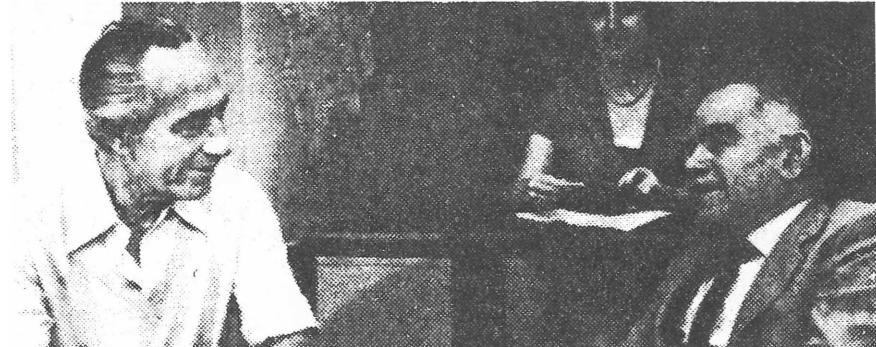


The Prospects of the Israeli 'National Unity Government'

The Israeli elections have been in the international focus for a period of time. The political observers have been closely following the developments of the elections. However the outcome was not decisively in favour of either the Likud or the Labour parties. This led to the formation of the «national unity government» which has numerous questions around it. The dominant theme is not what the new government can, or is going to do, but rather what it will not be able to do.

Before the results of the elections to the 11th session of the Knesset became known, Peres and his Labour Party were opposed to the idea of a «national unity government». Their opposition was not in principle based on essential contradictions or «historical differences» with the Likud. But rather stemmed from the Labour Party's evaluation of such a government's inability to overcome the internal Israeli crisis. Hence, Peres labelled such a government as one of «national paralysis». Now that the Labour Party leadership have come to favour such government lest they should again have to go to the polls without any guarantees of better results, Peres began to call it a «non-agreement» government. So, one is inclined to put the following question to Peres; can a government of «non-agreement» accomplish what - in his opinion - «the national paralysis government» could not? What has changed and in whose favour? How will this affect the government's political course for the period it is expected to hold?

In his confidence-vote address at the Knesset, Shimon Peres did not address the main problems, which his government was supposed to deal with. He was rather general and unclear in terms of these problems, whereas the speeches of the Likud leaders gave the impression that the «nonagreement government» was practically Likud both in essence and perspective. Peres pointed out that Labour and Likud had agreed on three main issues, namely tackling the economic situation, ending



Shamir and his new spokesman !

Israel's involvement in Lebanon, and making efforts to carry on with the «peace process in the Middle East». Meanwhile, General Ariel Sharon in his speech attacked the Labour Party and demanded further concessions concerning settlements in the occupied territories. In his speech, Shamir declared «The land of Israel shall never be the object of any bargaining or tolerate any foreign sovereignty».

Apart from the two major parties, Labour and Likud, six other small parties shared the government: four are further to the right than Labour and hence closer to the Likud, and two are closer to the Labour. On the other hand, observers have noted that although the parties represented in Peres's government account for 96 seats in the Knesset, only 89 voted for it. This shows how vulnerable Peres's premiership is going to be. Especially if we take into account that he failed to enlist the unanimous support of his own party. In fact, the Labour's Central Committee was divided in this respect, with 394 members voting for and 66 against the government.

Furthermore, it seems that the concessions made by Peres to bring this government about were much more than what had been declared. In addition to the fact that Labour and the Likud agreed to alternate the premiership and equally share the portofolios, Peres retreated from giving the Ministry of Religious Affairs to the Mafdal as he had promised. Instead, both Joseph Bourg of the Mafdal and Rabbi Yitzhak

Biretz from the Sphardi Torah Guardians (SHOS) were nominated ministers without portofolios. More serious still is that Peres and Shamir (as reported by some news agencies) endorsed a plan providing for establishing 27 new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the next four years. Five of which are to be constructed during the next year, that is during Peres's term.

Commenting on Peres heading the new Israeli government, the French «Le Monde» remarked, «It is the first time that a Labour Party member holds the leadership position without being unanimously backed by the party. If Peres succeeds in his job, then he would have given his party an unprecedented shift to the right. If he fails, he will further aggravate the confusion and identity crisis prevailing in the Labour Party». But what job can Peres do as a head of the Israeli government? The answer comes from «Al-Hamishmar», organ of the Mapam, which has pulled out from the Mirach, commenting on Peres's government by saying: «It is a big size caricature displaying a two-headed race-horse mounted by the 25 strong national unity government, some of whom feverishly spurring the horse to go forward and the others trying hard to drag it backwards».

Proceeding to speak of Peres's «job», *Al Hamishmar* says: «The job Shimon Peres will have to do during his term in office will not exactly be that of a prime minister, but rather that of a master of ceremonies or a head of a discussion group. He will have to guide discus-