereignty.”

Moreover, there is also a pronounced element of self-deception in such hymns of praise to Kadima. To speak of a month-old party dedicated to such an aggressive expansionist policy and to a neo-liberal economic agenda as being capable of uniting the Israeli people is little more than wishful thinking. To the extent that the media and the establishment succeed in selling Kadima as the next government, they will only deepen Israel’s descent into a military, social and political quagmire.



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