

Restraint and maturity

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As of Saturday night, Ariel Sharon's doctors were giving the nation a glimmer of hope that he could survive the cerebral hemorrhage that felled him, though they could not yet measure how much damage he has suffered. As Sharon fights for his life, three sets of reactions swirl around our stricken leader - over the medical attention he received, our political future without him, and his legacy and place in the international community.

Ordinary citizens have become armchair doctors, second-guessing and wondering why Sharon was administered blood thinners that risked causing the massive intracranial bleeding; how he could have been allowed to go to his farm, over an hour's drive from Jerusalem, the night before his scheduled heart surgery, and a host of other questions.

Anonymous [doctors have been questioning various aspects of his treatment](#). As might be expected, there is much we don't know about the exact chronology of Sharon's condition and the medical decision making process of the past few weeks.

Such speculation is perhaps inevitable, but some patience is certainly in order. At the appropriate time - which is not now, while Sharon remains in critical condition - Hadassah-University Hospital should assure the public that a complete report regarding the prime minister's treatment will be released, so that an informed assessment can be made and lessons, if any, learned. When this information is released, we will also learn more about the heroic efforts to save Sharon's life, given his condition when he arrived at the hospital on Wednesday night.

The political jockeying surrounding the evident political departure of the man who was by far the most dominant figure in our national life has proceeded with surprising restraint and orderliness. The senior figures who joined Sharon in Kadima seem to have relatively quickly consolidated around Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, rather than launching a race for the leadership of the party.

It remains to be seen whether this sort of restraint will continue beyond the current period of shock and concern, and whether [Olmert will succeed in holding together a party](#) that, at the age of just six weeks, lost its founder and charismatic leader.

The public, judging from the polls, is fully willing to give Kadima without Sharon a chance, but this willingness will likely dissipate quickly if it cannot act as a coherent party that is working together to elect its leader on a clear platform. It is not that common for even our more established parties to act as a single team. For Kadima, however, such teamwork would seem to be the first challenge of political survival.

As the ripple effect of Sharon's incapacitation extends to the international community, the contrast between Arab and Western reactions is striking, if not surprising to Israelis. While Arab leaders are privately and publicly expressing concern regarding Sharon's condition, the Arab "street" is being widely quoted as wishing him suffering and death.

There is no reason, by contrast, to doubt the sincerity of world leaders, such as George Bush, Tony Blair, Vladimir Putin and Kofi Annan who have echoed the words of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who called Sharon a "gigantic figure." Bush said that Sharon was a leader with "a vision for peace."

We should be encouraged, at this difficult and suddenly uncertain time, that the international admiration that Sharon is now receiving is not just a function of his condition and his policies, but of a change in Israel's position in the world, particularly in contrast to the last five years. This is not to advocate that Israel attempt to buy further international favor with the same coin, but to suggest that the task of explaining our position may now have a greater chance of success than in the past.

Sharon represented an odd combination of political stability and upheaval, continuity and change. In these past few days, our political system has continued forward with these characteristics to a remarkable degree. We can only hope that this so far impressive restraint and maturity will not disintegrate in the weeks ahead.



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