

'The Guy Upstairs' Doesn't Take Polls

by Dean Andromidas

Since Histadrut Chairman Amir Peretz assumed chairmanship of Israel's Labor Party on Nov. 9, the country has been hit with one political earthquake after another. Peretz changed the agenda from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's security and "maybe" peace, to a clear and decisive call for negotiations for a real peace with the Palestinians, and a new socio-economic agenda that will give not just military security, but social security to the Israeli people. Peretz transformed the moribund Labor Party into a fighting political force, filling it with determination to win state power, prompting Sharon to leave the Likud party, throwing that top right-wing party into disarray. Polls forecast that Sharon's new Kadima party could get as many as 42 Knesset seats in the elections in March 2006.

But on Dec. 18, Sharon's hospitalization with what was described as a "mild stroke," and a bit of reality undermined the campaign of Sharon's spin doctors. Yoel Marcus of the daily *Ha'aretz* wrote on Dec. 20, "The guy upstairs tapped Sharon on the shoulder at a very bad time. Even if the prime minister leaves the hospital with a clean bill of health, there has been a dramatic political development whose consequences are difficult to foresee."

An Israeli source told *EIR*, that the political deck has once again been reshuffled. "Everyone has become a medical expert, and now speculation on his health and age will become a theme in the election."

Political Realignments

Speaking at a Labor Party convention on Dec. 20, Amir Peretz made clear that "the issue of public concern is not Sharon's health, but the health of Israeli society." Peretz underlined, "A Palestinian state has become a consensus. The slogan 'two states for two nations' is also heard in Likud. But Mr. Prime Minister, we've never agreed to create two nations within our *own* country. The health of the state of Israel and broad swaths of the nation will head the agenda. The prime minister must not continue to evade his responsibility for the societal fracture in Israel," he said, referring to the growing gap between rich and poor Israelis.

The Labor Party's primaries will take place on Jan. 17 to decide its list of candidates for the Knesset, after which the campaign will go into high gear.

On the other side of the political spectrum, on Dec. 19,

the Likud party voted for Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu as its new chairman. The fact that the fanatic Moshe Feiglin, leader of the so-called "Jewish Leadership" faction of the Likud, received 15%, has become a scandal. He is even more of a fascist than Netanyahu. Commentators are writing that this has put the Likud on the extreme right, and are calling it the party of "Bibi and the Feiglins." It is now feared that under Netanyahu, Likud will gain the support of even more extreme right-wing voters, and become the first mass-based fascist party in Israel.

For the Labor Party, a Likud under the leadership of Netanyahu becomes an easy target for attack, since he is the author of the radical free-market policies that have left much of the population, and the Likud's own working-class base, in a state of impoverishment.

Palestinian Elections

The political earthquakes and tremors that have struck Israel have also spread into the Palestinian National Authority. Marwan Barghouti, Mohammed Dahlan, and Jibril Rajoub, three of the younger generation of leaders of Fatah, the leading party in the Palestinian National Assembly, announced the formation of a new party, named al-Mustaqbal ("Forward"). Barghouti, who is currently in an Israeli prison and is the most popular Palestinian leader, formed the party in reaction to the continued domination of the Fatah by the old guard, much of which is seen as discredited and corrupt by the electorate. Both Lyndon LaRouche and former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III called for Barghouti's release, after the death of PLO leader Yasser Arafat earlier this year, so that he could become a partner in peace negotiations.

Dahlan brings to the new party his strong base of support in the Gaza Strip, while Rajoub, who was Arafat's security chief, brings a strong base of support in the West Bank. All three are strong nationalist leaders who support a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Other leading members of the new party include Barghouti's wife, Fadwa; Palestinian parliamentarian Kadoura Fares; and former Fatah official Samir Masharawi.

With Palestinian elections on Jan. 25, it is hoped that the new party could defeat the Islamic Hamas party, which made substantial gains in local elections in the West Bank early in December. In Nablus, the largest city in the West Bank, they won 73% of the vote, giving them 13 seats on the 15-seat council. The other two seats went to Fatah and an independent. In Jenin, Hamas won 8 of the 15 seats, the rest having gone to Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In Ramallah, Hamas won three, while Fatah won six and the PFLP also won six.

Commenting on this development, a Labor Party source told *EIR*, "It is not coincidental that there is a political earthquake both in Israel and among the Palestinians at this time, since the future of both people are so very intertwined."