

{SEPTEMBER 3, 2005}

THE BANG AND THE WHIMPER

*"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to break down and a time to build up"*

The book of Ecclesiastes has no truer follower than Ariel Sharon. Witness, Sharon himself set up the settlements in the Gaza Strip, and now he has destroyed them with his own hands. He created the Likud, and now – hopefully – he is burying it.

For those who need a reminder: the creation of the Likud was the exclusive achievement of Ariel Sharon.

In 1973, before the Yom Kippur war, he was compelled to leave the army when the other generals blocked his path to the office of Chief-of-Staff. They detested him because he was insufferable as a colleague, insubordinate to his superiors and disloyal to his peers – traits he retained all his life and that may be typical of leaders who aspire to autocratic power.

One of his admirers at the time coined a phrase that became famous: "Those who don't want him as Chief-of-Staff will get him as Minister of Defense." Sharon was looking for a crane that would hoist him to that position. Since he did not find one ready made, he created one – the Likud ("Unification").

The idea was simple: unify the right wing. True, the two bigger right-wing parties – Herut and the Liberal party – had already established a joint parliamentary bloc (called Gahal). But there were also two right-wing splinter parties. Sharon used his new public prestige and compelled them – almost against their will – to unite.

I asked him, at the time, about the purpose of this exercise, since Herut and the Liberals were already united, and the two splinter parties had nothing to add. It is necessary, he told me, to create the impression that the entire Right is uniting. That will attract the public. No one should be left outside.

And, indeed, it worked. In 1969, the Gahal bloc had won only 26 (of 120) seats in the

Knesset, exactly the same as four years before. But in 1973, the new Likud already won 39 seats, and in 1977 it became the ruling party with 43 seats.

As is his wont, Sharon quarreled with his new colleagues almost immediately after establishing the Likud. He left and set up a new party of his own, Shlomzion (“Peace of Zion” and the name of a Hasmonean queen). When he failed miserably at the polls in 1977, he drew the obvious conclusion and rejoined the Likud at lightning speed. But Menachem Begin refused to appoint him Minister of Defense and gave him only Agriculture. “If he gets the chance, he’ll surround the Knesset with his tanks,” Begin said only half in jest, and appointed Ezer Weizman instead.

But four years later, after Weizman had resigned in pique, Sharon was finally appointed Minister of Defense. The rest of the story is well known: the invasion of Lebanon, the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the Kahan commission, Sharon’s dismissal from the Defense Ministry, Begin’s fading away, Sharon’s quarrels with Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Sharon’s quarrels with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and Netanyahu’s election rout, which left the Likud with a miserable 19 seats. Sharon took over the ruins and became Prime Minister. At the last elections, in 2003, he achieved a memorable victory: 38 seats (to which Natan Sharansky added his two), as against the mere 19 seats of Labor. Sharon became the uncontested leader of Likud and the state.

And two and a half years later, he’s in a situation where the Likud, his creation, is threatening to oust him from power and put in his place a crooked and failed politician. What happened?

The immediate reason is, of course, the dismantling of the settlements in the Gaza Strip and the North of the West Bank. On the face of it, this completely contradicts everything Sharon stands for. After all, he was the one who put them up in the first place and declared “What’s true for Tel-Aviv is true for Netzarim.” Now he has sent the bulldozers to demolish Netzarim, house after house, on camera. He “betrayed the Likud principles,” he “is implementing the plan of the Leftists” and “tearing the people apart.”

That is only partly true. True, Sharon did create a historic precedent by dismantling Jewish settlements in the historic land of Israel. He has scuttled the right-wing vision of “the Entire-Eretz-Israel” and turned the partition of the land into a fait accompli. But behind the left-wing façade, there hides a right-wing plan: sacrificing Gaza in order to annex a large part of the much more important West Bank and to prevent the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Even after the “disengagement,” he is now enlarging the West Bank settlements and building the “Separation Fence,” the real purpose of which is to fix unilaterally the borders of an enlarged Israel.

