

Sharon's Victory Means More Bloodshed for Israel

by Dean Andromidas

"Israelis voted with their guts, not with their minds," was the reaction to Ariel Sharon's Jan. 28 election victory, by one senior Israeli peace activist. He warned that Israel is in for a bloody future, if Sharon is not stopped. *Ha'aretz* commentator Yoel Marcus wrote, on the day of the elections, "Instead of choosing between two alternatives, as befitting a democracy, the public will elect Sharon today, as befitting psychopaths."

The real alternatives remain: forging a peace agreement with the Palestinians, or following re-elected Prime Minister Sharon into a new Middle East war and the destruction of Israel. This reality was fully understood by Labor Party Chairman Amram Mitzna, who reaffirmed after his party's defeat, that he will never lead the Labor Party back into a suicidal unity government: "We will not join Sharon, we will replace him."

Without the Labor Party in the new government, Sharon will have to forge a coalition—unstable at best—with various smaller parties.

Sharon's Likud party owes its victory to the war party in Washington, not the admiration of the Israeli voter. Two weeks before the elections, Sharon's campaign was hit hard by revelations that he was the prime suspect in half a dozen criminal investigations. The second blow to the campaign occurred when Mitzna declared that he would never join a national unity government, thus depriving Sharon of the figleaf that gave him political cover during almost two years of his first term, which ended on Oct. 30, 2002, when the Labor Party pulled out of the coalition "national unity" government.

Sharon was rescued by two of the biggest moneybags backing the war party in Washington: mega-billionaires Michael Steinhardt and Marc Rich. *EIR* wrote at the time that both of these rogues have a direct line into the office of "chicken-hawk" Vice President Dick Cheney (*EIR* Jan. 24 and Jan. 31). That connection is through Lewis Libby, Cheney's chief of staff and the attorney for Russian Mafia front-man

Marc Rich. Both Steinhardt and Rich met in Israel with leading members of the Likud and Labor parties just prior to the elections. Steinhardt confided to a Washington-based journalist that he had met with Sharon's top confidant, while both he and Rich had spoken with Likud moneyman, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, and with Labor Party leader Shimon Peres, Sharon's former Foreign Minister. The message to both was clear: The U.S. war party does not want Mitzna as the leader of Israel, but demands a unity government between the Likud and Labor. Only this combination could save Sharon and help the war party's efforts to mobilize for an attack on Iraq.

The orders were clear, and the election result proves that they were carried out. First, Mitzna's campaign was sabotaged with the help of Peres, who has fully abandoned his "New Middle East" concept of the 1990s, which was based on the Oslo peace accords, for another new Middle East, based on a clash of civilizations. As one senior Israeli intelligence source put it, "When there's peace, Peres is for peace; when there's war, Peres is for war." Peres attempted a clandestine leadership coup against Mitzna, after having unsuccessfully contended against him for party chairman. Although the coup failed, it nonetheless disoriented the Labor Party machine.

Meanwhile, on the Likud side, it became apparent that their cash-starved campaign got fresh contributions to fund the backroom deals and pay for activists to hit the streets in the last two weeks of the campaign.

Mitzna: 'There Is An Alternative'

When the polls closed, the Likud had won 37 seats for the 120-seat Knesset (parliament), almost doubling its previous 19 seats. The Labor Party fell from 26 to 19 seats, and the pro-peace Meretz party lost almost half its seats, winning only 6 mandates. A triumphant Sharon immediately announced his intention to form a national unity government with Labor—

and Mitzna vowed that he would not join under any circumstances.

Mitzna declared: "We presented the public with a clear, unequivocal, and courageous position, offering the path to hope, a way of dealing with the complex reality. . . . The voters chose a different path." Pointing to the future, he said, "Every day and in every part of the country, the Labor Party, under my leadership, will remind Sharon and the entire public, that there is an alternative, that there is another way. . . . Politics is a marathon, and we are only in the first kilometers. The nation chose Sharon as Prime Minister, but, at the same time, chose us to be the alternative. It is no disgrace to be in opposition, and I promise you that our time there will be short. Sharon hopes that Labor will once again become a figleaf for his failed policy. But we have no intention of joining him; rather, replacing him. . . . Labor has a path, an identity, and a leader. I, Amram Mitzna, pledge to you this evening that I will lead the Labor Party in its struggle for the future of the party."

