

Sharon's stroke plunges Israel into political turmoil

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A life-threatening stroke suffered by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on January 4 has provoked a predictable deluge of hypocritical statements of concern for the fate of a “warrior” turned peacemaker.

Sharon, 77, is morbidly obese, standing at five foot seven and weighing around 260 pounds. A mobile intensive care ambulance has been permanently stationed at his Sycamore Ranch in the Negev Desert, southern Israel. He was taken ill at his ranch on January 4, weeks after suffering a minor stroke on December 18. The latest stroke has caused massive bleeding in his brain, and there are reports that he is at least partially paralysed.

Even if he recovers, his continued leadership of the Kadima party he created after splitting with Likud is in doubt, as is the outcome of the March election it was projected to win. Sharon quit Likud in November. Opposition within its ranks and amongst the right-wing settler and religious parties to his “unilateral withdrawal” from the Gaza Strip in September, combined with the pullout from his coalition government by the Labour Party under its new leader Amir Peretz, had made his own position untenable.

Various world leaders have hailed Sharon—the “Butcher of Beirut”—for his supposed commitment to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. US President George W. Bush called him “a man of courage and peace,” while British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that he had surprised everyone “with the courage and statesmanship he has shown in recent years to work towards a long term peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.”

His deteriorating health has produced a temporary truce between his government and most of his warring rivals for power. His leadership powers were transferred to his deputy, Ehud Olmert, within 30 minutes of his being rushed to hospital. Likud, now led by Sharon's archrival Binyamin Netanyahu, called off its anticipated break with the government.

Shimon Peres, who quit Labour to join Sharon in Kadima, was “praying for his recovery.” Tommy Lapid, leader of the

economically liberal Shinui party, wished him a speedy recovery and expressed his hope that “the system will cope with the situation in a manner befitting a progressive nation.”

For his part, Peretz declared himself to be at Olmert's disposal and ordered a suspension of the Labour Party's campaigning for the March 28 election.

Only days earlier, most of these parties and political figures were denouncing Sharon for corruption, with some calling for him to be put on trial and barred from standing for office after further evidence emerged that he and his two sons, Omri and Gilad, had taken millions of dollars in bribes from Jewish-Austrian casino owner Martin Schlaff.

With the Al Fateh leadership of the Palestinian Authority making only the most perfunctory noises, the only dissenting response to the obscene praise for Sharon as a “man of peace” came from the Palestinian Islamic militant groups. A Hamas spokesman described him as “the one who carried out massacres and terrorism for decades against our people,” while Islamic Jihad leader Anwar Abu Taha called Sharon a bloody tyrant who should “go to hell.”

Since coming to power in 2001, Sharon, who deliberately provoked the second Intifada in September 2000 with his visit to the Al Aqsa mosque, has presided over a bloodbath that has claimed the lives of close to 3,500 Palestinians and around 450 Israeli civilians. He has also encouraged a massive expansion of Zionist settlements in the occupied territories, with almost half a million settlers now in the West Bank and Jerusalem. His much-lauded pullout of a few thousand settlers from Gaza has provided a cover for the United States to support a land grab that will permanently annex both Jerusalem and at least half of the West Bank to Israel. At the same time, it has provided the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) with the ability to actually step up its military offensive against the Palestinians without factoring in concern for Jewish settlers trapped in Gaza. On December 2, for example, an Israel Air Force strike in the northern Gaza Strip killed three Islamic Jihad commanders.

Even as the international tributes to this “man of peace”

were rolling in, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz—who joined Kadima—pledged that such “security operations” would continue. On the very night Sharon was taken to hospital, the Israeli Air Force struck two access routes in the northern Gaza Strip, following which, IDF artillery units intensified their shelling of northern Gaza. In the West Bank, security forces arrested nine alleged militants in villages near Tulkarm, Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem and the Jenin refugee camp.

The economic suffering caused by Sharon is equally terrible. In 2004, the World Bank reported that after almost four years of conflict and Israeli restrictions on movement, nearly half of all Palestinians were living below the poverty line, with 16 percent of the population unable to afford the most basic necessities. Incomes had dropped by more than a third, and a quarter of the workforce was unemployed.

Behind the hypocritical eulogies for Sharon and the attempts to unite the disparate factions within Israel’s ruling circles lay grave concerns over the political stability of Israel and the entire Middle East. Tel Aviv’s stock market plunged in early trading January 5, with a 6 percent drop. If the decline had reached 8 percent, trading would have been temporarily halted for the first time since 1994.

Sharon’s rule has assumed a semi-Bonapartist character, largely because of the discrediting of the major Israeli parties. The Likud party he created was increasingly opposed by the mass of Israeli workers because of its costly and bloody war against the Palestinians coupled with the social cuts resulting from its right-wing economic agenda. It was only able to remain in power thanks to the Labour Party joining it in a coalition in December 2004. But this only served to further discredit Labour itself.

Then, Labour leader Shimon Peres justified the coalition by boosting Sharon’s fraudulent Gaza withdrawal plan as a path to peace. But he paid the price two months ago, when he lost the party leadership to Peretz, who made demagogic pledges to end collaboration with Likud’s attacks on the working class and to resume genuine negotiations with the Palestinians.

Sharon also earned the hatred of the more rightist elements within Likud, the settler and religious parties, who viewed the Gaza pullout as a betrayal and gravitated around Netanyahu.

Kadima was a desperate attempt to create a new political vehicle for Sharon, with the assistance of Peres. According to a recent opinion poll, it was expected to secure 42 of the 120 Knesset seats as a result of Sharon being able to portray himself as both a strongman and peacemaker.

Now, Kadima could easily destroy itself in factional infighting or simply collapse. Election results now are hard to predict, but if 10 seats return to Likud and Labour,

anything could happen. If Kadima’s supporters generally return to their former political homes, the most probable beneficiary would be Likud, which under Netanyahu is pledged to a further escalation of the offensive against the Palestinians. Labour is a less likely victor, but its discrediting and decline is a serious problem for the Israeli bourgeoisie. It leaves no vehicle for channeling opposition to Likud’s militarism and its rightist economic policies. Likud’s own social base amongst the settlers and religious Jews is also highly unstable, particularly given that the attacks on welfare payments and public spending desired by Netanyahu and his backers hit these layers hardest.

The conditions are therefore maturing for major social and political struggles within Israel itself.

On top of this, Sharon’s drive to destabilise the Palestinian Authority (PA) and to reduce the Palestinian people to penury has been all too successful. Its impact has produced a broad-based radicalisation and deep-felt anger and hatred of Israeli repression and oppression.

Hamas appears likely to be the main winner of the Palestinian elections set for January 25. Reports speak of the Palestinian Authority having descended into chaos—with fighting between PA security forces and local militias a daily occurrence, accusations leveled by the PA of criminality on the part of the Islamic groups, and counter-accusations that the PA has staged provocations as an excuse to call off elections it believes it will lose.

Whoever is responsible, there are protests daily by angry demonstrators demanding jobs or the release of prisoners.

The unrest has even spilled over into Egypt, with Egyptian police arresting around 100 Palestinians on January 4 after gunmen affiliated with Al Fateh’s Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade stole two bulldozers and smashed through the Gaza Strip border barricade. Two Egyptian soldiers were killed and 37 were wounded, as Egyptian security forces said they were unable to stem the flow of Palestinians across the border. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz has warned that Israel will intervene if Egypt is unable to police the situation effectively, which amounts to a direct threat to reoccupy the Gaza Strip.



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