

The Netanyahu Bribery and Corruption Scandal, the New Knesset Vote for Him to Become President

Netanyahu saga a far cry from smaller corruption scandals enveloping predecessors

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As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared in court on Monday in his trial on corruption, bribery and breach of trust charges, a senior member of his Likud Party said a majority of members of the new Knesset would be vote for him to become president. This election must be held between April 9th and June 9th ahead of the expiry of incumbent Reuven Rivlin’s term on July 9. A Likud source told The Jerusalem Post that most Knesset members would vote for Netanyahu if he decides to become president.

If elected he would, in theory, have a new seven-year term in office which would put prosecutions on hold as Israel’s basic law prohibits charges against a president and perhaps, give him time to evade the charges altogether, as they say, by hook or by crook. Netanyahu would, however, give up policymaking and accept that his main role would be deciding who would form a government following an election. While this is an important role, a president’s other duties are largely ceremonial and bore Netanyahu who loves wheeling-and-dealing on Israel’s fractured political scene. Although his legal troubles could complicate a Netanyahu election to the presidency because he would enter the presidential race while on trial, he is said to be considering such a bid. The high court of justice might have to decide if he could run. Other scenarios involve plea bargains and pardons.

Without Netanyahu, the paper’s informant argued that the Likud would choose who among its Knesset members would be most likely to form a stable Likud-led coalition with other right-leaning parties which refuse to serve under Netanyahu.

Although he remains popular, like Donald Trump in the US with his “base” of followers, Netanyahu, like Trump, faces an influential anti-Netanyahu constituency. Indeed, thousands of protesters have demonstrated outside both the prime minister’s residence and his personal home for months with the object of forcing the Likud to drop him or him to stand down. His detractors have dubbed him the “crime-minister”.

Now for his trial. The Israeli police began investigating him for corruption in 2016 and began to lay charges in 2019. His trial began in May 2020 in the Jerusalem District Court but the presentation of evidence was postponed until February and then, due to the latest Knesset

election, April 2021. Scores of witnesses will, reportedly, be called.

Netanyahu faces indictments over three out of five possible cases. In the first case, he has been charged with receiving gifts worth more than \$500,000 over 20 years from a wealthy Israeli businessman and his Australian friend in exchange for favours.

In the second case, Netanyahu and the editor of Yedioth Aronoth are accused of conspiring to limit the circulation of a rival newspaper in exchange for positive coverage of the prime minister and his family.

The third case, again involved Netanyahu's quest for friendly media coverage from the popular web portal, Walla!, one of the first in Israel, which is owned by the communications firm Bezeq.

He could spend up to 10 years in prison for bribery and a maximum of three years for fraud and breach of trust.

If Netanyahu is convicted and sentenced, he would be the second Israeli prime minister to go to prison. The first, Ehud Olmert, also of the Likud, was jailed for six years bribery and influence peddling while he served as mayor of Jerusalem and prime minister. His sentence was reduced to 27 months and he gained early release in 2017.

Israeli presidents can also be charged and jailed. Moshe Katsav (in office from 2000-2007) was charged with rape and abuse by staff and imprisoned for six years.

Corruption is widespread among Israeli politicians. Ten ministers, 17 Knesset members, two chief rabbis, half a dozen mayors, and a number of other officials have been convicted and sent to prison. Some public figures have avoided jail.

Netanyahu's wife, Sara, was convicted in 2019 of appropriating \$100,000 in state funds to spend on lavish meals from restaurants while she had a fulltime chef working in her household. Following a plea bargain, she was fined \$15,000 and escaped prison. Two years earlier she was ordered to pay \$47,000 in damages to a housekeeper who accused her and her husband of bullying and she continues to face similar allegations by another employee. Their son, Yair, has also had scrapes with the law.

Corruption has always dogged Israeli politicians but the Netanyahu saga is a far cry from smaller scandals that enveloped his predecessors. For instance, the scale of the Netanyahus' abuses is much greater than the 1977 scandal involving then prime minister Yitzak Rabin who withdrew his candidacy ahead of a Knesset election and stepped back from politics after it was revealed that, in violation of Israeli law, he and his wife had not closed accounts in the National Bank of Washington in 1973 when they left the US capital where he was Israel's ambassador. Although she claimed there had been less than \$2,000 in her account, it was found that there were two accounts with a total of \$18,000 when the Rabins departed and about \$10,000 when the information was made public. Rabin was forgiven and became prime minister a second time in 1992 until his assassination in November 1995.

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