

Ariel Sharon's New Party Slated to Win in March Elections: The Secret of Kadima

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ONLY AN earthquake can still prevent an overwhelming victory for Kadima in the coming elections.

But don't rule it out. In this election campaign, four earthquakes have already struck. First: the Labor Party elected a Morocco-born left-wing leader. Second: Ariel Sharon split the Likud and created the Kadima party. Third: Sharon was felled by a massive stroke and left the political stage. Fourth: Hamas won a decisive victory in the Palestinian elections.

After four such stunning upheavals, what is to stop a fifth? But, truly, at the moment it is difficult even to imagine an event that could possibly undermine the dominant position of Kadima in the election campaign.

The Secret of Kadima

IT LOOKS like magic. What is it about Kadima that gives it such a fantastic lead?

At first it was believed that after the initial enthusiasm, it would shrink to normal proportions. The forecasts (mine, too) said that in the end, a picture of three more-or-less equal fingers would emerge, with the Likud, Kadima and Labor getting around 25 seats each.

According to the polls, this is not the way things are going.

Next, it was said that the massive figure of Ariel Sharon was keeping Kadima at the top. After the Gaza disengagement, and especially after the melodramatic TV shows of the evacuation of the settlements, his popularity had reached dizzy heights. So, when he sank into a coma, it was expected that his party's fortunes would sink, too, perhaps after a few days of emotional commiseration. After all, who the hell is this Ehud Olmert? Nothing but an unpopular, second-rate political hack! A party under his leadership is bound to decline.

But this has not happened, either.

On the contrary, it seems that the Sharon-party does not need Sharon. And the unpopular Olmert rose overnight to an astonishing popularity.

(That, by the way, has happened before. After the sudden death of Prime Minister Levy Eshkol in 1969, he was succeeded by Golda Meir, at the time a very unpopular party politician. On becoming Prime Minister, her popularity rating rose practically overnight from

3 (three) percent to 80 (eighty!)

A few days ago, something even stranger happened: Olmert lost several popularity points, while those of Kadima actually rose. It seems that they would rise even with Caligula's horse in charge.

At the moment, 48 days before the election, the following distribution of seats in the next Knesset is predicted by the polls: 40-45 for Kadima, around 20 for Labor, around 17 for the Likud. The rest of the 120, some 40 seats, will be shared out among 9 or 10 smaller parties.

If this picture is confirmed at the ballot box, Olmert will be able to form a coalition at his whim. There are many possibilities: with the Likud and the rightist parties, with Labor and the leftist parties, with both Labor and the Likud, with the right and the religious parties, with the left and the religious parties. There are at least a dozen different possibilities.

SO WHAT is the magic quality that protects Kadima from all harm and makes it almost invincible?

It's not the first time in Israel that a new party pops up on the eve of an election, positions itself in the center and gathers votes from both left and right. Nor is it the first time that a new party captures the public mood of the moment and succeeds beyond expectation. One such was the new Rafi party of David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, with its 10 seats in 1965. In 1977, the new Dash party of Yigael Yadin and his bunch of generals won a surprising 15 seats. In the last elections, the upstart Shinui party also got 15 seats. But none of them even approached the expected success of Kadima.

So what made Kadima jump from nothing to 40, and retain this commanding position in spite of all blows of fortune – the disappearance of Sharon, the breakthrough of Hamas, the televised attack by police horses on the settlers of Amona on live television, the assaults from left and right?

Well, it has successfully attracted a mix of politicians from right and left that seem to complement each other. Tsakhi Hanegbi, a right-wing hooligan turned "statesman" complements the world-famous, supremely unsuccessful Shimon Peres. Tsipi Livni, a right-winger from birth with a decent, rational façade complements Haim Ramon, a left-winger from birth with a history of political adventurism.

But Kadima is an entity that stands above its constituent personalities: it represents exactly what most Israelis feel at this point in time. It provides a focus for the Israeli consensus of the beginning of 2006 – and that is the main point. This consensus says:

- The huge gap between rich and poor is very regrettable indeed, but not so important. Amir Peretz has failed to make this the central issue.

- The majority wants an end to the conflict and detests the settlements. The Hamas breakthrough in Palestine has not caused panic to break out. That's why Binyamin Netanyahu's campaign has not taken off.

- The public does not trust the Arabs and does not want to have anything to do with them. This is what attracts it to the central idea of Kadima: that one can achieve peace "unilaterally".

Clearly, “unilateral peace” is a contradiction in terms. Olmert’s most popular promise – the winning formula, it seems – is “let’s fix the permanent borders of Israel unilaterally”. That is, of course, utter nonsense. Neither the Palestinians and the Arab world, nor the US and the family of nations will recognize a border that is fixed without agreement. It will not bring peace, but a continuation of the conflict for generations to come.

That’s what logic says. But in elections, logic takes second place to emotions. Olmert’s promise to “separate from the Palestinians” is only a more elegant rendering of the vulgar phrase “get the Palestinians out of our sight” – and that is the popular thing at this moment.

Olmert states fairly where the permanent border that is to be fixed unilaterally, will run. The principle is: a Jewish state as large as possible with as few Arabs as possible. He intends to annex the “settlement blocs”, Greater Jerusalem, unspecified “security zones” and the Jordan valley.

Among the settlement blocs he mentions Ariel, Modi’in Illit, Ma’aleh Adumim and Etzion. Miraculously, that exactly matches the Wall-cum-Fence that is now being constructed (confirming what we have asserted all the time: that the path of the fence was not shaped by security considerations, but by the annexation map.)

Olmert’s map is, of course, the same as that of Sharon. He only states it openly and in detail. It annexes 58% of the West Bank. What it leaves to the Palestinians (altogether, 11% of pre-1948 Palestine) is chopped up into isolated enclaves, cut off from the world.

Yossi Beilin, the originator of the “settlement bloc” idea, has already announced that his left-wing Meretz party wishes to join the future Olmert coalition. Labor does not announce this openly, but that is clearly its hope. They will surely argue with Olmert about the final location of the border, but they do accept his general approach.

Once upon a time, a jocular remark made the rounds in America: “What I hate most is racists and niggers.” Now the average Israeli wants “Peace without Arabs”. Kadima’s “unilateral” approach reflects this position precisely – and that’s the secret of its success.

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