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PEACE AND POLITICS

No sooner had the Israel-Egyptian treaty been signed than political pundits began to assess, measure, and speculate as to the impact of the agreement on Israeli politics and parties. Old coalitions and party affiliations are being tested, if not weakened and perhaps sundered. The first post treaty molecular change in the constantly splitting atom of Israeli politics was the resignation from the Likud this past week of Moshe Shamir, member of the Likud's splintered La'am Party.

Shamir's action was the first in a number of possible shifts in the wake of Likud's metamorphosis into a peace party prepared to surrender territories and remove the settlements from the Rafiah salient. He is expected to be joined by Geula Cohen, who is on the verge of breaking away from Herut. However, her loyalist group within Herut is urging her to remain and fight on from within the party. Shamir and Cohen have been conducting the intensive contacts with Gush Emunim (the Land of Israel Movement) and with other hawkish anti-treaty groups. One such group is a new political movement led by Professor Yuval Ne'eman (a top Israeli scientist and former president of Tel Aviv University) called Brit Ne'emanei Eretz Yisrael (Covenant of the Land of Israel Faithful). Another faction is called the Ein Vered Group, consisting of the hawkish elements within the Labor Alignment.

Among the leadership of Gush Emunim there is controversy as to the next steps. Hanan Porat urges the setting up of a new religious, nationalist party which will attract the hawkish elements within the National Religious Party (N.R.P.=Mafdal). This party will be known as HaTehiya (Rebirth or Revival). On the other hand the political secretary of Gush Emunim, Gershon Shafat, is urging a broad-based nationalist party which will attract to its banner both religious and non-religious alike. Others such as Rabbi Levinger of Kiryat Arba oppose setting up any new political party, but urge the continuance of their lobbying and demonstrations as a movement in order to influence those essentially opposed to the peace treaty. They are determined at this point not to bolt their parties. Such members of Knesset as Yigal Hurwitz of La'am and Haim Druckman of the N.R.P. have decided to remain within their parties in order to exert pressure from within. They realize perhaps that their influence would be greatly diminished if it came from the far right periphery of the political arena.

Despite the considerable heat and dramatic interest generated by these hawkish elements, the 95 votes in the Knesset for the peace

treaty render their kinetic activity of minimal political force at least in the days ahead. At most only some 10% of the Israeli public would identify with and support the right wing nationalist bloc which may emerge from all of the above.

Of far greater significance, if of lesser dramatic impact, are the changes generated by the peace treaty within the mainstream political parties and coalitions.

Despite the restraint, hesitation and doubts of the Israeli public regarding the peace treaty, the events in Washington and Cairo have given a substantial boost to the Likud among the electorate. The continuing survey of political opinion conducted by the Institute of Applied Social Research and the Institute of Communications at the Hebrew University indicated that the Likud was in trouble prior to the peace treaty. The surveys indicated that the Likud gained strength among the electorate for a period of six months following its victory at the polls in May 1977. Between November 1977 and November 1978, despite ups and downs, the Likud continued to hold the lead among that segment of the public who were willing to include their preference in response to the question "Which party would you vote for if elections were held today?" Only twice -- in March and June 1978 -- did the alignment approximate the Likud's popularity in the public opinion polls. Both dates marked crisis situations in American-Israel relations surrounding the peace effort. However, from the beginning of December 1978 until the end of February 1979, there was a steady decline in Likud popularity with the Alignment actually outstripping the Likud toward the end of this period.

Other parties such as the NRP, Shelli, and Citizens' Rights have remained characteristically stable during this period. After virtually disappearing from the polls, the splintered factions of the Democratic Movement for Change have had a slight rise in public popularity which would give them perhaps one or two seats in a new Knesset. However, for all intents and purposes they are virtually finished as a serious political force in Israeli politics.

Now matters have taken a new turn. The disastrous economic scene which hitherto has so seriously weakened the Begin government and diminished Likud popularity is for the time being masked by the achievement of a peace agreement.

It is against this background that speculation is rampant here concerning the desirability and possibility of early elections. Within the Likud leadership opinion is divided as to the desirability of early elections. Simcha Ehrlich, the Minister of Finance and head of the Liberal Party within the Likud, would dearly love early elections. The absolute shambles of his seeming non-existent economic policies have made the idea of an election campaign around Begin the peacemaker virtually irresistible to him. His reasoning is that an electoral victory now would give the Likud an additional two years to set its domestic house in order. It would also allow Mr. Ehrlich to choose some other Cabinet post in a new government

where he might recoup a modicum of respectability for himself and his Liberals. Today the two major economic cabinet posts, Finance and Industry, Commerce and Tourism, are held by Liberal M.K.'s, so they must take the major share of the blame for the domestic disorder and economic chaos.

On the other hand, Begin seems to be wary of the supposed benefits to be had by calling for early elections. Possibly he is mindful of the Churchill defeat immediately after the end of World War II. Churchill as architect of victory was unable to translate this achievement into positive electoral results in the face of domestic and economic issues.

More likely, he is simply more perceptive politically than his colleague Mr. Ehrlich. Although he can go to the electorate with the historic accomplishment of a peace treaty with Egypt, he appreciates the external problems yet confronting his government, as well as the disarray of his own party in the wake of the agreement.

