

Ynet-News-Nov-21 - Thursday

11.21.19

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11.21.19

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11.21.19

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11.21.19

Rivlin hands mandate to form government to Knesset, slams 'miserable political situation'

11.21.19 – Th - - - News Placed in Nov 22 spot – Friday

Dutch parliament halts EU aid to PA over aid payments to jailed terrorist families

11.21.19

Netanyahu calls decision to indict him an 'attempted coup'

11.21.19

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11.21.19

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Give and Take': The charges against Netanyahu

The 70-year-old prime minister denies all wrongdoing, but he now faces a legal process that could drag on for years, leading a nation in political deadlock after two inconclusive elections in six months and another one seeming likely

Reuters| Updated: 11.21.19 , 21:54

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was indicted on corruption charges on Thursday, throwing him into a legal limbo and driving the country deeper into political crisis.

Benjamin Netanyahu speaking after AG Avichai Mandelblit announced he is indicting the prime minister for corruption (Photo: Prime Minister's Residence)
Netanyahu, 70, **denies all wrongdoing**. But he now faces a legal process that could drag on for years, leading a nation in political deadlock after two inconclusive elections this year.

Here is a guide to the criminal cases against him: What are the allegations?
Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit announced that he has filed criminal charges against Netanyahu in investigations **listed as cases 1000, 2000 and 4000**.

A **protest against Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem after charges** were announced Thursday. The **banner in red reads: Parting from Netanyahu**

CASE 1000 centers on allegations that Netanyahu and his wife Sara wrongfully **received** almost 700,000 shekels (about **\$200,000**) **worth of gifts** from Arnon Milchan, a prominent Hollywood producer and Israeli citizen, and Australian billionaire businessman James Packer.

Prosecutors described a **"supply-line" of gifts** including champagne and cigars. According to the indictment, Netanyahu used his role in public office **to help Milchan with his business interests**.

"With these actions the defendant Netanyahu carried out acts of breach of trust that gravely hurt public trust and clean conduct," the indictment said.
He has been **charged with fraud and breach of trust**.

CASE 2000 alleges that **Netanyahu negotiated a deal with Arnon Mozes**, owner of Israel's best-selling daily newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, for better coverage. Ynet and **Ynetnews are part of the Yedioth Ahronoth group**.

In return, prosecutors say, the prime minister **offered legislation that would slow** the growth of a **rival daily newspaper**. In this case Netanyahu has been **charged with fraud and breach of trust** and Mozes has been charged with offering a bribe. Mozes too denies wrongdoing.

"By using his stature and power of office in order to receive favors and by being the most senior publicly elected official, he conveyed a message according to which offers of bribery are a means that can be used in order to further the mutual interests of senior public officials and business people and that there is nothing wrong with bribery," the indictment said. Arnon Mozes

CASE 4000, the most serious of the three, alleges that Netanyahu **granted a series of regulatory favors worth** around 1.8 billion shekels (about **\$500 million**) to Israel's leading telecommunications company, Bezeq Telecom Israel.

In return, prosecutors say, he **sought positive coverage of him and his wife on a news website controlled by the company's former chairman**, Shaul Elovitch. According to the indictment, Netanyahu maintained a "give and take" relationship with Elovitch and his wife, Iris.

Netanyahu has been charged with bribery, as well as fraud and breach of trust, in this case. Elovitch and his wife, Iris, have been charged with bribery and obstruction of justice. The couple denies wrongdoing. Shaul and Iris Elovich

What does Netanyahu say?

Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing and says he is the victim of a politically orchestrated “witch hunt” by the media and the left to oust him from office.

Loyalists in Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud Party have accused the justice system of bias, and Netanyahu has argued that receiving gifts from friends was not against the law.

His legal team says criminal probes into the relations between politicians and the news media would be a threat to a free press, a central pillar of any democracy.

Will a trial begin soon?

Unlikely. It could take many months before the cases are brought before the court.

Netanyahu could also seek a plea deal rather than stand trial.

Netanyahu’s allies in parliament have said they would push to grant him parliamentary immunity from prosecution. But with Israeli politics in unprecedented turmoil, it is unclear whether such a move is even possible.

Could he go to jail, if convicted?

Bribery charges carry a sentence of up to 10 years in jail and/or a fine. Fraud and breach of trust carry a prison sentence of up to three years.

Will there be political fallout?

Netanyahu has dominated Israeli politics for more than a decade. But both he and his main centrist rival Benny Gantz of the Blue and White party have failed to form a government after two elections, in April and September, leaving the country in political and economic stasis.

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz

If there is no political breakthrough in the next 21 days, Israel will face yet another election, which few want.

