

Hardliners force Sharon to dissolve parliament

Michael Matza and Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson
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JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dissolved his nation's parliament on Tuesday, forcing elections as early as February and plunging the close U.S. ally into political uncertainty as the Bush administration prepares for war in nearby Iraq.

It was unclear how or whether the dissolution would affect President Bush's effort to restrain the Israeli government from taking harsh military steps against the Palestinians that might preclude Arab cooperation in a possible war.

Sharon failed to form a governing coalition with ultra right-wing parties that demanded a hardline stance against the Palestinians. Without their support, he could not form a Cabinet that would win parliamentary approval.

Dissolution of the parliament

throws into motion a range of political forces that make any prediction of the election's outcome — and the resulting impact on approaches to peace in the region — difficult at best.

Right-wing parties took an uncompromising stance with Sharon in part because they believe they stand to gain in an election. Sharon initially tried to avoid early elections because, while personally popular, he faces a strong right-wing challenge within his own Likud party. Meanwhile, the forces calling for peace initiatives with the Palestinians may stand to gain within the left-leaning Labor Party.

Several Israeli political analysts said early elections are likely to favor Likud, costing Labor and other liberal factions a handful of Knesset seats. The reason, they said: Average Israelis have shifted right as a result of Palestinian violence.

Sharon was forced to seek new coalition partners following the Oct.

30 departure from his government of the Labor Party when Labor balked over funding for Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories included in proposals for a Palestinian state.

Labor Party leader Binyamin Ben Eliezer pulled his faction out of the "unity" government — unity between left- and right-wing parties — that Sharon had been leading for 20 months.

The ultra-rightists had said they would join Sharon's government only if he stiffened his demands on Palestinians and rejected a U.S. sponsored "road map" for peace that sets a timetable for negotiations and includes an eventual Palestinian state.

"Elections are the last thing this country needs right now," Sharon said. But "I will not throw away the good of the country for narrow-based party political considerations."

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U.S. compromises on Iraq

Warren P. Strobel and Diego Iburguen
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WASHINGTON — The Bush administration won agreement from France and other key doubters Tuesday on a new United Nations resolution demanding that Iraq scrap its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs, a deal clinched in a series of high-level phone calls by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Approval of the resolution appears likely to delay, perhaps for several months, any U.S.-led military action to overthrow Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, as the world waits to see whether Baghdad will comply with the world body's disarmament demands.

While officials cautioned that last-minute glitches are possible, the deal appears to end, at least for now, the disagreements with other world powers and within the U.S. government over how to deal with Saddam.

The United States plans to present the resolution Wednesday at the United Nations, and senior U.S. officials predicted that after weeks of wrangling, it would win backing from all of the 15-member U.N. Security Council except for Syria.

The American position was finalized Monday afternoon at a pivotal White House "principals' meeting" that was attended by Powell, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Se-

curity Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Gen. Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Powell's view that the United States should continue to work diplomatically and come up with a plan its allies could accept prevailed at the meeting, several officials said. All of them spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Cheney and Rumsfeld asked for a few minor wording changes but abandoned their months-long effort to press for a U.N. resolution that Saddam was unlikely to accept and that would authorize military action without further debate.

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