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Menahem Begin speaks at opening of Knesset (parliament) this month while other members listen

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Middle East

ISRAEL

The transition to the first government not dominated by the Labor Party since Israel's independence in 1948 was completed early this week when the Israeli parliament formally approved a narrow-based right-wing coalition government headed by Likud leader Menahem Begin. The following day, however, the Labor Party demonstrated that it remains a strong national force by apparently maintaining its long-standing control of Israel's large and important Labor Federation.

Prime Minister Begin's cabinet at this point is composed of nine Likud members, three from the National Religious Party, and Moshe Dayan, now an independent. Two small religious parties that support the coalition declined to

join the cabinet, but they have pledged to vote with the government. Three portfolios are being held open temporarily as an inducement to the Democratic Movement for Change to participate in the government—on Begin's terms.

Begin probably will deal with his government in the same autocratic manner that he has long ruled his own party. After Begin, the most influential members of the new cabinet will be Defense Minister Weizman, who is the number-two man in Likud, Foreign Minister Dayan, Agriculture Minister Sharon, and probably Education Minister Hammer, the outspoken head of the National Religious Party's dominant youth wing. All five men appear to share generally similar hard-line views on crucial foreign policy issues.

Many Israelis welcome indications that Begin will provide strong and unyielding leadership on peace issues, which they see as essential to deal with growing Arab sophistication in negotiating tactics and to meet anticipated US pressure for

territorial withdrawals. The principal constituents of the new government—immigrants from North Africa and eastern Arab states and the orthodox religious community—are likely to rally enthusiastically behind Begin's personal leadership.

Although the issues and to some extent the electorate were different in the Labor Federation election than in the national election last month, the victory was important to the Labor Party and its ally, Mapam. In addition to representing all but a small percentage of Israel's salaried employees, the Federation controls many businesses, industries, and social welfare programs, and its views must be taken into account by any Israeli government.

Labor Party leaders are likely to point to their party's strong showing as evidence that Likud's upset victory in the national election represented a one-time protest vote against Labor rather than a fundamental shift to the right. Labor may use its domination of the Federation to enhance its image with the electorate by presenting alternatives to possible efforts by Likud to decentralize the Federation and to undertake free enterprise reforms in the Israeli economy.

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