

Sharon shakes up rules of Israeli political game

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to quit his right-wing Likud party and fight the next election at the head of a centrist party will trigger a seismic shift in Israeli politics.

Sharon was due to announce his decision to go it alone at a general election early next year at a news conference Monday after deciding he had enough of trying to rub along with party hardliners who will not forgive him for ordering Israel's first pullout from occupied Palestinian territory.

The 77-year-old prime minister has become increasingly divorced from the party he was instrumental in founding in 1973 with the merger of four right-wing parties.

Since the first Likud leader Menachem Begin's election victory in 1977, Israeli politics has been essentially a two-party system between Likud and the centre-left Labour party. Signs of disillusion with the status

quo became evident at the last election in 2003 when Labour slumped to its worst ever result, winning just 19 of the 120 seats in the Knesset. The secular Shinui party, campaigning heavily on an anti-corruption ticket, saw its share of seats leap to 15.

The result was a major victory for Likud, which went on to lead the most right-wing coalition government in the country's history.

Now it is Likud facing electoral meltdown, unable to heal the rifts by the pullout of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip, completed in September.

Results from a poll last week said a Sharon-led party would win 28 of the 120 seats in the Knesset, compared to 18 for Likud.

According to Gideon Doron, professor of politics at Tel Aviv University, the only question was why Sharon had waited so long.

His arch rival, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was bound to have

launched more efforts to unseat Sharon if he stayed with Likud whose new intake of MPs is likely to be markedly more right-wing.

"I don't think it's a gamble by Sharon. What is his alternative? If he stays in Likud, he will be in a party that opposes him. If he goes by himself, he gets more seats, then he can decide whether to work with Likud" or any other party for that matter," said Doron.

Hanan Cristal, Israeli public radio's chief analyst, said Sharon was seeking to seize the initiative by breaking from his party.

"There will now be elections at a date of his choosing and he will now launch the latest blitz of his political career to fix the borders of Israel in line with his political vision, shaking up all the rules of the political game," Cristal told AFP.

Sharon will expect to attract the bulk of new recruits from Likud, such as Finance Minister Ehud Olmert and

Justice Minister Tzipi Livni.

However he will also seek to reel in figures on the right of Labour, such as the cabinet minister Haim Ramon who has previously spoken of a need to revolutionise the party system.

The election earlier this month of trade union leader Amir Peretz at the helm of Labour has dragged the party decisively to the left -- opening up further opportunities for a new centrist party.

Doron said the election of Peretz, who defeated the veteran deputy prime minister Shimon Peres, helped make up Sharon's mind.

"I think that was the last sign he needed to quit and it gives him room to move to the left."

Smaller right-wing parties, already scenting electoral disaster for Likud, have begun making noises about a merger with those who decline to join Sharon's adventure.



Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (R) and Israeli President Moshe Katsav meet in Jerusalem yesterday. Katsav announced that Sharon asked him to dissolve the Knesset (Israeli parliament), paving the way for early polls, expected in March 2007.

Moroccan forces arrest 17 with ties to al-Qaeda

AFP, Rabat

Moroccan security forces arrested 17 Islamic extremists with ties to the al-Qaeda network as they were setting up a terrorist cell, officials in Rabat said on Sunday.

"The Moroccan security services have just dismantled a terrorist structure as it was being formed," a statement said, adding that the suspects would be charged on Monday.

The network was "composed of 17 elements linked to the radical Islamic movement having connections with small groups emerging at the Iraqi border and maintaining close ties with senior members of the al-Qaeda organisation," it said.



Labelle elected chair of TI

Huguette Labelle, a Canadian with a broad background in development issues, elected chair of Transparency International, the global coalition against corruption, recently.

She replaced Peter Eigen, who founded the TI movement and has served with distinction throughout the organisation's 12-year history, says a TI press release issued from Dhaka and Berlin.

Eigen will assume the chair of Transparency International's Advisory Council. In his new position Eigen replaces Dr. Kamal Hossain of Bangladesh who has stepped down, but he will continue to be an advisor of TI.

Labelle was elected Sunday by the Annual Meeting of Transparency International's 94 chapters and contact groups around the world.

Samson H. Chowdhury, chair of the Transparency International Bangladesh and members of the TI's Board of Trustees congratulated Labelle on her election.



Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (L) gestures as he congratulates newly appointed Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake (R) after an inauguration ceremony in Colombo yesterday.

Saddam defence ready to attend hearing

REUTERS, Amman

Lawyers defending Saddam Hussein and his aides are willing to attend next week's trial hearing, despite threats to their lives, if the government provides them with proper protection, the team's leader said on Sunday.

Khalil Dulaimi announced earlier this month that the defence team was suspending all contacts with the court trying Saddam for crimes against humanity after the killing of two of its lawyers -- one shot in Baghdad on November 8, one killed on October 20.

On Sunday, he telephoned Reuters from an undisclosed location and said "We are prepared to attend the trial if our demands to secure proper protection are met... We are ready to attend any moment they tell us and despite our reservations."

Dulaimi accused his opponents in the judiciary of spreading rumors that the defence was boycotting the trial so that they could appoint their own defence lawyers.

