



### [The Criminal Corruption Trial Against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Resumes](#)

The high-profile criminal corruption trial against sitting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resumed this week, a mere month and a half before yet another national election on March 23rd – Israel’s fourth election in two years. Netanyahu briefly appeared in a Jerusalem courtroom on Monday to formally respond to the charges. He faces three different cases related to fraud, breach of trust, and bribery, including: seeking regulatory benefits for media tycoons in exchange for positive coverage, colluding with them to publish favorable stories about him while smearing his political opponents, and accepting lavish gifts from supporters. During the proceedings, chants from dozens of anti-Netanyahu demonstrators gathered outside the building could be heard inside the courtroom. Many have been protesting for months, calling on him to resign over the serious nature of the criminal charges. Over the past two years, Israel has been immersed in a major political crisis whereby attempts to form a coalition government have repeatedly broken down, resulting in the upcoming March election.

Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, a scheduled hearing last month was postponed because of the current lockdown in Israel. Netanyahu has served as prime minister since 2009 and his government faces heavy criticism for a multitude of reasons, including both the response to the health crisis and the criminal charges. The country is only now starting to emerge from its third nationwide lockdown, and the closures have sent unemployment skyrocketing. An emergency coalition government was formed last May to combat the coronavirus outbreak, but leaders have struggled to enact consistent policies and have repeatedly accused each other of playing politics with the pandemic.

As a result, the Knesset voted to dissolve itself back in December, triggering the fourth national election in a period of only two years. Polls appear to show Netanyahu’s Likud Party winning the most seats but struggling to form a 61-seat majority coalition in the Knesset. The margin of victory could be extremely tight, potentially opening the door for a smaller fringe party to ultimately play a significant role in deciding who heads the next government.

Israeli law requires Cabinet ministers to resign when charged with criminal offenses, however it does not explicitly address the circumstances surrounding if a prime minister has a case and is facing conviction. While Netanyahu is not the first Israeli prime minister to be criminally charged, he is the first to do so while still serving in office. Thus, his current trial is unprecedented and a situation that the country’s government has never had to endure before. The bribery charges against Netanyahu carry a jail sentence of up to 10 years and/or a fine, and the fraud and breach of trust charges carry a sentence of up to 3 years. For his part, Netanyahu has denied the allegations against him and claimed that the charges are part of a politically-motivated “witch hunt” by his rivals to help them win the upcoming election. However, the array of substantiated evidence and seriousness of the charges would suggest otherwise and could mean that Israel is in a state of political crisis for the foreseeable future, particularly if Netanyahu remains in power after the impending round of elections.