A review of the election results demonstrates that Sharon's victory may indeed prove short-lived.

The election turnout of 68% was Israel's lowest ever. Israeli observers indicate that Labor and the left suffered most. But also, many of the non-voters were former Likud supporters, disgusted by the corruption and criminality that has taken over the party, but could not bring themselves to vote Labor. Furthermore, the Likud won 13 of its additional 18 mandates at the expense of the right-wing ethnic-Russian and Shas parties. Another five or six of the Likud's new mandates came as the result of the dissolution of the Center and Geshet parties, both of which had been led by former Likud figures, who simply rejoined the Likud for the recent elections. Many of these parties' loyalists had previously been Likud supporters, but abandoned that party during the 2001 Knesset elections and were convinced, this time around, to return to the fold. Although the Likud parliamentary bloc is much larger than before, it is also more unstable, now that both its left wing, led by Dan Meridor, which supports territorial compromise with the Palestinians, and its right wing, led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who refuses to accept a Palestinian state of any form, are back in the party. Under certain conditions, the party could split again.

Labor lost its six seats primarily due to the low voter turnout, and to the gains made by the secular Shinui party. Led by Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, the Shinui was formed on the basis of opposition to the ultra-Orthodox religious parties. It went from a marginal 6 mandates to 15. It has a left wing which supports territorial compromise, and a right wing which does not. Although Lapid would love to jump into the coalition wedding bed with Sharon, he cannot join a coalition that includes the ultra-Orthodox Shas, a party which has maintained a considerable number of backroom deals with the Likud. If Lapid tried, his party would most likely split, with some of its Knesset members joining the ranks of the opposition. Lapid has called on the Labor Party to dump

Mitzna and join a Sharon-led government.

Meanwhile, the trade union-linked One Nation doubled its strength to four seats, and the Arab parties Ra'am and Baland, along with the Arab-Jewish party Hadash, increased their mandates to a total of nine. The rest of the mandates were spread among the religious parties and the extreme right-wing National Union.

Thus, despite Likud's 37 mandates, without the Labor Party, the arithmetic of coalition-building will not add up to a stable government. If Sharon decides to go for a right-wing government, he could be forced to go to war sooner than the war party in Washington would want, or his government could collapse, and once again, the country would go to early elections.

Then there is the dark shadow being cast by six criminal investigations against both Sharon and the Likud party. If the Israeli criminal justice system is able to do its work, Sharon might have to spend more time with police interrogators than with his Cabinet ministers.

Sharon Wants Iraq War

Sharon is banking on a U.S. war on Iraq, which he hopes will force the Labor Party to enter the government. That war, he hopes, will ensure the arrival of \$14 billion in U.S. grants and loan guarantees to bail out the collapsing Israeli economy. In addition, he will be putting tremendous pressure on Mitzna, according to *Ha'aretz* correspondent Yosser Verter, "through the well-known pressure groups: American Jewry, business people, security officials, intellectuals, mayors."

Former Labor Party Chairman Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who had served as Sharon's Defense Minister in the last government, voiced his support for Mitzna, telling *Ha'aretz* (Jan. 30) that a war in Iraq need not be a reason to join a unity government with Sharon. "The most important thing to do now is rehabilitate the party, build the branches, and create a fighting spirit," he said.

But Shimon Peres continues to take his cue from Rich and Steinhardt. According to *Ha'aretz*, Peres took the unusual move of calling his "old friend" Sharon to congratulate him on his victory, while telling the press that Labor should keep the door open to Sharon's overtures.

But everyone knows that Sharon will not change his three "no's": no to negotiating under fire; no to talks with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat; and no to a set timetable for Israeli concessions. Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in *Ha'aretz* on Jan. 29, "The first mission of the new Sharon government will be to thwart the imposition of an international initiative—the 'road map'—for settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict"—a joint endeavor with Europe, Russia, and the United Nations.

Whether or not Sharon can do that, depends on Washington, and that is where the real fight is being waged. Without a change in U.S. policy, away from the Iraq war and toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, Mitzna and the pro-peace elements in Israel face a steep uphill fight.