

# Israel confronts harsh reality of house divided against itself Former general Barak expected to become defence minister

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Byline: REUBEN LOEWY; SPCL

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BY REUBEN LOEWY

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The unity that so uncharacteristically prevailed yesterday over a grieving Israel lasted all of an hour.

No sooner had the dignitaries and camera crews left the site where Yitzhak Rabin had been laid to rest when a fight broke out over the slain leader's policies.

It started when the cemetery opened to the public and hundreds swarmed to the wreath-covered grave to leave bouquets and light candles. Shouts soon drowned out prayers after one man reportedly said the assassin should also have killed Mr. Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres. Others yelled about the impropriety of the dispute and called for unity after Mr. Rabin's death.

Israel today faces the harsh reality that the deep divisions in the country that led to the tragic killing prevail.

While Mr. Peres, as acting prime minister, conducted talks last night with U.S. President Bill Clinton, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Hussein on the continuation of the Middle East peace process, Israel itself is sharply divided over how to proceed.

The so-called Peace Camp headed by the Labour-led government coalition assembled by Mr. Rabin, and the self-styled National Camp of the rightwing Likud opposition and its allies have entirely different agendas.

"The issues are still very much there," said Zalman Shoval, Likud's spokesman on foreign affairs. "Israel is divided - not on peace, but on tactics and the nature of the agreement with the Palestinians."

Talk of the formation of a national-unity government to breach this chasm in Israeli society has been swept aside by both camps. Instead, Mr. Peres is expected to form a new government in the coming few days, with Likud already having agreed not to block its creation.

"Israeli governments are changed by democratic elections, not assassinations," Likud Leader Benjamin Netanyahu explained to his party. Survival, however, will not be easy for the Peres government.

As Mr. Peres takes over the helm of a deeply shocked and traumatized Israel, his new government is expected to carry on implementing the peace accords reached with the Palestinians. This involves Israel redeploying its forces on the occupied West Bank, thereby paving the way for a Palestinian election early next year and the introduction of limited Palestinian self-rule, none of which is popular with the country's right wing.

Even with new ministerial appointments, the coalition will still only have a wafer-thin majority in parliament, with little prospect of broadening its base.

And, personally, the new prime minister will face an uphill struggle to win the confidence of the Israeli people before going to the polls in the general election that is scheduled for next November.

Mr. Peres, not known for his great popular appeal, will be facing Mr. Netanyahu in Israel's first direct election for the post of prime minister. The Labour and Likud Parties have been running neck-and-neck in the opinion polls, but Mr. Netanyahu has consistently outpolled Mr. Peres in popularity, at least until now.

In his quest to bolster his position and continue and expand the peace process that he embarked upon in close partnership with Mr. Rabin, Mr. Peres is expected to appoint former Israeli army chief of staff Ehud Barak as defence minister, a portfolio that Mr. Rabin had held for himself in addition to his post as Prime Minister.

General Barak, a novice on the political scene, was only recently appointed interior minister after a long and distinguished career in the army.

But while Gen. Barak may lack political experience, Mr. Peres is hoping that his tough reputation will, to some extent, make up for the absence of Mr. Rabin, dubbed Mr. Security because of his hawkish pragmatism. In the eyes of the always security-conscious Israeli electorate, Mr. Rabin counterbalanced and supplemented Mr. Peres's dovish and visionary image.

Mr. Peres is also expected to appoint Labour maverick Haim Ramon to the interior portfolio. Mr. Ramon is currently head of the Histadrut trade union movement.

Dr. Yossi Beilin, one of the chief architects of the Oslo accord between Israel and the Palestinians, a dovish protege of Mr. Peres and until recently deputy foreign minister, is an obvious candidate to step into Mr. Peres's shoes at the foreign affairs ministry.

Mr. Peres's new government is expected to enjoy a short period of grace while the opposition lies low, tainted as it is in the eyes of many Israelis by its association with the vitriolic rhetoric that is widely regarded as having encouraged Mr. Rabin's assassination.

Also acting in the new government's favour will be the unprecedented manifestation of support among the Israeli public for the peace process, and for Mr. Rabin personally.

"The demonstrations of the right-wing opponents of the peace process, and the silence of the supporters, gave a false impression that the opposition was stronger than it was in reality," said Arie Dayan, political correspondent of the left-of-centre Israeli daily Davar Rishon.

It was a sentiment echoed by Mr. Rabin's widow Leah yesterday. "Where were you before?" she asked the throng of Israeli youth who congregated outside her house in a Tel Aviv suburb to pay tribute to her husband.

In more senses than one, the peace rally on Tel Aviv's Kings of Israel Square (now renamed Rabin Square) that Mr. Rabin addressed moments before his assassination may prove to be a turning point in Israeli politics.

The Song of Peace, which Mr. Rabin sang on the podium that evening, was originally written in the wake of the Six-Day War in 1967 as a protest against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and promptly banned on Israel's popular Army Radio.

Now it has been adopted by the Israeli public as a symbol of the slain Prime Minister, and is constantly played on all radio and television stations.