One of Sharon’s big problems is rooted in his character. After winning his great

election victory, he did not trouble to hide from his party, and indeed from the public at large, his disdainful attitude. The 3,300 members of the powerful Likud Central Committee, most of them small politicians with big appetites, feel (quite rightly) that he despises them (also quite rightly).

Sharon never took the trouble to explain his motives for undertaking the Disengagement. One could only guess. The military preparations were meticulous, the public relations preparations were nil. In spite of this, the general public did support the plan, either out of loyalty to the democratic order or out of hope for peace, or both. But even this did not generate a big, rousing public movement in support of the Disengagement.

Now the Likud is in a state of rebellion. The situation borders on the absurd: The ruling party threatens to oust its own Prime Minister, even at the risk of losing power. The Knesset Members, who won their lofty position only thanks to Sharon, threaten to dissolve the Knesset, knowing full well that many of them have no chance of being reelected as candidates. The whole political system is in a state of anarchy.

Public opinion polls show a confused picture: in the Likud Central Committee, the decisive institution, there is a big majority against Sharon and for Netanyahu. Among the Likud members, too, there is a majority against Sharon. But among the Likud voters, Sharon has a majority, and among the voting public at large Sharon has a commanding lead over Netanyahu.

In this odd situation, what are the possibilities?

Option 1: Sharon will triumph. The Likud Central Committee will indeed convene and decide to hold party primaries, but at the last moment the members will shrink back from ousting Sharon, out of fear of losing power. The thousands of party hacks, whose fat jobs stem from their party affiliation, will prefer power with the hated Sharon to going into opposition with Netanyahu. Sharon will continue as Prime Minister until the regular elections in November 2006, with a good chance of being reelected for another four years (until the age of 81).

Option 2: Sharon will be thrown out. The Central Committee will decide on early primaries, Netanyahu will be elected as Likud leader. He may set up a new nationalist-religious coalition in the present Knesset. Or, the Knesset will be dissolved and new elections will take place, with Netanyahu leading the united Likud. Sharon will return to his farm. This would be a resounding victory for the settlers, proving that anyone dismantling settlements is committing political suicide.

Option 3: the Small Bang. Sharon will lose the Likud primaries, the Likud will split into two, Sharon will take with him about a third of the Likud Knesset faction. He will set up a new coalition with the left-wing and Orthodox parties and continue to govern. If he wins the general elections in November 2006, he will continue to govern as the leader of Likud B.

Option 4: the Big Bang. The Likud will split as above, but Sharon will set up a new party together with members of the Labor Party and Shinui. The Knesset will disperse and the new party, led by Sharon, will – as public opinion polls now indicate – win by a landslide. This is widely known as “the Big Bang.”

President Bush is doing everything in his power to facilitate Option 1. He is working hard to help Sharon achieve spectacular political successes, such as a meeting with the President of Pakistan, welcoming the King of Jordan to Jerusalem , and suchlike. But it is doubtful if this will really help Sharon before the Likud Central Committee.

As far as the peace process is concerned, it would be better for new elections to take place as soon as possible, so as to avoid a long interim period when everything is frozen, the settlement activity goes on and a third intifada may well break out. One cannot rely on the Americans to prevent such a freeze.

But the main interest of the peace camp is in the rearrangement of the entire political system. For years now the situation in Israel has verged on the grotesque: with hardly any connection between the distribution of opinions among the general public, as continuously shown by all polls, and the division of forces in the Knesset. The Labor Party is a walking corpse, without a common philosophy, a political plan or a leadership worth speaking of. The Meretz party is pale and ineffectual. The many voters who are longing for peace have no real representation in parliament.

The country needs a political earthquake that will make mountains out of valleys and valleys from mountains. If the present crisis brings about a complete change in the political landscape, that would be a blessing.

T. S. Eliot prophesied: “*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*” The fate of the Likud may well be the opposite: it may end not with a whimper, but with a bang.