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Blow after blow for Kadima

By Yossi Verter

"Another blow, and another, it never stops," a Kadima member sighed yesterday. His eyes wandered to the calendar, stopping on March 8, the date previously set for elections. The Likud had asked to put them off "to erode Kadima."

Indeed, Kadima is being eroded. It is still strong and can gain enough votes to form the next government, but it is no longer that shiny, flawless new car. In the last few weeks it has suffered scratch after scratch, knock after knock. Sunday's blow, a senior figure said, was "a punch in the stomach."

Omri's diary, exposed on Channel 10, is all Kadima had hoped to avoid. It is potentially more damaging than all of Olmert's real estate affairs, whether disproved of or not. They are harmful because they touch at the heart of the matter, the essence of power and the soul of the public which has tired of corruption.

All this goes on in the Likud and Labor too. There - unlike Kadima - there are still "activists" and "group leaders," which are other names for bribe takers in the central committees. But the campaign rules are brutal. The one whom the spotlight shines on is the one who burns and roasts.

Kadima is preparing party regulations ensuring its Knesset candidates' independence of activists. Meanwhile, senior Labor figures are courting central committee members for their support to become ministers after the elections. The committee's 2,000 members have chosen the party's ministers twice in the last five years, but the story did not evoke much protest because Labor is not the story in these elections. Nobody believes it will form the next government.

Kadima has been on the defensive in the recent weeks. Olmert, Hanegbi, Omri Sharon. For Kadima, the election campaign that began four months ago should have ended tomorrow. The polls of Haaretz-Channel 10 News on January 9 gave Kadima 44 Knesset seats, while its two rivals Labor and the Likud together had 29. Today the polls predict Kadima will get 37 seats and the Labor-Likud bloc 34. Taking into consideration Shinui's evaporation, which gave Kadima another four Knesset seats, Kadima has lost 10 to 11 Knesset

seats in about two months.

Despite the spin, there is no chance that Labor and the Likud will join in coalition. Silvan Shalom keeps talking about the possibility, maybe to show Olmert that he had better invite the Likud to join his government immediately after the elections. Labor is just playing the game.

Kadima, in any case, is already preparing the answer in its campaign broadcasts. "Vote for Peretz," they will tell Labor's voters, "get Bibi." To the Likud's voters they'll say, "vote for Bibi - get Peretz."

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