

Slouching towards Kadima

By Thomas O'Dwyer,
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In early January 2006, Israel's seemingly invincible "bulldozer" prime minister, Ariel Sharon, suffered a second stroke in quick succession and slipped into a coma. Now, on the eve of the country's election on 28 March, it seems that the entire Israeli nation has followed his example.

The felled Sharon left behind him a new party, Kadima ([Forward](#) [1]), now led by his deputy and acting prime minister Ehud Olmert, which he had set up to ride the waves of a successful evacuation of settlers and troops from the Gaza strip in August 2005. His aim was to sweep back to power in the elections whose date he had announced in [December](#) [2].

What has followed since has been one of the most astonishingly dull election campaigns ever seen in a country where "dull" is a word rarely used to describe the daily news. Unparalleled apathy and indecision among the voters have been stealing more headlines than the pledge by Kadima leader [Ehud Olmert](#) [3] finally to define Israel's borders, or new Labour Party leader [Amir Peretz's](#) [4] promises of a social revolution, or the desperate efforts of Likud leader [Binyamin Netanyahu](#) [5] to pull together the old rightwing consensus gutted by its former hero, Sharon.

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"Highlights" of the election campaign have been as scarce as hens' teeth. One newspaper columnist commented: "If silence were an Olympic sport, Olmert would be winning the gold." There has been but one sudden burst of [action](#) [7] on 14 March when Israeli troops stormed a Palestinian prison in Jericho and seized several prisoners. Among them was Ahmad Saadat, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, whom Israel accuses of masterminding the October 2001 assassination of tourism minister [Rehavam Ze'evi](#) [8].

The swashbuckling military operation – clearly trying to send the message that Olmert was a chip off the old macho and unyielding Sharon block – was successful and popular with the public, but created scarcely a blip in the public opinion polls and quickly faded from media memory.

Michael Feige [9], a prominent sociologist at Ben-Gurion University Research Institute in the Negev, and an expert on the changing role of symbolism and politics in Israeli identity, finds the apathy disturbing.

Feige told me that all Israel's larger parties think new territorial political landscapes are now required – "even the Likud". But the political consensus in the country seems to be "wall off the Palestinians, put them away, behind us, and forget about them."

Feige said Israel is in fact also walling off the Jewish West Bank settlers, but won't speak about that because of the human-rights issues involved: "It's a case of 'you're all over there, in a different world from us'. From a moral perspective, this is all very disturbing. It could backfire on Israel – maybe not, but it could."

"In the meantime it is the Palestinians who will suffer the price. The second *intifada* [10] (the armed uprising which began in September 2000) undermined the process of discourse. Israelis don't care any more about the Palestinians, or the settlers – the public just wants to be rid of it all."

Lior Chorev, a leading Kadima campaign strategist, echoes [11] this view: "Most Israelis are not looking for peace with the Palestinians. They are looking for quiet, for security, and they want the fence to be high enough so that they don't have to see them any longer".

Michael Feige said it was interesting how the public attitude had shifted during the Gaza disengagement – "the religious nationalist camp ended up fighting the disengagement alone." And yet, he continued, there was an unmistakable feeling that this election would mark an important turning-point in national consciousness, for Palestinians as well as Israelis, in a post-Sharon political and social landscape.

As voting-day neared, even warnings from inside the defence establishment that Palestinian terrorists were planning bombing campaigns ("more than seventy possible threats have being identified") raised scarcely a yawn over morning coffees in Tel Aviv's lively cafes, with their bored security guards at the entrance.

The politicians worry

Signs of alarm among the frustrated politicians began to appear on the weekend of 25-26 March, and a shrill edge of desperation could be heard. Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister – whom Olmert has designated [12] as deputy prime minister if Kadima wins the election – pleaded with voters to hit the polling stations hard. "I don't understand why people are telling me that Kadima will win the elections anyway, so what's the point in voting", she said. "We are facing dramatic decisions and these are significant elections. Pick up the phone, get people out of the house."

The veteran statesman Shimon Peres echoed her concerns. "All major national decisions were made when there was at least one party with forty Knesset [13] seats – it is impossible to run this country with a split Knesset", he said. Indeed, before Sharon's stroke, Kadima itself was confidently predicted to win at least forty seats easily in the 120-seat parliament, leaving it sure to construct a comfortable coalition majority with Labour and smaller parties.

That commanding lead has been slipping. The [opinion polls](#) [14] on the last weekend of the campaign predicted between thirty-two and thirty-five seats for Kadima, with twenty for Labour, and the once mighty Likud trailing with just fourteen. An astonishing twenty-five seats were said to be still in the hands of undecided floating voters, and a host of small [parties](#) [15] were scrabbling to beat the 2% minimum votes threshold (an increase from 1.5% in 2003, which may hurt the Israeli-Arab parties especially) to share the rest.

"My big worry is that even if we win the elections we will not be able to form a powerful enough coalition for the government to see through its term free of the politicking of minor parties", Olmert admitted.