If the Israeli political system allowed for a quick elections then perhaps Begin could make political capital out of his singular achievement. However, the election laws are such that preparations require at least four to six months. By that time the explosive problems of autonomy and settlement in the administered territories may well dim the bright light of peace, creating strains and crises with Egypt and the United States.

Moreover, Begin's coalition partners would not support a bid for early elections. The Democratic Movement led by Yigael Yadin would commit political suicide by such an act, while his N.R.P. partners would find themselves threatened by their right wing Gush Emunim faction.

Internally within his own Herut party Begin faces problems which must be resolved before going to the polls. Herut after the peace treaty will never be the same; the ideological history of Herut with the slogan "Not One Inch" is now an anachronism. Those Herut leaders who are essentially opposed to the peace treaty must be shunted aside or brought into line. In addition to Geula Cohen, these include such stalwarts as Ariel Sharon; Moshe Arens, Chairman of the Knesset Committee for Foreign Affairs and Security; Yitzhak Shamir, Speaker of the Knesset and would-be successor to Begin; and Haim Landau, Minister of Transportation and once loyal confidant. Begin needs time to cultivate and develop other leaders and would-be successors and to bring them into the center of Herut politics.

One such figure is Ezer Weizman, whose political stock has risen and fallen erratically these past two years. Despite his popularity with large segments of the Israeli public he has been on the periphery of the Herut political scene. Little trusted by the party faithful, he is only now in the position of the politician who came in from the cold. The treaty signing and Begin trip to Cairo have vindicated his position and his struggle to convince the

government of Israel that Sadat and Egypt truly mean peace. Despite the doubts and party frictions during the debate over Camp David and the subsequent peace treaty, the vote in the Herut central committee and the vote of the Herut M.K.'s represent a major political success for Weizman. With it he has successfully pushed aside his chief opponents in the Herut party itself. He has long enjoyed widespread support among the Liberals in the Likud. They have for some time regarded him as a likely successor to Begin. The signing of the peace treaty advances his political position both within Herut and outside the party.

Another figure within the Herut party who is moving to center stage is David Levy, now Minister of Housing and Construction, as well as Minister of Immigration and Absorption. The dramatic rise of Levy to a position of power and authority within Herut is impressive. When Begin insisted that Levy be given a cabinet post in his new government, it was seen only as a political pay-off owed to the large mass of Sephardic Jews who had supported the Likud in the election. Begin's choice was not greeted with enthusiasm by party leaders or by the public.

The nation was swept by a wave of David Levy jokes which combined elements of Polish jokes with those reminiscent of the Eisenhower jokes of the 1950's. David Levy was a big joke in the eyes of the public.

Nevertheless, he began quietly and determinedly to build a political base of power within Herut. More than any other minister, he staunchly supported Begin throughout the sixteen months of the peace process. The four Herut ministers in the government include Weizman, Sharon, Levy and Landau. Only Levy has been consistently loyal to Begin in external affairs without causing trouble. For this reason Begin chose Levy to represent him personally before the central committee of Herut in the debate over the peace treaty. At that stormy session his strength was evidenced by his taking on two party stalwarts. He did not hesitate to call on Arik Sharon to resign or to verbally abuse and publicly condemn Moshe Arens.

Levy's power does not solely rest on his support for Begin. The fact is that Levy's loyalty did not include support for the government's inept economic policies. He was prepared to embarrass Begin in his struggle with Aryeh Dulzin, Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, over aliya and absorption, as well as to fight Ehrlich and prevent an increase in the prices of dairy products and frozen meat.

Along with this, Levy has used the patronage available to him in his ministry to give out jobs to the party faithful. More than all of his ministerial colleagues he has used his position to reward his followers and would-be followers.

Today David Levy is the new authentic Herut leader. He is one of the very few political leaders to emerge out of the "Second Israel" and to rise to a position of power at the top. If not a

potential successor to Begin, then he is certainly cast in the role of king maker. If indeed peace will permit Israel to get on with trying to deal with its critical social and economic problems, then David Levy can only continue to rise in the power structure of Israeli politics.

With the self-made independence, appeal, and power of a David Levy together with Ezer Weizman's growing popularity, Begin the peacemaker is in a position to shift his Herut Party from the margin to the center of the political spectrum.

In the face of Begin's peace achievement as well as the above shift in the Herut's orientation and base, it is little wonder that the Alignment finds itself in a very difficult position. It has not yet fully recovered from its defeat of two years ago; its leadership remains divided among itself and, in the face of a peace achieved by Begin, they have little to propose in opposition. Little wonder, then, that they, too, prefer to wait for new elections until the present government finds itself in difficulty over issues of autonomy, settlements, or domestic policies and until such time as a strong and united party leadership emerges within the Alignment. In line with this, a new name being floated for potential leadership of the Alignment and possibly prime minister is that of Yitzhak Navon. Navon as President of Israel has achieved the image of a statesman who, with his appreciation and knowledge of Arab culture and language, can perhaps better represent Israel to Sadat and the Arab world than the Polish-born Begin, who often appears insensitive to Arab sensibilities.

In the end it will be the internal politics within the Herut and the Alignment which will probably determine the date as well as the issues of the next Knesset elections.

- - David Clayman