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ISRAEL'S NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT: THE FIRST HUNDRED DAYS

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Against All Odds, Unity / Political Savvy / Alignment Takes the High Road / In-fighting among Likud

On December 22, Israel's national unity government completed its first hundred days in office. Many critics thought that it would not survive this long. Others doomed it to be a national paralysis government without the power, ability, or will to offer clear direction. Some cherished the hope that at least in the areas of national consensus, namely, the economy and Lebanon, there would be concerted and dramatic action.

AGAINST ALL ODDS, UNITY

One hundred days later, Israel is still in Lebanon and the economic situation is terrifying, but the national unity government is not only still with us, but functioning. Although there have not been any magical elixirs, there is growing national support for the government's policies on Lebanon as well as the economic freeze and cutbacks. The hibernation, if not demise, of the protest movements such as Peace Now and Parents Against Silence is evidence of the public's support for Rabin's policies and dilemmas on the I.D.F.'s withdrawal from Lebanon. On the economic front there is surprising unity, evidenced by the Alignment Prime Minister Peres's backing of his Likud Minister of Finance, Yitzhak Moda'i. The latter's two predecessors, Cohen-Orgad and Aridor, never enjoyed such backing from their own prime minister, who was from their own Herut party. However, the overall impression of inaction by this unity government is due to its anticipation of the coming election, be it near or far. Rather than cutting loose from the yoke of extortion by the small parties, the major parties are busy courting their junior party partners. The near crisis caused by the feuding and competition between

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the Sephardic Shas party and the N.R.P. over cabinet posts bears witness to this. However, it is precisely in this matter of the next elections that there has been significant movement and change.

Although the national unity government has produced only lukewarm consensus combined with self-imposed restraint on major national issues, it has had a dramatic effect on party politics.

POLITICAL SAVVY

Shimon Peres's popularity in public opinion polls has soared since his ascension to power as prime minister. In May 1984 less than 15% saw him as the best candidate to be prime minister. Today he enjoys the support of 42% of the public, as evidenced by a poll conducted by the Israeli daily, *Ma'ariv*, at the end of November. His nearest competitor is Yitzhak Shamir, with a popularity rating of only 10%.

This dramatic rise in Peres's popularity can be ascribed to two factors. First, it confirms an old Israeli political tradition that the incumbent prime minister automatically enjoys public confidence and support. Secondly, it illustrates the disparity in functioning between the two major political parties—the Alignment and the Likud.

Personally, Peres has conducted himself with aplomb, restraint, and moderation. He has thus far avoided the pitfalls of factionalism, partisanship, and controversy. He has cleverly balanced or juggled the intra- and inter-party pressures and interests. He has spoken sensibly and known when to remain silent in the face of political controversy, whether it be Sharon's extended stay in New York or the shouting matches between Shamir and Levy.

If Peres's visit to the United States bolstered his image abroad more than in Israel, his recent state visit to France was viewed here as a singular and personal triumph. For the first time in many years Israel gained visible support, friendship, and respectability in a Europe which has too often displayed a pro-Arab and anti-Israel bias.

ALIGNMENT TAKES THE HIGH ROAD

Besides Peres's personal achievement, there has been the remarkable unity in the functioning of his compatriots in the Alignment. The breakaway of Mapam and Yossi Sarid and their joining the opposition did not harm Peres and the Alignment; indeed, it reinforced their image as promoters of consensus and moderation. (Another public opinion poll indicates that if elections were to be held now, Mapam would win only one seat in the Knesset, as compared to the six seats which they have in this Knesset by virtue of their agreement with the Labor party to run a joint list.)

More significant has been the competence and devotion to duty shown by the Alignment ministers in the government, as contrasted with the bickering and political intrigues of their Likud counterparts. Simply put, the Alignment seems to have put their act together, at long last. The Labor party, in contrast to its sordid past, appears today as a bastion of collegiality (although it might yet regress or revert to its former self).

No one is challenging Peres's pre-eminence in the party. His two former contenders and detractors are quiet and devoted to their ministerial tasks—Yitzhak Navon because he failed to generate support as the 'Great Sephardic Hope,' and Rabin because he is happy in his natural element, defense. There is

also a general feeling that the Labor Party choices for government ministers have been more successful than those of their Likud rivals. Chaim Bar Lev's appointment as Minister of Police came just at the right time. Navon as Minister of Education seems made for the job. Modechai Gur's personal ambitions are finding adequate expression in a problem-ridden Health Ministry. Aryeh Nehemkin, the Minister of Agriculture, is someone with experience and interest in agriculture, and not in settlements or defense. Outside of the government, the new head of the Histadrut, Yisrael Kessar, is regarded much more positively than his predecessor, Yerucham Meshel.

IN-FIGHTING AMONG LIKUD

On the other side of the fence, World War III seems about to break out. The Likud leadership struggle is on. Shamir coined for himself the title of 'Prime Minister Alternate,' but his colleagues seem to be ignoring it. David Levy and Ariel Sharon are doing everything they can to undercut Shamir's authority as leader of the party, and to prevent his becoming prime minister. The in-fighting among and between Herut and Liberal party leaders is debilitating. Except for Minister of Finance Yitzhak Moda'i (Liberal Party) and Minister of Labor and Social Welfare Moshe Katzav (Herut), the other Likud ministers are busy playing the part of the Opposition, rather than devoting themselves to their respective ministries and to the national unity government.

After the first 100 days of this government, it appears that Peres and the Alignment have the better of the deal. Peres is gaining strength and popularity while Shamir is fading fast. The Likud has a serious dilemma: To depose Shamir as their leader would nullify the rotation agreement, which provides for personal, not party, succession; thus Peres would remain on as prime minister. Yet, to rally around Shamir would finish off the personal ambitions of David Levy and Ariel Sharon to lead their party in the next election.

That same poll on Shamir and Peres's popularity also included their compatriots—Sharon, Levy, Rabin, and Navon. The combined popularity of the three Alignment leaders was 54.2%, as opposed to 14.5% for the Likud triumvirate.

Israeli politics are much too volatile and subject to outside foreign policy issues to render any judgments or prophecies after these first hundred days. Lebanon, West Bank settlement, Hussein's possible call for peace negotiations, a revived Reagan Plan, or inflation and unemployment could quickly and radically alter the present political constellation.

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