Praise for India, Pakistan as Kashmir truce holds

AFP, Tithwal

Residents of this village on the de facto Kashmir border between India and Pakistan praised the South Asian rivals yesterday for sticking to a two-year ceasefire and for continuing quake relief efforts.

The two countries have observed a ceasefire since November 26, 2003, along Kashmir's Line of Control, a move that helped pave the way for the start of peace talks in January 2004.

The ceasefire has spared villagers on both sides from random shelling and made it easier to open crossing points for earthquake relief.

Civilians have also begun crossing on foot for the first time in 60 years to check on the safety of relatives on the other side after the October 8 quake, which killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir and 1,300 in Indian Kashmir.

"The last two years have been the most peaceful ones in our lives," said 35-year-old shopkeeper Anwar Sidiq. "We used to live under constant fear of incoming shells from there," he said, pointing to the Pakistani zone.

"But it has stopped. We have no words to thank the two countries."

Two dozen Indian Kashmiris made history on Saturday when they walked over a 175-feet bridge from Tithwal to the Pakistani village of Chilyana to look for their missing relatives and mourn the dead.

The villages, on either side of the fast-flowing Kishen Ganga river that marks the ceasefire line, were among the worst hit by artillery duels before the truce.

"We were living in hell before the ceasefire. Now it is calm, except that it will take us some time to rebuild our homes destroyed by the quake," said

Sidiq's mother Asmat Begum, 45.

The family's home was destroyed in the quake and they now live in a tent.

The nuclear-armed rivals have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir. They are now engaged in a slow-moving peace process, with the first fruit the resumption of a historic bus service connecting the two zones of Kashmir in April.

Tithwal is now a symbol of the peace effort, with regular meetings between Indian and Pakistani army and civilian officials who stop to photograph each other.

"Decades of enmity is giving way to trust," said Nasima Bibi, now living in a tent alongside the river, who cheered as army officers from two sides shook hands in the middle of the suspension footbridge when civilians crossed last week.

Tamils wary of Rajapakse

AFP, AP, Kilinochchi

For Tamils erecting lifesized posters to mark the forthcoming Heroes' Day, when Tiger rebels remember their fallen, the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as new Sri Lankan president is a matter of concern.

"We know Mahinda. He has been a politician for a long time. And we don't trust him," said Darunial Saravanam, owner of a roadside eatery outside Kilinochchi, political capital of the rebels.

"I think he wants war because he promised the JVP he would abandon the truce," said Saravanam, referring to the Marxist Peoples' Liberation Front (JVP) with whom Rajapakse had forged a pre-poll alliance to ensure their vote during the November 17 ballot.

The Tamil Tigers rebel group rebuffed new Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse's calls for peace talks, saying Sunday the hard-line leader does not understand their aspirations for a separate state on the Indian Ocean island.

After taking office Saturday, Rajapakse ruled out the rebels'

demand for greater control over Tamil affairs, saying he would never let Sri Lanka be divided. But he pledged not to return the country to war and said he would initiate a new round of talks with the rebels.

Rajapakse on Monday swore in a hardliner as prime minister, who in the past has pushed for strong-arm tactics to end the civil war. The ceremony marked the start of 72-year-old Ratnasiri Wickremanayaka's third stint as premier.

The JVP believes too many concessions have been given to the Tigers and wants the entire Norwegian-led peace process renegotiated.

Peace talks between Colombo and the Tigers have been deadlocked since April 2003 although a truce signed in February 2002 still holds. The ethnic conflict between majority Sinhalese and the separatists claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

"If Mahinda yields to them, we are heading for war," said Saravanam. "We are already in training for war. We can use any weapon. We don't like war but if war comes we will be ready for it."

Not a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), he is,

however, a firm follower of rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

"We have our own leader and he is about to speak to us again," said Saravanam. "We will listen to whatever he says. He will know how to deal with Mahinda."

Prabhakaran, self-styled Sun God of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, uses Heroes' Day to make a rare public appearance, arriving at an unannounced venue at night to deliver a lengthy oration that is studied and dissected by his followers for the ensuing 12 months.

LTTE media director Daya Master told AFP here that Prabhakaran would this year use Heroes' Day -- November 27 -- to deliver the Tigers' response to Rajapakse's offer of fresh peace talks after he was sworn in Saturday as Sri Lanka's fifth president.

Saravanam, 50, who for Heroes' Day has splurged 25,000 rupees (250 dollars) on a series of posters depicting various facets of the Tamils' struggle for an independent homeland, said he would be listening to Prabhakaran's message on the radio.

Bush's China visit fails to narrow differences

REUTERS, Beijing

President George W. Bush's visit to Beijing, which ended yesterday, had the trappings of a whistle-stop campaign appearance intended to sell his message that the United States wants China to free up its politics and economy before the two countries can move closer.

But the closely scripted encounter between Bush and his Chinese hosts seemed to retrace, not narrow, the differences, analysts said.

"Both sides are paying more attention to the relationship and trying to define and shape it," said Jin Canrong, an expert on Chinese-US relations at the People's University of China in Beijing. "But without any urgent issues demanding attention, this visit was always going to be exploratory, not defining."

