



Israeli Prosecutors File an Amended Indictment Laying Out Detailed Charges in the Netanyahu Criminal Corruption Case

Earlier this week, Israeli prosecutors filed an amended indictment highlighting detailed charges against embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the criminal corruption case against him. Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust, and accepting bribes in multiple different corruption cases. Responding to a request from Netanyahu's lawyers for additional information, the prosecutors released a letter outlining hundreds of incidents of criminal behavior including efforts to influence the type of media coverage for Netanyahu and his rivals in exchange for bribes. The prime minister is accused of trading favors with an influential media mogul to promote positive coverage of himself and conversely, negative coverage of his political opponents. Netanyahu's trial began last year and is slated to resume next month in February 2021, with several former close associates expected to testify against him. While previous top Israeli officials have been criminally convicted after leaving office, Netanyahu is the first sitting prime minister to be charged and tried in court.

Last month in December 2020, the Jerusalem District Court rejected a motion by Netanyahu's attorneys to cancel the criminal charges against him and instead ordered prosecutors to amend the indictment and add further details in one of the three cases. In their ruling, the judges instructed them to clearly distinguish the prime minister from his family members in the hundreds of incidents of improper behavior alleged against Netanyahu, his wife, and his son. That way, there would be no confusion as to which individual made the demands in each instance and whether or not the prime minister was aware of the requests or involved in them. In total, the prosecutors found that Netanyahu was directly a part of at least half of the demands for favorable media reporting and that he was also apprised of the fact that his family members were making repeated editorial requests as well.

The most serious charge against Netanyahu alleges that he promoted substantial regulations to benefit the owner of the Bezeq telecom company in exchange for positive coverage on its popular news site. This included giving more prominence to favorable articles about the prime minister, changing headlines, removing unfavorable stories, and requests for negative coverage of Netanyahu's political rivals. In one particular instance, Netanyahu ordered that the site cut a live broadcast of a rally by his opponents during the 2015 election campaign. Another one alleges that the prime minister pressured a shareholder with the media company to publish disparaging articles about the wife of a political adversary.

In addition to the ongoing criminal corruption trial, Netanyahu is also dealing with an impending political crisis, with Israel set to hold its fourth national election over the span of two years in March 2021. Netanyahu's fragile coalition government with Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz recently failed to pass a national budget in the Knesset, leading to the parliament's dissolution and the triggering of a new election. Some experts contend that Netanyahu may have been seeking new elections in an effort to remain in power beyond his current term and strengthen his political standing during the midst of the trial. After struggling to win another outright term in three successive elections, Netanyahu managed to form a power-sharing government with Gantz which outlines that the latter will take over as prime minister in November 2021. Therefore, Netanyahu is likely keen on a fresh round of elections as opposed to having Gantz take the reins later on this year.

It remains to be seen how the new elections will turn out, but this apparent strategy could be a dangerous one if Netanyahu loses his grip on power while continuing to face very serious criminal charges.