

Troubled Soil

With Ariel Sharon off the stage, Israel prepares for life after its iconic leader—while facing new challenges in making peace with the Palestinians

By JOHANNA MCGEARY

SOON AFTER ARRIVING HOME ON THE EVENING of January 5, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, 77, complained of an excruciating headache. He was rushed to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, where an MRI scan revealed a massive brain hemorrhage. Sharon underwent a two-stage operation that lasted more than eight hours. After another surgery, he remained in a medically induced coma and was attached to a respirator.

Since his election as Prime Minister four years ago, Sharon has towered over Israeli politics, shaping it to his will. But the prognoses from medical experts indicated that he would never return to the tan leather chair at the center of the Cabinet table. And so the country began the wrenching process of moving on. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert inherited Sharon's duties and his suffocating security retinue.

The rapid handover of power, though, did little to ease the shock and uncertainty that accompanied Sharon's exit from public life. As Israelis monitored the Prime Minister's condition around the clock, they knew they were witnessing the end of an era—and, perhaps, the vanishing of the country's

best hope for a durable settlement of the Palestinian dispute. Sharon's credentials as an uncompromising hawk meant the public trusted him to make painful concessions for peace, even if "peace" for him involved imposing territorial boundaries without the negotiated assent of the Palestinians. That process began last August, with Sharon's decision to withdraw Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements.

Until December, the future looked relatively sunny for this corner of the world. The constant fear of Palestinian suicide bombings has largely dissipated from Israeli life, and Israel's economy emerged from a long slump to become one of the fastest growing in the developed world. Prosperity and the success of the Gaza pullout boosted Sharon's political confidence. When the angry right of Likud hamstrung his government after the Gaza evacuation, he asked Israeli President Moshe Katsav to dissolve the parliament and call for early elections to be held this March. Then he took an even bolder gamble: he left the Likud Party and built a new one, Kadima ("forward" in Hebrew) on center ground. Labor voters seeking tough security and Likud voters ready for pragmatic solutions flocked to Kadima.

In fact, it may well be that without the strong hand of Sharon to reassure Israelis, it is the Palestinians who will determine the outcome of the country's March vote. The mounting turmoil in the territories and the prospect of a resurgent Hamas launching new terrorist attacks could

provoke an Israeli turn to the right.

A Hamas official told *TIME* that if the next Israeli government responds to the growing chaos in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with force, a "new round of confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis will begin before the end of this year." The mettle that moderates on both sides show in coming days will determine whether Sharon's last overtures toward peace outlive him. ■

Questions

1. Who is Israel's new Prime Minister?
2. How did Sharon give hope to Israelis?

