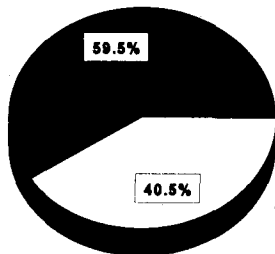


Vote for prime minister



■ Sharon □ Barak

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Source: Israeli television exit polls

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sharon easily beats Barak

Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon easily defeated incumbent Ehud Barak in Israel's election for prime minister.

Sharon, who won by a projected 59.5 percent to 40.5 percent, according to exit polls, has 45 days to form a government and get it approved by the Knesset.

Sharon called on the Palestinians to "cast off the path of violence and return to the path of dialogue." In his victory speech Tuesday, Sharon also said he would "strive to strengthen and consolidate a united Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish people."

After the election, Barak, who was elected 21 months ago, resigned as leader of the Labor Party and as a member of the Knesset.

During his resignation speech, however, Barak left open the possibility of accepting Prime Minister-elect Sharon's invitation to form a national unity government.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat sounded a conciliatory note. "We respect the decision of the Israeli people," Arafat told Reuters. "We hope the peace process will continue."

Bush congratulates Sharon

President Bush congratulated Ariel Sharon, telling the newly elected Israeli premier that he looks forward to working with him to bring peace and stability to the Middle East, the White House said.

Bush told Sharon "he looked forward to working with him, especially with regard to advancing peace and stability in the region," said a statement released by White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

ISRAEL'S NEW LEADERSHIP

Sharon's victory likely to alter dynamic of Israeli-U.S. relations

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The election of Ariel Sharon in Israel is likely to bring a new dynamic to the relationship between the United States and one of its strongest allies.

In contrast to the close engagement that characterized U.S.-Israeli relations over the past eight years, the new administrations in Jerusalem and Washington are likely to pursue, at least in the short term, a mutual hands-off approach.

With his Likud Party back in power, Sharon is less likely to seek active engagement from the U.S. government. And President Bush, settling into his own new administration, is less likely to want to give it. "I think the new administration's attention is specifically and intentionally elsewhere," Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, said referring to the Bush administration.

Bush's announced agenda has been almost entirely domestic. His Middle East agenda has focused largely on Iraq, rather than on the failed Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Most analysts believe that because of Sharon's reputation as a military leader who opposes concessions to the Palestinians, he will be greeted by the Bush administration and by Congress with respect, but cautious pessimism.

It is too early to tell if the cordial relations that are likely to appear in the first few days and weeks will evolve into cooperation or confrontation, which was the case the last time a Republican administration in Washington — under the elder George Bush — faced a Likud government in Israel led by Yitzhak Shamir.

Much will be determined by events on the ground: What kind of government will Sharon form? Will Israeli-Palestinian peace talks disintegrate into all-out confrontation? What policies will the Israeli premier pursue in fighting Palestinian violence?

David Makovsky, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the United States will wait and see whether Sharon is able to form a government and whether it incorporates members of the Labor Party.

The first test of the relationship between the two leaders may come when Sharon first comes to the United States and the Bush team must decide whether to invite him to the White House. "They may be hesitant giving him the red carpet, but they are going to give him a chance," Makovsky said.

Bush called Sharon on Tuesday to congratulate him and tell him he looked forward to working with him, "especially with regard to advancing peace and stability in the region."

"The United States has worked with every leader of Israel since its creation in 1948," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said in a statement. "Our bilateral relationship is rock solid, as is the U.S. commitment to Israeli security."

At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell signaled Tuesday that while the Bush administration would not be "standoffish" with regard to Middle East peace, it would view it "in a broad regional context so that the quest doesn't stand alone in and of itself."

Powell said he expected to visit the Middle East, Persian Gulf and Europe later this month. He also urged calm in the Arab world. "This is the time to be patient, give the winner the opportunity to decide what kind of government will be formed" and to "refrain from any acts that would lead to violence," Powell said Tuesday.

For its part, the Arab world, say Arab analysts, will be watching the United States'

MIDEAST FOCUS

Voter turnout a record low

Voter turnout was estimated at 62 percent — a record low for Israeli elections.

The low turnout was blamed in part on the Israeli Arab community, which heeded calls to boycott the prime ministerial election.

Clashes erupt on election day

Israeli troops exchanged gunfire with Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

No one was hurt in Tuesday's incidents.

Palestinians called a "Day of Rage" to coincide with Israel's elections. Israel imposed a total closure on the West Bank and Gaza out of concern for possible terrorist attacks.