Bush visited a state-controlled church on Sunday, where he renewed a call for religious freedom in China.

Later that day he lectured China's leaders about the value of liberty and the need for China to loosen currency

controls, strengthen intellectual property protection, and close its trade gap with the United States.

While China's leaders sidestepped direct dispute with Bush on these issues, they sent their own message swaddled in diplomatic rhetoric -- that China wants to protect its rising economic and political power, but not confront the United States.

Chinese President Hu Jintao repeated his refrain that China is a "peacefully developing" country whose rising wealth and influence need not threaten other countries.

Hu also promised to work toward a balanced flow of trade between the two countries, and to crack down on commercial "pirates" who illegally copy US films, music, software and patented goods.

China has a massive trade surplus with the United States -- in the first 10 months of this year it shipped \$132.5 billion of goods to the United States, while the United States shipped \$39.8 billion to China.

Iraqi president starts landmark Iran visit

Talabani extends hand to insurgents

AFP, Tehrani Baghdad

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani began a landmark visit to Iran yesterday, the first by an Iraqi head of state in nearly four decades, in a clear effort to win more help in battling the insurgency raging in his country.

Iranian officials said Talabani was to spend three days in the Islamic republic for a series of high-level talks centred on security issues. Iranian media said his delegation includes Iraqi national security adviser Muwaffaq Rubaie.

Ties between Iran and Iraq's new authorities have been relatively close, with Baghdad's new government dominated by Kurdish figures like Talabani and Shias once backed by Tehran during Saddam's rule.

But relations remain clouded by allegations of Iranian support for insurgents fighting US and British troops in Iraq. Iran denies meddling, and blames the violence on the very presence of foreign forces.

Talabani is scheduled to meet hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, top national security official Ali Larijani and Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. Iranian media said he is also expected to meet supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The last Iraqi head of state to tour Iran was Abdel Rahman Aref, Iraq's president between 1966 and 1968.

The two neighbours fought a devastating war from 1980-88, after former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein attempted a land grab in the wake of Iran's Islamic revolution.

Talabani's visit comes hot on the heels of a trip to Tehran by the Iraqi national security adviser last week, which ended with the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Larijani.

The agreement covers cooperation in the fight against terrorism and the facilitation of visits to Iraq by Iranian pilgrims.

During his visit, Rubaie said he

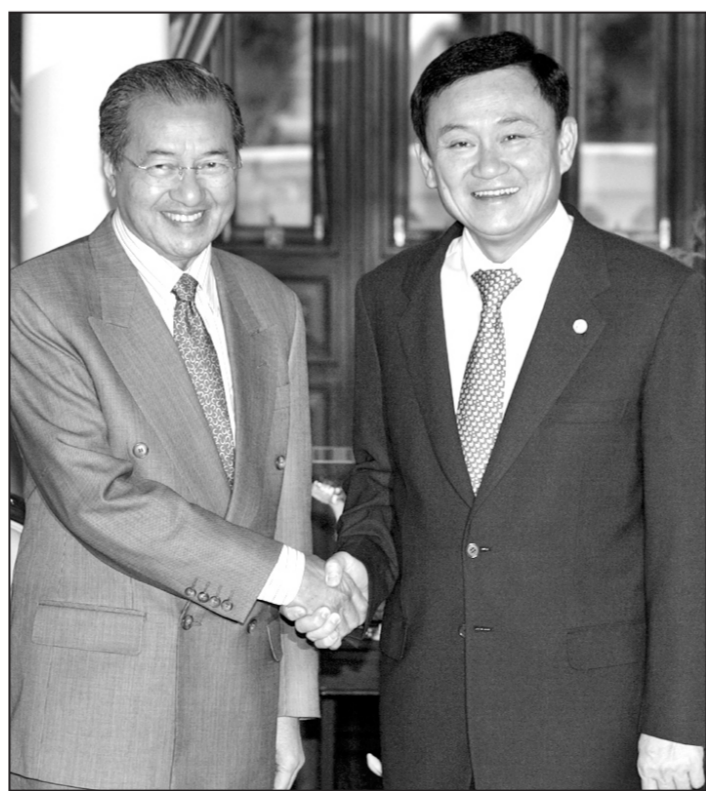
asked the Iranians to use their influence with Damascus to secure Syria's cooperation in sealing off the Iraqi border to insurgents.

Earlier Iraqi President Jalal Talabani on Sunday extended a hand to insurgents during reconciliation talks between the war-torn country's factions, even as violence continued to rage at home.

"If those who call themselves the Iraqi resistance want to contact me, I will welcome them," Talabani, a Kurd, told reporters on the second day of the Arab League-sponsored meetings in Cairo.

During the opening session on Saturday, Talabani had excluded Jihadis and criminals from the entourage of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein from talks.

"To those who took up arms to end the occupation, we say that the solution will not come through weapons but through political dialogue and democratic means," he said Sunday.



Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (R) receives Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohammad at Pitsanulok House in Bangkok yesterday. Mahathir arrived here on a two-day visit for talks as a worsening Islamic insurgency in southern Thailand continues to batter relations between the two countries.