

# Former Israeli Premier Olmert sentenced to jail

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Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert has received an eight-month jail sentence for fraud and breach of trust for actions taken when he was trade and industry minister in the early 2000s.

He also received an eight-month suspended sentence and a \$26,000 fine. This is in addition to a six-year prison term for bribery in relation to another unrelated case, related to the Holyland development project in Jerusalem, which he is currently appealing.

If Olmert's appeals are unsuccessful, he will be the first former Israeli Premier to be jailed.

The sentences highlight the pervasive and systemic corruption at the heart of Israeli state institutions. Olmert, a long-time member of the Likud Party, served as a cabinet minister in the 1980s and the mayor of Jerusalem between 1993 and 2003. He 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.

Far from being a man of peace who came close to reaching a deal with the Palestinians, as he likes to claim, Olmert launched criminal and murderous wars on Lebanon and Gaza in 2006, imposed an illegal blockade on Gaza that continues to this day, and mounted a further military assault on Gaza in 2008-2009.

He remained in office until 2009, when he was forced to resign due to indictment for fraud in a case arising out of the Rishon Tours scandal that had occurred some years earlier. He was acquitted in 2012 but received a \$19,000 fine and a suspended jail sentence for a breach of trust.

New evidence came to light during the Holyland trial that led Judge David Rozen to agree to a plea bargain with Olmert's former secretary and confidante, Shula

Zaken, for her involvement in a series of graft scandals surrounding Olmert. In exchange for a light prison sentence, she handed over diary entries and tape recordings of conversations with Olmert about illicitly receiving cash-stuffed envelopes from US businessman Morris Talansky when Olmert was mayor of Jerusalem and a cabinet minister.

The tapes reveal that Olmert told Zaken not to testify in the first trial so she would not incriminate him. Last March, the retrial revealed that Olmert had given Zaken some of the money to ensure her silence in the first trial, while keeping the rest for his own personal use without reporting it in violation of the law.

Olmert drafted his cronies, including former British prime minister Tony Blair and former Israeli Mossad chief Meir Dagan, as character witnesses, but to no avail. He was found guilty of illicitly receiving money, as well as charges of fraud and breach of trust.

Olmert's name has long been synonymous with bribery and corruption scandals, including the events surrounding a ministry-run Investment Centre, the Talansky, Rishon Tours, Bank Leumi, and Cremieux Street affairs, and improper political appointments, with other bribery charges still under investigation. But he is only one of a long line of Israeli politicians in all the main political parties, going right to the top, who have been tainted, if not convicted, by corruption and other charges.

All Israel's prime ministers after the first, David Ben Gurion, including the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, have been linked to corruption, although none of the allegations have resulted in jail sentences. In Ariel Sharon's case, he had the good fortune to become incapacitated before any convictions.

Some of the most notorious cases that resulted in guilty verdicts include:

\* President Moshe Katsav was forced to resign to face charges of rape. He is serving a seven-year prison sentence after being found guilty of obstructing justice.

\* Aryeh Deri, the leader of the Shas Party, was convicted of bribery while serving as interior minister and given a three-year jail sentence. He went on to resume the leadership of the party until last December.

\* Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson received a five-year jail sentence and a 450,000-shekel fine for embezzling millions from the Histadrut Labour Federation while he was its chairman.

\* Justice Minister Haim Ramon was convicted of sexual assault for forcibly kissing a young soldier in the prime minister's office and sentenced to community service.

\* Shas legislator Shlomo Benizri was found guilty of accepting bribes, with his sentence 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.

At least 12 legislators have also been found guilty of serious crimes.

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Last December, the police announced that they were investigating 30 public figures and politicians in a major corruption case relating to nepotism and the illegal transfer of funds. A number were from Avigdor Lieberman's far-right Yisrael Beiteinu Party, including Faina Kirshenbaum, the former deputy interior minister, and her daughter, Ronit. As a result of the scandal, Yisrael Beiteinu won just 6 seats in the March elections, down from 15 in 2009.

Others arrested include the former presidents of the basketball and handball federations and several officials in charge of settlement operations in the West Bank and Golan Heights.

In April, one of the most serious public corruption cases in Israel came to light, involving Ruth David, a former Tel Aviv district prosecutor, senior police officers and Ronel Fisher, a top lawyer. The case involves the alleged systematic bribery of police officers to secure inside information on cases under investigation.

According to the OECD's index of global corruption, Israel is consistently ranked in the bottom half of its 34

member countries, coming 24th in 2014. Last year, Israel stood 37th in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index, behind the United Arab Emirates (25) and Qatar (26). In both cases, this represented a fall of one place from the previous year.

Rampant corruption and criminality in Israel have become the norm, as politicians seek both personal gain and political power for themselves and their sponsors. Israel's financial elite dominates much of Israel's economy based on vast speculation, plunder and the upward redistribution of wealth through the impoverishment of the great majority of Israeli and Palestinian working people. This financial oligarchy controls all the levers of power—the media, courts, the police and the army—while the politicians are their bought and paid hirelings.

That some at least of these politicians are now being prosecuted and convicted testifies not to the pursuit of justice, but rather to the venomous relations that prevail within Israel's ruling circles.

The corruption that Olmert epitomises is a symptom of the decay of Israeli democracy, which never even in principle encompassed the entire population, most notably Israel's own Palestinian citizens and Palestinians living outside Israel's internationally recognised borders.

In the final analysis, democracy is incompatible with the increasing pauperisation of working people, both Israeli and Palestinian, and the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people.

None of this goes unnoticed, in Israel or elsewhere. Last year, Transparency International reported a survey showing that nearly three quarters of Israelis believe the government is 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.



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