World leaders waiting on Sharon

Several world leaders are expressing a "wait-and-see" attitude to the election of Ariel Sharon as Israel's next prime minister, according to Shula Bahat, acting executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

During the past several days, AJCommittee officials have met with French President Jacques Chirac, Jordan's King Abdullah and the foreign ministers of Russia and Qatar.

The leaders indicated they would base their judgments on Sharon's future performance as premier, not his controversial past, Bahat said.

State Dept. pushes Israel

The U.S. State Department asked Israel for an explanation of its policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders implicated in attacks on Israelis, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

According to the article, Israel asked the United States to keep the section on Israeli treatment of Palestinians out of the State Department's annual report on human rights violations, but the request was refused.



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interaction with Sharon. Arab leaders will be looking to see if the Bush administration will break from what they see as one-sided policies during the last eight years, said Rashid Khalidi, a professor of Middle East history and director of the Center for International Studies at the University of Chicago.

"I think, because of his record, Sharon will probably be held to a different standard than another Israeli government," Khalidi said. "If the Bush administration looks carefully at the mood of the Arab world in the last five or six months, they will listen to the anger that has permeated Arab opinions."

Meanwhile, the Israeli Embassy said it was already working with official Washington to make sure that the new prime minister would "receive general support."

Just minutes after Sharon was elected on Tuesday, Mark Regev, a spokesman at the Israeli Embassy, said, "There are lots of biased and partisan selective histories of Sharon.

"It's very important to get the true picture of Sharon out there."

Tom Smerling, Washington director of the Israel Policy Forum, said Sharon will use his personal skills to reach out to both the Israeli public and the United States leadership.

Smerling predicted Sharon will attempt to soften his public image, much as he did while campaigning the last few months, from that of a military leader responsible for Israel's engagement in Lebanon to that of an elder statesman.

Some analysts said it will be easier for Sharon coming into power with a new Republican administration, as opposed to one too closely tied to the Clinton administration's investment in the peace process.

Sharon's reception in Congress, however, could be a mixed bag.

On one hand, Congress as a whole tends to be supportive of the State of Israel, passing large annual aid packages to the Jewish state and issuing resolutions such as those supporting Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Henry Siegmán of the Council on Foreign Relations predicted that Sharon will have strong support, at least early on, from key religious conservatives in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

These Republicans, he said, embraced hard-line Israeli politics when Clinton took office as a weapon with which to criticize the Democratic president.

But many members of Congress have also been strong advocates of the peace process, and some may be less inclined to support an Israeli leader that takes a tougher line on concessions for peace and is still seen by some to be the spark that set off the latest wave of Palestinian violence.

Former Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), a strong proponent of the Middle East peace process, said his former colleagues will be "skittish and very apprehensive" about the new Israeli leader. While most lawmakers are proponents of the peace process, Lautenberg said a majority will defer to the will of the Israeli people. "If that's what they want right now, what alternative does Congress have?" he said. "We in the United States will have to determine what support we give him by how committed we are to Israel."

At least one former Likud prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, was successful in reaching out directly to Congress, and analysts and pro-Israel activists say Sharon will have to do the same.

Howard Kohr, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, said that meetings have already started between the Sharon government and officials in both the White House and in Congress.

"One can't overstate the importance of personal relations in diplomacy," Kohr said. "And it's critical on Capitol Hill."

AIPAC officials have gone on the offensive in recent weeks, seeking to educate lawmakers in the new Congress about the facts on the ground and the causes of the latest casualties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

An official of a major Jewish organization said it is becoming clearer that Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in late September was not the cause of the violence, and that lawmakers who are less familiar with the situation in the Middle East must be taught that. "Ariel Sharon does not come into power without significant baggage, no one can deny that," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

But, he said, it is more important to focus on the situation that brought him to power — specifically Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's refusal to agree to concessions made in the latest phases of the peace process. □

(JTA staff writer Michael J. Jordan in New York contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jews vote for the 'lesser evil' while Israeli Arabs stay away

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For a day, at least, Revital Ovadia represented the average Israeli.

A 25-year-old civil servant in the Interior Ministry, Ovadia didn't like either of the two candidates in Israel's election for prime minister Tuesday — but ultimately decided that Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon was the lesser of two evils.

"It was a harder decision than usual," said Ovadia, who has voted Likud in the past but hesitated before casting her vote for Sharon at a polling station in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Katamon. "I don't really like Sharon because of his record in Lebanon — but I still think he is better than Barak."

Sharon's past as the defense minister who led Israel's controversial 1982 invasion of Lebanon, beginning an 18-year military occupation, was hardly the primary issue at the polling stations.

