



## The Evidentiary Phase of the Criminal Corruption Trial Against Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu Begins

Earlier this week, the evidentiary phase of the criminal corruption trial against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began with the first wave of witness testimony. Prosecutors laid out the ways in which the incumbent prime minister used his political power to secure favors in an effort to ensure the continuation of his rule and promote his personal interests. They also detailed how the criminal indictments were based on both concrete and circumstantial evidence that will ultimately prove his guilt. The ongoing trial coincides with Netanyahu's involvement in coalition deliberations, as he has been tasked with trying to form a new government despite the slim prospects of doing so after yet another recent inconclusive election and the credible nature of the criminal charges against him. Thus, analysts point to the multilayered governmental crisis that is currently taking place with a sitting premier facing serious legal challenges while political gridlock also looks set to continue with a potential fifth nationwide election in a span of just over two years appearing likely in the coming months.

One of the key witnesses to take the stand for the prosecution this week was Ilan Yeshua, the former CEO of the Walla news website. During his testimony, Yeshua described how he was instructed by Netanyahu allies and his superiors to skew the site in a manner which bolstered positive news coverage of the prime minister while at the same time denigrating his main political rivals. All told, Yeshua expressed his belief that the actions were part of a quid pro quo deal between Netanyahu and the site's owners whereby both parties benefited from the corrupt arrangement. In the three extensive criminal corruption cases against him – referred to as Case 1000, Case 2000, and Case 4000 respectively – Netanyahu is accused of an array of improper behavior including eliciting bribes to garner positive news coverage from media moguls in exchange for promoting regulatory agreements in their favor, accepting lavish gifts, and attempting to push legislation weakening the rival news outlets of deal co-conspirators. Yeshua is the first of an expected hundreds of witnesses who will testify during the course of the embattled prime minister's trial, which experts project could take years.

While its incumbent prime minister battles very serious criminal charges, Israel is also faced with a longstanding political stalemate which has compounded the ongoing governmental crisis and resulted in four consecutive inconclusive elections over the past two years. The most recent took place just a couple of weeks ago in late March as neither Netanyahu and his allies nor opponents in the anti-Netanyahu bloc were able to secure the number of parliamentary seats needed for an outright majority in Israel's Knesset, giving slim hopes to the chances of successful deliberations regarding a new coalition government. Despite the criminal corruption trial, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has tasked Netanyahu with the first opportunity to form a new government. If Netanyahu is unable to do so over the next 28-42 days, another political figure may be asked to try. In the end, if both fail to accomplish the monumental task, then Israel will be headed towards an unprecedented fifth straight election to try and break the deadlock – a prospect that is dreaded by lawmakers and citizens alike.

Observers note that this week's developments see the convergence of Israel's legal and political crises, with the beginning of the evidentiary phase of the Netanyahu trial taking place at a time when post-election coalition talks involving the criminally-indicted prime minister have also commenced. It is anticipated that these two predicaments will continue to plague the governmental apparatus in Israel for the foreseeable future.