

Last update - 01:19 06/01/2006

Under Peres, Kadima would win 42 seats; under Olmert - 40

By Yossi Verter

Ariel Sharon's party, Kadima, would win 40 Knesset seats if elections were held today and the party were to be headed by Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Should Tzipi Livni step into Sharon's shoes, Kadima would get 38 Knesset seats. Were Vice Premier Shimon Peres to take over leadership of the party, Kadima would win 42 seats - exactly the number of seats it would have garnered four days ago, when Sharon was still healthy.

The results are from a special survey conducted yesterday for Haaretz and Channel 10 by Dr Camil Fuchs's polling company, Dialog.

The survey covered 650 people representing the general public, and was conducted less than one day after Sharon suffered a severe stroke. The Haaretz-Channel 10 survey also checked the response to two more party leadership candidates - Shaul Mofaz (36 Knesset seats) and Meir Sheerit (28). With Olmert - considered the leading candidate - heading Kadima, Labor loses one seat and drops from 19 places to 18, as does Likud, which drops from 14 to 13.

The impact of the survey is limited, as it was conducted in the eye of the storm, at the height of uncertainty, polling a public awash in sympathy for Sharon, who is fighting for his life. Anyone who said yesterday they would vote for Kadima was still saying they would vote for Sharon, even though it is clear he will no longer head the party he founded just weeks ago.

The prevailing assumption among Kadima members is that their party will lose altitude in the polls over the coming weeks and the only question that remains is: Where will it stabilize? A senior Kadima official said yesterday that the victory line for the party was 30-32 seats. According to him, if Kadima gets 32 seats on March 28, it will form the next coalition and the party's leader will be prime minister.

Last night's Haaretz-Channel 10 survey has further significance for Olmert: It is possible that as early as the beginning of next week, Sharon's doctors will have to declare that he cannot fulfill his duties permanently. In such an event, the cabinet will convene and select an interim prime minister from the Kadima faction. The survey, which gives Olmert's Kadima 40 Knesset seats (even if this is clearly the result of sorrow and public shock), would help Olmert position himself as the candidate without facing much opposition from home.

Most senior Kadima members last night announced their support for Olmert, except for Shimon Peres. Peres always plays his cards close

to his chest and did not promise not to close doors. Peres is scheduled to day to meet with Olmert. Senior Kadima officials said Olmert must offer Peres the number two slot on the party list and possibly even the job of acting prime minister, in order to "lock him into Kadima, and prevent his return to Labor".

Senior Labor officials put out feelers to Peres yesterday, checking if he was willing to come home and serve as Amir Peretz's number two. Peres is not leaning toward doing so. Also, Likud chair Benjamin Netanyahu's associates sent feelers to ex-Likudniks such as Tzachi Hanegbi and Meir Sheerit.

A senior Kadima figure said yesterday that if Olmert were to prevent Hanegbi, Sheerit and Peres returning to their former political homes, his chances of being appointed interim prime minister would improve.

"Should, heaven forbid, Peres lead Kadima, everything will fall apart immediately. We must choose Olmert in no more than a week, rally around him, choose an inner circle of five or six, and erase any signs of internal strife or disputes over places," the senior Kadima figure said.

According to the figure, in the coming weeks, it will become clear if Kadima's widespread support was only for Sharon's leadership or also due to the real public need for a centrist party that will lead "responsible, wise, well-considered policy."
