

Former Israeli PM Olmert sentenced to jail

By Jean Shaoul
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A Tel Aviv judge sentenced former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to six years in prison for bribery when he was mayor of Jerusalem. Judge David Rozen fined him \$289,000, and ordered \$140,000 of his assets seized. He fined him another \$12,500 over a separate project.

It is the latest and most egregious example of the pervasive and systemic corruption at the heart of politics in Israel. Olmert, a long-time member of the Likud party, served as a cabinet minister in the 1980s, the mayor of Jerusalem between 1993 and 2003, and then entered the Likud-led cabinet of Ariel Sharon. He joined Sharon's breakaway Kadima party in 2005, becoming prime minister after Sharon suffered two strokes in January 2006.

During his period in office, the man who likes to claim that he came close to reaching a deal with the Palestinians launched a war on Lebanon and Gaza in 2006, imposed an illegal blockade on Gaza that continues to this day, and mounted a further murderous assault on Gaza in 2008-2009.

He remained in office until 2009 when he was forced to resign due to indictment for fraud in another case arising out of the Rishon Tours scandal that occurred when he was mayor of Jerusalem, the charge of which he was ultimately acquitted.

However, last March, in another unrelated case that also took place when he was mayor, Olmert was found guilty of accepting a \$145,000 bribe from the developers of the highly controversial apartment complex in Jerusalem known as the Holyland Project, for which planning and zoning laws were changed.

The high-rise development, built on a hilltop in Jerusalem with magnificent views of the surrounding area, is an eyesore, and totally out of keeping with the rest of the city. Only half of the planned development has been built and the project is on the verge of bankruptcy.

Olmert's name has for years been synonymous with

bribery and corruption, but none of the other court cases—including the scandals surrounding a ministry-run Investment Centre, the Talansky, Rishon Tours, Bank Leumi, and Cremieux Street affairs, and improper political appointments—that led to him resigning the premiership in 2009 resulted in a trial or conviction. Other charges that he received bribes during his time as a legislator are still being investigated.

Judge David Rozen said in sentencing him said that bribery offences “contaminate the public sector” and “cause the structure of government to collapse”. He added: “People who receive bribes give rise to a feeling of disgust and cause the public to despise the state's institutions. The taker of bribes is like a traitor who betrays the public trust that was given to him—trust without which a proper public service cannot be maintained.”

Rozen described Olmert's offences as “noxious” and said he was guilty of “moral turpitude”. Under Israeli law, this would preclude him from seeking public office for seven years after finishing his jail term. Olmert had expected to make a political return if acquitted. Nevertheless, he gave Olmert time to lodge an appeal, delaying the start of the jail term.

An appeal may not save him. Rozen, in a separate but related case against Shula Zaken, for her involvement of a series of graft scandals surrounding Olmert, agreed a plea deal that will give her a light prison sentence in exchange for giving evidence that could send the former prime minister to jail for several more years.

Police and prosecutors are now pursuing additional charges, including tampering with witnesses, and the state prosecutor is to re-open investigations, based on her evidence, into other corruption scandals for which Olmert was acquitted.

Two others were sentenced along with Olmert. Danny Danker received a three-year jail sentence. He

was for two years chairman of Israel's largest bank, Bank Hapoalim, and only removed from that post after an unrelenting campaign by former Bank of Israel governor Stanley Fischer. This sentence came on top of a one-year jail sentence in a separate case where he pleaded guilty to a number of corruption charges.

Eli Simhayoff received a three-and-a-half year sentence. Simhayoff is a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem who had to be suspended after he refused to step down from his post on being indicted for corruption two years ago. This did not prevent Aryeh Deri, once again leader of the religious Shas party, who himself served two years in jail for accepting \$155,000 in bribes in 1997, from putting Simhayoff back on the Shas list for last year's municipal elections, even as the Holyland trial was entering its final phase. He only suspended him from his position as a Jerusalem councillor on Tuesday, the day of the sentencing.

Olmert joins a long line of politicians tainted, if not convicted, of corruption and other charges. As in every country, corruption and criminality have become the norm, as politicians seek both personal gain and political power for themselves and their sponsors.

According to the OECD's index of global corruption, Israel is consistently ranked in the bottom half of its 34 member countries, coming 23rd in 2013. Last year, Israel stood 36th in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index. Transparency International reported a survey showing that nearly three quarters of Israelis believed their government was ruled by insiders promoting special interests. According to another survey cited by the *Times of Israel*, half of all Israelis say corruption is increasing and 79 percent say that Israel's political parties are the most corrupt institutions in the country.

Scandals have engulfed politicians from all the main political parties. Until the 1990s, legislators could work as attorneys for corporate clients while passing legislation and regulating the companies they represented.

The 1988 elections and the 2002 internal election of the Likud party proved so scandalous that they resulted in court cases. Three city mayors, removed from their posts because of corruption, were re-elected to their positions in last year's municipal elections. The leader of the Shas party is a convicted criminal. Some of the most notorious cases that resulted in guilty verdicts

include:

- President Moshe Katsav was forced to resign to face charges of rape, and is now serving a seven-year prison sentence. He was found guilty of obstructing justice by attempting to cover up the truth.

- Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson resigned to face charges of stealing funds from the Histadrut trade union federation.

- Justice Minister Haim Ramon was charged with sexual assault for forcibly kissing a young soldier in the prime minister's office.

- Shas legislator Shlomo Benizri was found guilty of accepting bribes. His sentence was increased by the Supreme Court to four years.

- Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman was found guilty of assaulting a 12-year-old boy, fined and ordered to pay compensation. He was forced to resign last year to face charges of corruption, money laundering, breach of trust and witness tampering, of which he was later acquitted.

If Olmert's appeal is unsuccessful, he will be the first former head of government in Israel to be jailed. While all Israel's prime ministers after the first, David Ben Gurion, have been tainted with the stench of corruption, none of the allegations have come to anything. In Ariel Sharon's case, he had the good fortune to become incapacitated before anything stuck, leaving his son to carry the can.

The conviction and sentencing of the former prime minister is evidence of the terminal decay of Israeli democracy, which has withered in the face of the twin pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people and the social inequality within Israel itself, which ranks among the highest in the developed world.

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