

Are Sharon's Troubles Harbinger for Bush?

by Michele Steinberg and Nancy Spannaus

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon could be going to jail, as an outcome of one of the longest-running political organized-crime investigations in the history of the “free world.” The fact that the Cheneyacs controlling the Bush Administration have succeeded so far in getting the President to capitulate to Sharon, means that the Israeli strongman’s political demise may well have devastating consequences for George W. Bush as well.

Since the January indictment of Likud-party money-bags David Appel, Sharon has been confident of the opposite result—that Washington would save him. He shrugged off the indictment, and instead escalated military operations, including air strikes into Lebanon and Syria, and frequent assassinations of Palestinian militants, culminating in the March 22 assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Yassin was the spiritual leader and founder of the Hamas organization that Sharon himself had built up during the 1980s, then as a counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The chaos that will follow the Yassin killing has yet to unfold fully.

A Changed Washington

Sharon is scheduled to arrive in Washington on April 14, with his hands still bloody from personally supervising that assassination. But Sharon will find Washington changed, and there are reports that the meeting may be cancelled. With his neo-conservative protectors in the United States also in political trouble, Sharon will find himself under pressure to deliver a foreign-policy “success” for President Bush. The American President had once attempted to present himself as a broker for Mideast peace, but has seen such hopes dashed by the Israeli leader’s bloody actions.

Inside Israel, Sharon’s trump card has been his proven close relationship to Washington. On the surface, Washington still provides Sharon support; indeed, it is reported that Vice President Cheney himself gave the green light to the Yassin assassination. But those parts of the Administration which are committed to Bush—rather than to the neo-conservative agenda—want to put Sharon under control.

Middle East sources report that Sharon’s visit is occurring as part of a deal which the desperate White House hammered out, whereby Sharon promised he would clear Israelis out of the Gaza Strip, and also close down six or seven remote Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But the extreme right wing in

Israel has threatened to bring down his government if Sharon gives Bush this deal.

It is clear that in Sharon, the United States is dealing with a gangster, whom Labor Party Knesset member Ofer Pines-Paz compares to “the Sopranos on television.” The Appel case is one of several multimillion-dollar frauds for which Sharon is still under investigation, including illegal American contributions to his 1999 Likud leadership campaign, and a \$1.5 million loan from South African businessman Cyril Kern.

Already, forces in Washington’s neo-con war camp are feeling out options to replace Sharon. The two leading jackals around his government—Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz—are already circling, waiting for Sharon’s political corpse to stop twitching. But the continuing investigations into David Appel, who is not just a “businessman” supporter but a member of the Likud Central Committee, show that his money taints the entire Likud. If he goes under, many others besides Sharon may fall.

The Case Against Sharon

On March 28, Israel’s Chief Prosecutor Edna Arbel delivered to Attorney General Menahem Mazuz, a draft indictment of Sharon for taking huge bribes from Appel, a real-estate developer and Likud Party money-bags who has been indicted, after an investigation of several years, for bribing Sharon, his Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (also national chairman of the Likud), and Sharon’s son Gilad. The money was said to have been channelled through Gilad Sharon. Attorney General Mazuz has announced that he will decide in about a month whether to indict Sharon—which, if done, would make him the first Prime Minister in the history of Israel to be indicted.

The referral by the Chief Prosecutors has renewed the calls for Sharon to resign now—including a call by Sharon’s own Minister of Infrastructure, Yosef Paritzsky, a member of the Shinui Party. Knesset (Parliament) member Yossi Sarid, a leader of the Meretz Party, demanded, “How can you run the country when a heavy cloud of bribery allegations hovers over your head? We all know that when we have a personal problem, it eats away and distracts our mind.”

Sharon’s troubles are further amplified by the deadly economic crisis which is gripping Israel, and is being exacerbated by the policy of permanent war his Likud party is pursuing.

In the United States, sane Republicans may well see a harbinger for the Bush Administration’s future in the fate of Sharon. The application of brute force as an occupying power, combined with blatant corruption and drastic economic austerity for the lower income brackets of the population, are about to send America’s “leading ally” into political oblivion, and perhaps to prison. Bush may well be too stupid to see that that’s where Sharon’s friend Cheney is leading him; but perhaps there are some loyal Republicans who will clue him in.