Kadima's manifesto supports setting up "another nation (i.e. Palestinian) state, as long as it is not a terror state", but the party also wants to keep large Jewish West Bank settlement blocs and an undivided Jerusalem. Domestically it promises investments in social and economic infrastructure and a war on poverty and crime.

Labour's untested new leader [Amir Peretz](#) [16], elected in November 2005 in place of Shimon Peres (who defected to Kadima soon after) remains confident of leading his party into a ruling coalition with Kadima. At first lampooned by television satirists as a figure always bellowing through a shop-steward's megaphone at the electorate, he quickly dropped his harsh attacks on Israel's wealthy capitalists and crafted a moderate social-reform agenda to slash unemployment and raise the minimum wage. On the peace front, Peretz [says](#) [17] that Labour will renew diplomatic negotiations based on "two states for two nations" with borders to be determined in the talks.

In every Israeli election campaign one party seems to emerge unexpectedly and make political and media waves. The dark horse this time is [Avigdor Lieberman's](#) [18] Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), a nationalist rightwing party with a large base among the million Russian-speaking voters. The most recent estimates suggest that Lieberman's group may oust the anti-religious Shinui ([Change](#) [19]) party from parliament and win eleven seats, a number likely to equal the religious Shas party. This would leave an expected eight seats for the Israeli-Arab parties, and six for the leftwing Meretz.

The most pathetic figure of the election campaign is former prime minister, foreign minister and finance minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He has been [fighting](#) [20] a forlorn battle to drag moderate Likud voters who followed Sharon into Kadima back into the fold. The gutted Likud remains the last bastion of the somewhat tattered Zionist nationalist vision of a "greater Israel" – the party's election platform pledges not to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state, to set the River Jordan as Israel's permanent border, to expand Jewish neighbourhoods in east Jerusalem, and to boost Jewish settlements on the Golan Heights (seized from Syria in the 1967 war).

But Netanyahu's problems go beyond outmoded ideologies that are out of favour with Israelis weary of being branded "occupiers". For years Israel's working classes, traditionally rightwing voters – at least since the political earthquake of 1977 which first brought the Likud to power under [Menachem Begin](#) [21] – pinned their hopes on Netanyahu to improve their dismal economic lot. But since his Thatcherite economic reign (2003-05) at the treasury, they have turned viciously against him.

Netanyahu is further held in contempt by former admirers among the settlers in the West Bank and Gaza for his disappearance overseas during the evacuation of the Gaza settlers, despite promises to oppose it – a feeling not alleviated by Netanyahu's resignation from the government

over the issue. Only the left has remained consistent on Netanyahu – they despise him as roundly as they always did.

A nation shrugs

The domestic apathy has been successfully exported. The international media crews who flocked to Israel in January to camp outside the hospital of the stricken Sharon have not come back for the election. Freelance journalists grumble that they have never had so few calls from foreign editors during an election.

Even Netanyahu, who is by far the best known Israeli leader after Sharon and Peres in the United States, brought in no American advisers, co-opted no Congress members, nor even called on influential American Jews.

Ehud Olmert, the probable next prime minister, remains virtually unknown abroad outside foreign ministries. Amir Peretz is regarded as an alien with a Joe Stalin moustache, no English, and an invisible resume as a lifelong trade-union leader. He is totally unknown to the American or European public and (a brief [BBC Radio 4](#) [22] interview aside) has shown no interest in getting to know them – not even the foreign Jewish public.

A US embassy diplomatic source in Tel Aviv agreed that such American lack of interest was unusual for an Israeli election. "The U.S. government will expect a new Israeli government to address some issues in the territories such as their economic plight, the tax money due to the Palestinian Authority, and how to engage with the new Hamas administration," the diplomat said. The unspoken hint was that there was little US interest in the election because very little was expected from a new Olmert government anyway.

Israelis say the only thing that could disrupt the orderly trickle of voters to the polls now would be a spectacular terrorist outrage. So, having given up on the campaign, exasperated commentators are looking to the morning after and the coalition horse-trading to provide some excitement.

Since this is Israel, the first question to be asked of the new coalition will be: "can it survive?" Olmert has promised to bring into government only parties that will back a West Bank disengagement – or "convergence", in his new terminology. But if no one cares before the election, will anyone care afterwards?

In the prevailing apathy, no one has even bothered to ask the about-to-be-elected prime minister about his actual plans for "the convergence" – the who, what, when, where and why of it all. And, as important in an Israel increasingly preoccupied with "pocket-book" issues – the how much.

Military officials say they haven't been asked to prepare any evacuation plan at all, much less one for the "morning after" the government takes office. Neither, apparently, has anyone else. Israelis too await the future they are about to decide.

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[9] <http://www.bgu.ac.il/Ben-Gurion/staff/feige.html> target=_blank

[10] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4294502.stm target=_blank

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