

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu faces possible indictment for corruption

By Jean Shaoul
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Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit has given the go ahead for police to carry out two separate investigations into allegations of corruption against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The investigations follow months of delay, during which some 50 witnesses have been questioned.

At least one of the cases has the potential to lead to a formal indictment.

This is only the latest in a series of scandals surrounding Israel's political establishment that reflect the putrefaction of Israeli democracy. Netanyahu's immediate predecessor, Ehud Olmert, received a jail term for bribery offences when he was mayor of Jerusalem prior to becoming prime minister. Netanyahu and his family have for years faced numerous allegations of corruption and even preliminary investigations.

This is the first time, however, that allegations have led to a full-scale criminal investigation of Netanyahu's financial relationships. Police questioned him at his official residence for three hours on Monday in relation to the first case. Apparently the smaller of the two, this case involves substantial gifts and benefits from several wealthy businesspeople. These include Ronald Lauder, whose family founded the US cosmetics giant Estee Lauder and who has himself been questioned by the police.

Netanyahu has already admitted to receiving \$40,000 in 2001 from Arnaud Mimran, a French businessman currently serving an eight-year jail sentence for fraud. Netanyahu was out of office at the time. Mimran testified that he gave one million euros to Netanyahu during his 2009 election campaign. If true, this would violate Israeli law that bans the foreign funding of elections.

The second case is apparently more serious, although

no details have been released to the press. Police will question Netanyahu about it on Friday. It follows Mendelblit's announcement last July that he had ordered a preliminary investigation into a potentially corrupt relationship, with specific accusation emerging three months ago. He said that the allegations were new and did not relate to any previous rumours or investigations.

The daily Ha'aretz says that the case is being described as a "bombshell," an "earthquake" and other such explosive adjectives" and relates to a well-known Israeli business figure who would benefit commercially from Netanyahu's support. Unlike other allegations, this case seems to have accelerated quite rapidly.

Being the subject of a criminal investigation does not require Netanyahu to resign. However, an indictment, which could take months if it happens at all, would put him under enormous pressure to step down. That in turn could trigger early elections, which are not due until late 2019, if the ruling coalition cannot agree on a successor.

Mandelblit, a former cabinet secretary and military advocate general, is a close associate of Netanyahu who has sought to protect the prime minister and his wife Sara from other allegations, dismissing some and postponing the current probe for as long as possible. To the extent that he has approved the two current investigations, it may indicate that the evidence is too strong to simply ignore.

Netanyahu has responded in a predictably belligerent manner, listing on his Facebook page each accusation with "Nothing" and "I repeat and say there will not be anything because there is nothing."

He told members of his Likud Party, "We hear the celebratory spirit and winds blowing through the

television studios and in the corridors of the opposition.” He added, “Hold off the celebrations; don’t rush. I’ve told you before and will tell you again--this will come to nothing, because there is nothing.”

Corruption scandals are often the mechanism through which vicious political battles within ruling elites are fought out. In this case, the lack of information makes it difficult to ascertain what precisely is at issue. Nevertheless, it takes place in the immediate aftermath of the UN Security Council’s toothless resolution condemning Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, President Barack Obama’s support for the resolution and Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech affirming support for the “two state solution.”

Netanyahu, as soon as he heard that the Obama administration was proposing to abstain rather than veto the resolution, contacted President-elect Donald Trump to lobby for a veto. Emboldened by the prospect of an openly pro-settlement supporter in the White House, and fearful of being outflanked by his right-wing coalition partners, Netanyahu launched a vitriolic attack on the Obama administration, provoking uproar in Israel among those who fear that the unanimous vote of the Security Council has left Israel dangerously isolated.

Former Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon, who quit the coalition government last May over policy disagreements over Iran and the West Bank, speaks for this layer. He opposed the resolution but criticized Netanyahu, saying that Israel had to maintain a dialogue with its friends around the world despite disagreements, not punish or boycott them. He added, “More responsible leadership could have prevented the resolution.”

Ya’alon and others are concerned that Trump’s repudiation of the two state solution and support for Israel’s ultra-nationalist politicians and settler movement will pave the way for the outright annexation of much of the West Bank, ethnic cleansing and the destabilisation of the entire region. It would also further weaken the Arab states that play the Palestinian card for their own domestic purposes and with whom Israel is working covertly in Syria and against Iran.

This conflict over the two state solution was one of the factors underlying the prosecution of Olmert. He

became become increasingly isolated after his attempts to impose a deal on the Palestinians on Israel’s terms, and to reach some accommodation with Syria in a bid to secure an end to Syria’s close relationship with Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. His attempts to overcome this impasse via murderous wars against Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and then against Gaza in 2008-09 were political disasters that sealed his fate.

Netanyahu has called on the media to apologise for its campaign against him. His office claimed that his opponents were mounting a witch-hunt, issuing a statement lambasting the media for “premature and politically motivated reports.”

It said, “Try replacing the Prime Minister at the ballot box—as is customary in a democracy.”

Netanyahu’s supporters are seeking to introduce a bill that would make it impossible to investigate a sitting prime minister for fraud, bribery and breach of trust, although it is difficult to see how this could be applied retrospectively even if passed.

Israel’s bourgeois “left” and “centrist” parties have responded decidedly timorously. Isaac Herzog, the leader of the Zionist Union, formerly the Labour Party, said merely that it was “a tough day for Israel when a prime minister is under investigation” and “We are not expressing satisfaction at another’s misfortune.”

Yair Lapid, the leader of Yesh Atid, which is ahead of the Likud Party in opinion polls, said, “The presumption of innocence applies to every Israeli, including the prime minister.” He called for a speedy investigation, saying, “A person who is being investigated is a person under pressure.”

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