



## **Netanyahu Indicted on Charges of Fraud, Bribery and Breach of Trust**

The first prosecution of a sitting Israeli premier deepens the political paralysis in a country that has had two inconclusive elections this year, and may be headed to a third vote.

JERUSALEM — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was indicted Thursday on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in a set of long-running corruption cases, throwing his political future into doubt and heightening the uncertainty and chaos surrounding Israel's fitful, yearlong struggle to choose its next leader.

Mr. Netanyahu, 70, who in July became the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history, now also has the distinction of being the first to be indicted while in office.

The cases against Mr. Netanyahu involve allegations of giving or offering lucrative official favors to several media tycoons in exchange for favorable news coverage or gifts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.



*Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announces the indictment: "No one is above the law."*

The indictment threatened to open a dangerous new challenge to Israel's democracy, as the nation's top prosecutor and its premier accused each another of subverting the rule of law.

"The public interest requires that we live in a country where no one is above the law," Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said in a televised evening news conference.



In a defiant speech an hour later, Mr. Netanyahu insisted that the case against him was built on lies and political animus. He declared that it was the police and prosecutors who should be called to account, urging Israel's citizens to "investigate the investigators."

By turns fiery and maudlin, he told Israelis that they were "witnessing an attempted coup."

"I will not allow lies to prevail," he vowed. "I will continue to lead this country."

Mr. Netanyahu is not legally required to step down. But with Israel's political system already in uncharted territory, having failed to settle upon a new prime minister despite two elections and three attempts at forming a government since April, the criminal case against him could make it far more difficult for him to retain power.



After his chief rival, Benny Gantz of the centrist Blue and White party, failed to form a government by the Wednesday deadline, that task shifted to Parliament. If no lawmaker is successful in assembling a 61-seat majority over the next three weeks, a third round of elections will be called.

While Mr. Netanyahu has maintained strong support from his political base so far, polls have shown that a formal indictment would change many minds, including among many right-wing voters.

"We've seen consistently that a big majority of the public, about two-thirds, do not think a prime minister can serve and at the same time try to clear his name in court," said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute. In an October survey by the institute, nearly half of right-wing voters concurred. There were already signs of unrest in Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, as a popular younger lawmaker, Gideon Saar, called Thursday for a primary contest for prime minister, and said he would be a contender. Even if Mr. Netanyahu fends off intraparty challengers, and assembles a viable coalition in Parliament, Mr. Plesner said that the Israeli president, Reuven Rivlin, might balk at assigning him the task of forming a government while he awaits trial.

In addition, critics are expected to petition the Supreme Court to rule that Mr. Netanyahu must step down.



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