In an election notable for its ennui despite its potentially fateful consequences for the peace process, incumbent Prime Minister Ehud Barak appeared to have all but conceded the race to Sharon just hours after the polls opened.

Despite Barak's outward confidence, his campaign paraphernalia was nowhere to be found in several Jerusalem neighborhoods, ranging from Katamon — a poorer Likud stronghold — to the left-leaning German Colony and Baka along trendy Emek Refaim Street. Sharon's campaign machine continued to operate, albeit on a low scale, with posters scattered loosely and small groups of activists distributing bumper stickers throughout this traditionally Likud city.

The low-key atmosphere during this first Israeli election exclusively for the premiership contrasted sharply with the race that brought Barak to power 19 months ago, when activists slugged it out on the streets down to the very end.

One reason for the lackluster campaign was that little drama remained by election day, after weeks of polls predicted a landslide victory for Sharon.

Yet the numbers did not mean that voters who dropped Sharon's name into the ballot box were overly excited about the imminent change in power. Many said they were choosing least offensive of two undesirable candidates.

Barak supporters were likewise ambivalent.

Dr. Yehuda Yaeger considered casting a blank ballot before he ultimately decided to vote for Barak — but not because he particularly liked him.

"There is no point putting in a blank ballot, and the candidate I like less than any other is Sharon," said Yaeger, 56, a doctor voting along Emek Refaim Street. "There is no question that this is the lesser of two evils."

Many voters were intent on driving Barak from office for failing to deliver on his promises of comprehensive peace, and offering extensive concessions to the Palestinians that were answered with protracted violence.

"I could have supported the Camp David proposals," said maintenance manager Meir Asor, 40, referring to the U.S.-sponsored summit in July. "But I am not happy with Barak for many reasons. The whole peace process just didn't work, and now what we need is a strong, decisive leader like Sharon."

While Barak's concessions did not bring peace, Asor believes Sharon is capable of delivering peace — even though he has said he will offer the Palestinians far less than they demand.

"Sharon will say to the Palestinians, 'This is what you get — take it, or leave it and get nothing,'" Asor explained as he entered the Katamon polling station. "I believe that the Palestinians will accept it."

During his 19 months in office, Barak managed to anger many different sectors of Israeli society, and on many fronts. Such frustrations may have further boosted opposition to Barak's peacemaking policies. Yet at the end of the day, Israelis said, the nail in Barak's political coffin came from the Palestinians.

"I used to be more toward the center, and supported the Oslo process," said Eliyahu Kalig. "But the last four months have changed me from left to right." □

'Iran 10' request clemency

The 10 Iranian Jews imprisoned for allegedly spying for Israel sent a letter to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, requesting clemency.

A court appeal by the 10 reportedly has failed, and clemency may be their last option. They were sentenced last year to terms ranging from two to nine years.

U.S. groups congratulate Sharon

Most North American Jewish groups congratulated Ariel Sharon on his victory in Tuesday's Israeli election, saying they look forward to working with the prime minister-elect.

In addition, several groups called the election a victory for Israel's democratic process.

Paper: Attacks planned over Web

Muslim extremists are posting encrypted messages on the Internet to plan attacks against the United States and its allies, according to USA Today.

In an article Tuesday, the newspaper quoted U.S. law enforcement officials as saying that extremists were using encryption to provide maps and photographs of their targets, as well as instructions for carrying out attacks, in sports chat rooms, pornography bulletin boards and other Web sites.

BBC airs Jewish divorce film

Campaigners for Jewish women whose husbands will not grant them a religious divorce have welcomed a BBC documentary on the subject.

Broadcast on Monday, "Everyman: Chained Wives" examines the issue of agunot, Hebrew for "chained women."

Birthright recruits for spring trip

A program that sends Jewish young adults on free, educational 10-day trips to Israel is recruiting for its spring round of trips.

Birthright Israel, which has funded trips for 17,000 people since its launch in December 1999, expects to send some 7,000 Jews to Israel in May and June.

Book touts Schindler's widow

Oskar Schindler's widow, who was left on the sidelines in the Steven Spielberg movie about her husband, is being remembered in a new book that shows her role in rescuing thousands of Jews from the Holocaust.

"She was not in Oskar's shadows. She worked right beside Schindler, and that is the truth," Argentine journalist Erika Rosenberg told Reuters. Rosenberg is author of "Ich, Emilie Schindler" — German for "I, Emilie Schindler."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Contemplating fractious coalition, Sharon calls for a gov't with Labor*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon may find that the worst thing about his landslide victory over incumbent Ehud Barak on Tuesday was precisely his 20-point margin of victory.

