

Anthony Bubalo

A shrewd leader falls and suddenly the also-rans are leading the race

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With the sudden deterioration in the health of the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, after he suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage, it is clear that his commanding presence in Israeli politics has come to an end, leaving great uncertainty about Israel's leadership and direction.

Before this latest health crisis, Sharon and Kadima, the party he recently formed, were sitting comfortably. Despite the fact Sharon had suffered a minor stroke three weeks ago, and the re-emergence of corruption allegations against him, recent Israeli polls had Kadima well ahead of its competitors going into national elections, scheduled for March 28.

Sharon's departure from politics has levelled the political playing field. Sharon was not just Kadima's founder, he was the party. Kadima was formed only a matter of months ago, when Sharon bolted the Likud party in frustration at the constant opposition he faced from within its ranks to his policies. Kadima still lacks institutions and internal processes — indeed, it does not have an agreed list of candidates for the forthcoming election.

All of this can be overcome, of course. There are able people in the party, not least Sharon's nominal deputy, Ehud Olmert, who took over prime ministerial powers as Sharon went into surgery, and the popular figure Tzipi Livni.

Moreover, Kadima will probably survive as a centre-right party embodying Sharon's approach to peace and security. Sharon had successfully translated the desire of most Israelis for separation and disengagement from the Palestinians into a political and strategic program that found broad public favour — even if it left Palestinians ringed by fences and less than thrilled with the program's unilateral nature.

The desire in Israel for the continuation of such an approach and a party to carry it out will not suddenly disappear.

Much more problematic for Kadima will be finding someone who might emulate Sharon's appeal as a leader. In recent years Sharon had come to dominate politics in Israel in a way not seen since David Ben-Gurion, its founding prime minister. None of Sharon's potential replacements in the party can match his combination of long experience, his well-earned reputation for toughness and his more recently developed reputation for pragmatism.

As a result, Kadima has suddenly gone from ruling party in waiting to one fighting for a place at the leadership table. And while Kadima would benefit from an immense outpouring of public sympathy should Sharon die, there is little question that Labour and the Likud will benefit politically without Sharon leading his party into the poll.

Precisely which party and which leader will benefit more is unclear. Each has his own strengths and weaknesses. The newly appointed Labour Party leader, Amir Peretz, with his long union pedigree, will appeal to the socially and economically disenfranchised, especially among the Sephardic Jews, many of whom have traditionally been Likud voters. But he is an unknown quantity on security issues.

Conversely, the strong security credentials of the former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu will hold him in good stead. But in the short time before the election he will need to move his party to the centre and shake off perceptions that after Sharon's departure to form Kadima the Likud shifted further to the right.

There may even be the odd wildcard entry, such as former prime minister Ehud Barak, who in some respects comes closest to Sharon in term of his security credentials, though he lacks his political experience or popular appeal. But first he needs to find a party willing to let him lead it in the very short time before the elections — an unlikely prospect.

More likely than not, the electoral spoils will be divided about equally between the three main parties, resulting in even more complex post-election coalition manoeuvring than is usual in Israeli politics. It may well be some weeks after the election result before we know who Israel's next prime minister will be.

None of this uncertainty will be good for efforts to end Israeli-Palestinian violence. For historical and more contemporary reasons, the Palestinians will not mourn Sharon's departure from Israeli politics. But even they would grudgingly acknowledge that his decision to leave Gaza injected new possibilities into a faltering peace process, even if they would dispute his means and his motives.

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