

Netanyahu to face charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust

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Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced on Thursday his decision to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in connection with three separate cases on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, pending a hearing at which Netanyahu can challenge the charges.

The indictment announcement, following three years of deliberations over recommendations to prosecute by numerous authorities, comes just 40 days before the general election set for April 9. It centers on Netanyahu's dealings with businessmen to whom he allegedly granted regulatory concessions in return for lavish gifts or favorable news coverage.

If the hearing, likely to be held after the election, rejects his challenge, Netanyahu, who has held the premiership since 2009 and before that from 1996 to 1999, will become the first sitting prime minister to be indicted.

While being the subject of a criminal investigation does not require Netanyahu to resign, it puts him under pressure to do so and seems likely to alter the course of the election, in which his Likud Party had been expected to win the largest number of seats in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset.

The indictment announcement comes in the context of mounting tensions and divisions within the Israeli political establishment exacerbated by Netanyahu's increasingly pronounced far-right orientation, including the cultivation of neo-fascist forces both within Israel and internationally.

Facing an unexpectedly serious electoral challenge from former army chief Benny Gantz in the April 9 vote, Netanyahu last week engineered a deal to shore up his right-wing coalition by merging the fascist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party with the more established right-wing party of religious Zionists,

Jewish Home. This effectively legitimized an organization that traces its roots to the long-outlawed Kach party of Meir Kahane. That party was declared a terrorist organization by the United States.

Like Kach, Otzma Yehudit encourages violence against Palestinians, calls for the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories, and advocates a ban on intermarriage or sex between Jews and Arabs. With its merger with Jewish Home, this organization could win seats in the Knesset and possibly become part of the next government.

The two leaders of Otzma Yehudit who could win parliamentary seats—Michael Ben Ari and Itamar Ben Gvir—are cofounders of a group that was implicated in a 2014 arson attack on a school for Jewish and Arab children in Jerusalem. Ben Ari was denied a visa to the US in 2012 as a member of a terrorist organization.

Ben Gvir has acknowledged having a picture in his home of Baruch Goldstein, the Kahane supporter who murdered 29 Palestinians at a mosque in Hebron in 1994.

Netanyahu's electoral alliance with outright fascists has sparked outrage and revulsion within Israel as well as among Jews in the United States. Even elements within the Israeli religious right are likening the politics of Otzma Yehudit to the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws. Last week, influential sections of the Israel lobby in the US that have generally supported Netanyahu, including the American Jewish Committee and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), issued denunciations of Netanyahu's inclusion of Otzma Yehudit in his electoral bloc.

The decision to indict thus takes place under conditions of growing concerns within the Israeli ruling elite and state that the far-right policies of Netanyahu are alienating Jews outside the country and

destabilizing the Zionist regime internally. Israel is among the most economically unequal advanced economies in the world and has the highest poverty rate of any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It has seen a growing wave of working class strikes and protests.

Last July, there were protests within Israel over the passage of the “Nation-State Law,” which enshrined Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state.

At the same time, Netanyahu has solidarized the Israeli government with far-right and neo-fascist forces and leaders around the world, including Viktor Orban of Hungary, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Sebastian Kurz of Austria, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and, of course, Donald Trump in the US.

None of this, it should be noted, has deterred the corporate media and political establishment in Britain, France, Germany and other countries from prosecuting their fraudulent campaign against “left-wing anti-Semitism,” targeting those who criticize the Israeli state’s oppression of the Palestinians.

Speaking at a press conference in Hanoi, where he was meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Trump declared his support for Netanyahu in advance of the Israeli attorney general’s announcement, saying he “has done a great job as prime minister.”

Netanyahu joins a long line of Israeli politicians who have faced corruption and other charges. His immediate predecessor, Ehud Olmert, received a six-year jail term for bribery offences when he was mayor of Jerusalem prior to becoming prime minister. Olmert’s predecessor, Ariel Sharon, had the good fortune to become incapacitated before charges against him could be proved. Sharon’s predecessor, Ehud Barak, became extraordinarily rich after he left office in 2001.

Netanyahu’s wife, Sara, is the defendant in a trial, stalled since last October, on charges of aggravated fraud and breach of trust for allowing staff at the prime minister’s residence to order \$100,000 worth of meals from restaurants between 2010 and 2013.

Of the three cases for which Mandelbit is recommending that Netanyahu be indicted, the most important is the Bezeq affair, known as Case 4000, which relates to allegations that the telecom billionaire Shaul Elovitch gave Netanyahu flattering coverage on his *Walla* news website in exchange for regulatory

favours.

Speaking on television, Netanyahu denied the charges and said they would collapse “like a house of cards.” He boasted that he intended to continue as prime minister “for many more years.”

Leading members of Likud, while publicly remaining supportive and calling the charges “political persecution,” have been lining up to put themselves in contest for the leadership position, with his long-time rival and former aide Gideon Saar coming third in the Likud primaries.

According to a poll by the *Times of Israel* conducted before Mandelbit’s announcement, the decision to go ahead with a prosecution would have a major impact on the election, giving his chief rival, former Israel Defence Forces Chief of Staff Gantz, a decisive lead, with 44 seats in the 120-seat Knesset against Likud’s 25.

The indictment announcement also takes place in the immediate aftermath of the release of the report by the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Israel’s actions against the Palestinians in Gaza during the protests that started on March 30, 2018. The panel declared: “Israeli soldiers committed violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Some of those violations may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.”



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