The very magnitude of Sharon's victory triggered Barak's decision, two hours after the exit polls, to announce his resignation from active politics.

Political pundits here believe that with Barak gone and a leadership battle set to begin within the Labor Party, Sharon's chances of setting up a Likud-Labor unity government have substantially declined.

The huge success of Sharon, a 72-year-old former general, was grounded in large part on a boycott of the elections by Israel's Arab community.

Making up some 12 percent of the electorate, Israel's Arabs stayed away in droves.

Only 13 percent of them came out to vote, and many of those placed blank ballots in the voting envelopes.

Knesset member Abdel Malek Dahamshe, leader of the Islamist faction in the Knesset, said the Arab boycott had led many leftist Jewish voters to stay away from the polling stations or to cast blank protest ballots, driving home the blow to Barak.

"No party will take us for granted again," Dahamshe predicted.

The Arabs mounted their boycott in reaction to the deaths of 13 Israeli Arabs in clashes with the police in early October, in the first phase of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Whatever the motivation, many Jewish voters did indeed skip this election: At 62 percent, it was by far the lowest turnout ever registered in Israel.

By comparison, turnout at the last general election, in May 1999, was nearly 79 percent.

Some Jewish leftists have suggested that the boycott or blank-ballot phenomenon may grow into a mass movement.

One of these is Motti Ashkenazi, the man who launched the grass-roots protest movement after the 1973 Yom Kippur War that eventually forced Prime Minister Golda Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to resign.

Ashkenazi feels the protest trend Tuesday reflected a profound disillusionment not only with Barak but with the entire political leadership of the left — and says that if the movement takes hold, it could give rise to a sweeping renewal of the nation's political leadership.

Others, however, regard the mood of apathy in this campaign as potentially dangerous to Israel's democratic character and institutions.

While a low turnout is normal in the United States, it may mark a trend that signifies a deep crisis of political trust in the Jewish state.

While the prime minister-elect made no direct reference in his victory speech to the low turnout and its causes, he did issue an impassioned call for national healing and reconciliation.

"The State of Israel," Sharon began, "has tonight set out on a new course of striving for domestic peace within itself, and for peace with others."

Sharon recognized "the powerful public longing for unity" and pledged to create "the widest possible government," urging Labor to join him "in a true partnership for security and peace."

Certainly Sharon's core coalition represents a more varied swath of Israeli society than the left-liberal minority government Barak led by the end of his 19-month term.

Having fallen out with his original Orthodox and Russian immigrant partners, at the end Barak could count only on the support of Labor and Meretz.

Barak will continue as prime minister until Sharon manages to form a government.

Sharon has picked up the support of all the factions that defected from Barak, and his government is likely to contain rightists, centrists, fervently Orthodox, modern Orthodox and the two large Russian immigrant parties.

If Labor does not join him, however, Sharon's weakness will be this multiplicity of small and mid-sized parties, all of which he will need to keep under his tent to retain a working majority in the Knesset.

A tally of the parties allied to Likud, together with all the Barak defectors, gives Sharon a slim majority of 63 Knesset seats out of 120.

And the various components will be pulling in disparate directions.

This was precisely why Benjamin Netanyahu, who briefly contemplated a political comeback in December, preferred to stay out of the arena at this time, waiting until the Knesset implodes and new general elections are held for both premier and parliament.

In Sharon's favor, however, is the inescapable fact — inescapable for the small parties — that if Sharon loses power there will be general elections, and many of them may not get voted back to the Knesset.

Sharon's close aides hope this consideration will be enough to hold things together at least for a year. Netanyahu's supporters, on the other hand, predict general elections in the fall.

In any case, there is still the possibility of a unity government, even with Labor in the throes of a leadership battle.

In his concession speech Tuesday night, Barak urged his party not to reject Sharon's unity overture out of hand, but to examine whether joint policy lines could be found that would enable the two movements to work together.

He warned, however, against "sham unity" that would require Labor to abandon its basic peace policy.

That policy, Barak said, may have "come before its time" for both Israelis and Palestinians, but ultimately would provide the parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty.

Sharon is said to be offering Labor two of the three top ministries in a unity government — defense, foreign affairs and finance.

Political insiders say that if Shimon Peres takes over the Labor leadership, either as a caretaker or as winner of a party primary, he will probably support the unity effort.

Though political foes, Sharon and Peres have been personal friends for many years.

Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg, one of the likely contenders for Labor leader, pointedly suggested Tuesday that a "collective interim leadership," including Peres, should weigh the pros and cons of a unity government.

Another hopeful, Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, said he had supported unity when Barak was premier, and he supports it now, too. □