

{JANUARY 10 2006}

# THREE FINGERS, NO FIST

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**A** political earthquake before an election is an unusual event, but not unknown. A second earthquake in such a period is already rare. But a third earthquake before an election, a short time after the first two – now, that is really scary.

Well, it has just happened. The nomination of Amir Peretz as leader of the Labor Party had already changed the political landscape of Israel. That is what pushed Ariel Sharon to create the Kadima party, the “Big Bang” that changed the landscape once again. Now, with the collapse of Sharon, the landscape has changed yet again – and this time beyond recognition.

Eighty days before the elections, the competition starts again right from the beginning. What will happen to Kadima? What kind of leader is Ehud Olmert? How will the parties do in the elections? Who will be the next Prime Minister? What kind of coalition will come into being?

Important questions. None of them has a clear answer at this time.

Kadima was born as Sharon’s personal party. He was the glue that held together the extreme right-winger Tsachi Hanegbi and the self-declared peacenik Shimon Peres, militarist Shaul Mofaz and former leftist trade union leader Haim Ramon.

The first thought after Sharon’s massive stroke was: this is the end of Kadima. Without Sharon, the entire package will fall apart. Only a miserable group of orphans will remain, something like a political refugee camp.

But that is really not certain at all. True, if someone joined this project only because he adores Sharon or needs a Big Father, he may now want to return to his former home. But if someone has already found a new home in Kadima, he will remain.

Who? First of all, the opportunists who have no chance of snatching a Knesset seat any other way.

But not only they. True, Kadima has no real program, no ideology. But its fuzzy sentiments and vague ideas can serve as a surrogate for a program. Many people entertain a hazy longing for peace – not peace with clear-cut contours, with a clear

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price, based on a compromise with the Palestinians, but a kind of abstract “peace”. This goes together with the slogan that one cannot trust the Arabs, that with Arabs you cannot make peace. This basic racism, perhaps a natural result of 120 years of war and conflict, expresses itself also in the feeling that the Jewishness of Israel should be reinforced and that Jewish traditions should be preserved, a vague, but nonetheless powerful sentiment.

Altogether this is a popular mixture, common to a significant proportion of the Israeli-Jewish public. It can serve as a convenient alternative to the explicit policies of the Left and the Right – all the more so since the public has become deeply suspicious of programs, ideologies and everything that looks like a miracle cure. The slogan could be: the vaguer, the better.

Until now, the Kadima people had put their trust in Sharon, believing that he would know what to do when the time came. They were sure that he had solutions – even if they did not know what they were – indeed, without wanting to know. They knew that he knew, and that was enough. Now this opaqueness can turn out to be an advantage in itself. A party that has no clear answer to anything can attract everyone.

Certainly, the party called Forwards will go backwards. It will not reach the 42 seats promised to Sharon by the opinion polls. But how many then? One can only guess, and no guess is worth much. My own guess: not less than 15, not more than 30.

One has to face the fact that Sharon is leaving the political arena empty of outstanding personalities and charismatic leaders. For better or worse, Israel will now be a normal Western-style country, with normal political parties headed by normal politicians.

And no politician is more normal than Ehud Olmert; the quintessential politician, who has never been anything but a politician, a politician pure and simple.

He is not a Great Father. Neither a glorious general nor a great thinker. He has no charisma, no vision, no exceptional integrity. At the start of his career, he soon betrayed several of those who favored him. But he is shrewd, smart, sober, ambitious and glib on TV, a politician, without grandstanding and poses.

He landed in his present position by sheer accident. The title “Deputy Prime Minister” was given him as a consolation prize, because Sharon could not satisfy his craving for the powerful Finance Ministry, which had already been promised to Netanyahu. As compensation, Sharon conferred on Olmert a title that was quite meaningless, because it meant only that Olmert would chair cabinet meetings on the rare occasions when Sharon was abroad.

Now, suddenly, the empty title turns out to be an excellent springboard. Automatic procedures have turned Olmert into Sharon’s temporary successor, and in politics, as

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is well known, nothing is more permanent than the temporary. The first to occupy a position has a huge advantage over all challengers.

One can trust Olmert not to do foolish things. His ego will not lead him into a hole, as frequently happens to Netanyahu. He is also much more experienced and devious than Amir Peretz.

If he maintains a steady hand until the elections, he has a chance to become the next prime minister.

Israeli politics now resemble the three fingers of a hand: Likud, Kadima and Labor. Three fingers instead of a fist.

It is quite possible that on election day, the three will get almost identical results – something around 25 seats each. If one of them does better than the others, its leader will probably be called upon to form the next government.

While the three are practically equal, Kadima has an advantage, since it occupies the place in the middle. When three lie in a bed, the one in the middle is always covered. In such a case, Olmert will be able to form a coalition either with Likud or with Labor. He will have no ideological qualms – he can be a leftist or a rightist, as required.

The situation presents a challenge to Amir Peretz. Since his nomination, his campaign has not left the ground. The massive figure of Sharon left no space for any contenders. Sharon had the initiative, with the media dancing around him. Now, with Olmert, Peretz has a much greater chance – provided he does not appear to be a second Olmert. Vagueness is good for Olmert, it is bad for Peretz.

Peretz has chosen the slogan “The Time Has Come!” A vague slogan that says nothing. He must move ahead, demonstrate leadership, present daring initiatives, capture the imagination, prove that he is capable of bringing about a revolution both in matters of peace and social affairs. It is hard to win, easy to fail. Now it’s up to him.

And all this, of course, is also true for Netanyahu on the other side.

After the third earthquake, these elections are good for democracy. For the first time in years, the public is faced with three clear options, represented by three parties with three leaders:

- On the right there is Likud under Netanyahu, championing the continuation of the occupation and the enlargement of the settlements, placing territory above peace.
- In the middle, Kadima under Ehud Olmert, will try to continue the ways of Sharon: annex territories and fix new borders for Israel unilaterally, adding some meaningless gestures spiced with vague slogans about peace.
- On the left, Labor under Amir Peretz will call for practical negotiations with the Palestinians, aimed at bringing an end to the conflict.

If these alternatives are clear-cut, and if the candidates do not try to obscure the

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differences between them, these elections can be really democratic, offering the public a real choice.

Voters will have to make the choice themselves, instead of leaving their fate in the hands of the Great Father.