

Mark Bruzonsky reports from Washington

ISRAELI Prime Minister Menachem Begin's six-month-old coalition government seems in danger of cracking.

If the ailing Prime Minister cannot bring himself to concede radical changes in his policy on the occupied West Bank and Palestine there could be a serious rupture.

So far Begin has shifted only slightly from his completely uncompromising positions on these matters. Now it seems likely only major and basic alternations will preserve the increasingly fragile state's political alignments.

Concessions involving an "autonomous West Bank" are really only a cosmetic repackaging of Begin's long-standing insistence that Israel must retain security control and settlement rights over what his government terms Samaria and Judea.

"I stand by my principles which are so well-known I need not elaborate on them," Begin told an interviewer a few weeks ago.

As proof, four new settlements have been opened in the West Bank even since Egyptian President Sadat's visit.

Yet, only a complete shift from these principles towards acceptance of the Palestinian "national" problem — which necessitates a Palestinian territorial homeland — can make a comprehensive Mid-east peace possible.

Challenge

Waiting in the wings are political factions, both in and out of the current government, which could combine to mount a serious challenge to Begin's authority.

Begin faces a revolt by leading political figures in and outside his government if he does not shift from his hard-line positions," *U.S. News and World Report* concludes this month.

But whether such an uprising will actually occur in the coming few months is impossible to forecast. What can be said with certainty is that the odds have increased dramatically since Sadat's Jerusalem visit.

Possibilities of such a development are continuing to escalate as the Begin hard liners concentrate mainly on imaginative public relations terminology rather than bold new Palestinian policies.

In the past few weeks, not only has the opposition Labour Party begun a serious re-evaluation of

Peace moves bring danger of Israeli split

its former positions, but Begin's own Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, and his Deputy Prime Minister, Yigal Yadin, have cautiously strayed from Begin's unyielding postures.

Begin has had to reassert control by publicly insisting that all Dayan's statements are cleared with him in advance, by reminding Yadin that he is not one of those who is allowed to make public statements on foreign policy, and by ordering a group of Knesset members from government parties to disband a bloc they were forming to press for West Bank territorial concessions.

In short, in Sadat's wake, unprecedented rethinking is taking place on the Palestinians' and the West Bank's future by political sources throughout Israeli society — everywhere that is except Begin.

"There is wide national consensus for a boldly imaginative peace policy," *The Jerusalem Post* noted shortly after Sadat returned from Egypt. Yet, the *Post* added, "the existing consensus is currently being distorted by the predominance of one relatively small faction — Mr Begin's own — in the shaping of foreign policy."

Press reports in the U.S. have assessed, but only superficially, this widening sub-surface split within the Israeli establishment. But what has not been sufficiently emphasised is that political currents are creating the possibility that the core of the Begin government — the Herut movement which arose from the Irgun military organisation when Israel achieved statehood — could become totally isolated within

months if it sticks to its slightly amended West Bank and Palestinian notions.

No repackaging of former positions will do. Only a complete change in outlook — recognition that the Palestinian problem is a national one, not one of "local autonomy" nor one of refugees — will make possible progress towards a comprehensive peace and head off Israel's simmering political crisis.

It is even becoming feasible that a totally new coalition could emerge uniting the Labour Alignment, the Democratic Movement for Change (which joined the Begin government only a few months ago) and factions that went with Begin's Likud Party to create Israel's first Right-wing, nationalist governmental last June.

Reject

Just last month the respected Jewish Telegraphic Agency concluded in a special report from Jerusalem that even a majority of Begin's cabinet will not accept his rigid stance for long.

"It is too early to predict whether Begin will abandon some of his well-known fundamentalist doctrines," JTA stated.

According to observers," the report continued, "that depends on whether he prefers to be remembered in history as the man who brought peace to the Middle East by agreeing to compromise on the West Bank or as one who missed a chance for peace by continuing to advocate the idea of a 'Greater Israel.' Should Begin choose the latter course, there are many in his cabinet, probably a

majority, who would withdraw their support of him."

Former Foreign Minister Yigal Allon has been even more blunt in his predictions.

"Either the Begin government will have to make a fundamental change in its policy or the Israeli people will change the composition of its government," he stated some weeks after Sadat's visit.

"The policy of the Likud government is irrelevant to the new situation which has appeared in the Middle East... The government might miss a historical opportunity."

The widening gulf on Palestinian and West Bank policies has been clearly illustrated in the statements of Israeli political personalities.

In an exclusive *Politicks* interview opposition Labour Party leader Shimon Peres, for instance, has broken from former Labour attitudes and accepted the basic concept of "Palestinian national existence."

Yet the Begin government, though now usually speaking with somewhat greater sensitivity to the "Palestinian Arab problem" (as opposed to the former terminology — "the Arabs of the Land of Israel), has been unable to break from former positions.

This unfortunate reality was most dramatically spelled out in another exclusive *Politicks* interview, this one with the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Ephraim Evron, one of the top government spokesmen and second only to Dayan at the Foreign Ministry.

Though Begin and Dayan have not been as candid as Evron — as

they attempt to get as much benefit as possible from what they know to be only marginally altered policies — careful analysis of their stated positions reveals that Israel's goal remains not only security arrangements for the West Bank but prevention of any nationalistic forces from gaining control and asserting independent economic and political policies.

This focus solely on the Palestinian and West Bank questions is justified because these are the issues upon which a stable and just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict will eventually pivot.

Proper security arrangements for Israel are, beyond question, a necessity — Israel cannot be expected to yield major territorial and political concessions without firm demilitarisation agreements, arms control arrangements, security concessions for Israeli forces and international guarantees especially from the U.S.

Yet, some reasonable fulfillment for "Palestinian legitimate rights" is also an imperative for any overall settlement.

The Sinai has not really been at issue and has always been returnable to Egypt for the right concessions. The Golan Heights too, though a tougher security problem, has not been claimed as part of Eretz Yisrael and can be compromised — the bulk of the territory returning to Syrian sovereignty with a variety of security arrangements.

Aspirations

It is the West Bank and the small Gaza Strip where more than a million Palestinians live and where Palestinian aspirations for a homeland can conceivably be satisfied which remains the major block to a settlement.

But as a settlement seems to draw closer, the debate within Israel is destined to grow fiercer.

But this ferment is a most welcome and hopeful development.

That Begin's government has not, as yet, accepted the eventual necessity of dealing with "Palestinian nationalism" rather than "Palestinian Arabs" is understandable if not justifiable.

Giving in at this point in his life and after finally achieving political power will be a supreme test of statesmanship for Begin. Neither Begin nor Sadat are great men. But Sadat is doing great things. Will Begin rise to the historical moment? Can he?