

Israeli Government Crisis Buying Time

As we go to press, Labor leader Shimon Peres has been granted two more weeks to form a government. So the political maneuvers continue with both Labor and Likud trying to draw the religious parties and other uncommitted factions to their respective sides. Whatever the outcome of this wheeling and dealing, it offers no hope of enhancing the prospects for peace. If Labor is able to form a government, their demagogic about wanting to further the peace process will appear in its true light. Although Labor is more flexible than Likud about cooperating with US diplomacy, it is not prepared to negotiate with the Palestinians on any issues of real substance. Moreover, such a government would most probably be narrowly based and thus reluctant to undertake any decisive moves in relation to the peace process. The other possible outcomes of the current crisis - a new «national unity» government, a Likud-led coalition or new elections - also hold out little hope of anything new, especially since the Israeli electorate still appears almost equally divided between the two major blocs. The only certain result of the current crisis is that the Zionist state can use it to buy time and distract attention from substantial issues, chiefly the intifada and the Palestinian peace initiative. Meanwhile, the Soviet Jewish immigration continues, bolstering Israel's expansionist tendencies.

by Farida Al Asmar

The March 15th fall of the Shamir government was the first time ever an Israeli government has been toppled by a no-confidence vote in the Knesset. It is also the first time an Israeli government has fallen under the impact of the Palestinian question. In the last analysis, the intifada brought on the crisis that precipitated the rift in the coalition government between Labor and Likud. This does not, however, mean that Labor and Likud have taken significantly different positions on the Palestinian cause or the intifada. The no's on which the coalition government has been functioning are still basically intact: No talks with the PLO, no to a Palestinian state and the rights of repatriation and self-determination; Jerusalem's status is non-negotiable, etc.

The real reason Labor and Likud could no longer govern jointly is that they have different approaches to coordinating strategy and tactics with the US, in the common crusade to abort the intifada. Thus, it follows that the current choice on the Israeli political scene is not really a simple choice for or against peace, as some are saying. The crisis came to a head not over sub-

stantive issues concerning the peace process, but over how to react to Baker's procedural proposals for starting a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. Labor ministers resigned on March 13th, when Shamir rejected Peres' demand for a cabinet vote on the Baker plan, and sacked him. Shamir refused the last-minute compromise proposed by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual mentor of the Shas(Torah Guardians) party, that both government parties accept the US proposals. Instead, Shamir «bravely» walked the plank to his government's demise, continuing the game of buying time to beat down the intifada, which has been Israeli government policy since it began.

The US and Jerusalem

During the first week of March, President Bush and Secretary of State Baker each issued statements that made waves in Israel, even though they did not radically depart from long-standing US policy, or from the obvious demands of furthering the peace process as they understand it. On March 1st, at a congressional hearing, Baker made his support to \$400 million in loan guarantees for housing Soviet Jewish immigrants conditional

on Israel not spending this money on settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or to free other funds for this purpose. At a March 3rd press conference, Bush said: «We do not believe there should be new settlements in the West Bank or in East Jerusalem» (*International Herald Tribune*, March 10-11th), becoming the first US president to speak publicly against Israeli settlements in Jerusalem.

Within two weeks, both statements had been modified in a way more pleasing to Israel. On March 2nd, State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said that the US would give the loan guarantees if Israel provides assurances about the money's use similar to those provided in connection with the US's \$3 billion in annual aid, thus dropping Baker's condition about halting settlements. Bush, for his part, responded to a letter from Teddy Kolleck, the Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, with assurances that «Jerusalem must never again be a divided city»(AP, March 15th), and that negotiations on the final status of the city would be at the later stages of the peace process. There was no mention of the problem of settlements. A White House statement on March 9th, said that Jews have the right to live in all parts of Jerusalem «in the context of a negotiated settlement»(AP, April 1st).

Nonetheless, the Likud began a campaign to rally support for its obstinate stand on the peace process by propagating that the US had broken faith on the issue of Jerusalem. Throughout March, US newspapers were saturated with columns written by American Zionists decrying the Bush Administration's «pressure» on Israel. This culminated in rather wild exaggerations like the contention of William Safire in *The New York Times* that «Bush has long resisted America's special relationship with Israel»(*International Herald Tribune*, March 27th). It also culminated in a US Senate resolution that Jerusalem is Israel's capital -►