If he is still in office as prime minister after that, Netanyahu would be under no strict legal obligation to quit. According to Israeli law, a prime minister must step down if ultimately convicted, but can stay in office throughout legal proceedings, including appeals.

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Attorney general Mandelblit forced to charge Netanyahu on suspicions of corruption Thursday

11.21.19

Mandelblit: I made decision to indict Netanyahu with heavy heart

Attorney general rejects claims move to prosecute was politically motivated, says a day when the AG 'decides on an indictment against a prime minister for serious crimes is a difficult and sad day for the Israeli public'

Yael Freidson, Gilad Morag, Agencies | Updated: 11.21.19 , 20:55

The decision to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for bribery, fraud and breach of was a heavy-hearted one, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said Thursday, after announcing that he would bring charges in the three corruption investigations into the veteran politician who has led the country for more than a decade.

"This is a difficult and sad day," Mandelblit told reporters. "Today, I informed the Prime Minister's Office of my decision to indict him on three counts. A day when the attorney general decides on an indictment against a prime minister for serious crimes is a difficult and sad day for the public in Israel - and for me personally."

Mandelblit previously served as Netanyahu's cabinet secretary.

"All of Israel's citizens, including myself, look up to our elected officials and foremost the prime minister, and view them as our democratically elected leaders," he said.

Supporters of the PM protest in Jerusalem after AG Mandelblit announces his decision to indict him. The poster reads: We are all Netanyahu

"Prime Minister Netanyahu is a privileged man. I have been privileged to work beside him and to see his many talents and abilities as prime minister. I made the decision to indict him with a heavy heart, but wholeheartedly."

"From a deep sense of commitment to the rule of law, to the public interest and to the citizens of Israel, law enforcement is not a choice," he said.

He rejected suggestions that the indictment was politically motivated.

"It's not a matter of right or left, it's not a matter of politics," he said.

"This is a duty bestowed upon us, and on me personally. It is my duty to the citizens of the state in which public interest demands that they live in a country where no one is above the law, a country where suspicions of corruption are probed and investigated for the sake of discovering the truth and exacting the law where required," he said.

AG Avichai Mandelblit in his office in Jerusalem on Thursday evening (Photo: Kikar HaShabbat)

"This is the most fundamental meaning of the rule of law in a democratic state. For this very reason, today is a difficult day, but also an important one," Mandelblit said.

He also angrily criticized pressure campaigns by both Netanyahu's supporters and opponents to sway his decision, which came after months of deliberations.

Netanyahu has called the corruption charges a witch hunt and repeatedly lashed out at police and prosecutors throughout the investigation.

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AG indicts Netanyahu for bribery, fraud and breach of trust

Avichai Mandelblit charged PM with bribery in Case 4000; fraud and breach of trust in Cases 1000 and 2000; Shaul Elovich and Arnon Moses have also been indicted in Cases 4000 and 2000 respectively; this is the first time in Israel's history a sitting PM faces criminal trial

Ynet, Agencies|Published: 11.21.19 , 18:23

The attorney general on Thursday charged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in all three corruption cases. Avichai Mandelblit decided to indict Israel's leader on charges which include bribery, fraud and breach of trust. It is the first time in the nation's history a sitting premier faces a criminal trial. Shaul Elovich and Arnon Moses are also indicted in Cases 4000 and 2000 respectively.

The charges is a heavy blow to Netanyahu's hopes to remain in office although he is not required to resign. Netanyahu has called the allegations part of a witch hunt, lashing out against the media, police, prosecutors and the justice system.

According to the indictment, Netanyahu accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars of champagne and cigars from billionaire friends, offered to trade favors with a newspaper publisher and used his influence to help a wealthy telecom magnate in exchange for favorable coverage on a popular news site.

The most serious charges were connected to so-called Case 4000 and include bribery, fraud and breach of trust. In the case Netanyahu is accused of passing regulations that gave his friend, telecom magnate Shaul Elovitch, benefits worth over \$250 million to his company Bezeq. In return, Bezeq's news site, Walla, published favorable articles about Netanyahu and his family. Shaul Elovitch and his wife Iris have also been charged with bribery by the attorney general.

In Case 2000, in which Netanyahu and Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet owner Arnon Mozes allegedly discussed mutual assistance to promote one another's interests during private meetings that began in 2009 and lasted for several years, Netanyahu is charged with fraud and breach of trust. Mozes has been charged with bribery over the affair.

Charges of fraud and breach of trust also signify Case 1000, in which Netanyahu's gifts of champagne from billionaires Arnon Milchan and James Packer turned into a sort of supply line. The indictment said Netanyahu assisted the Israeli Milchan, a Hollywood

mogul, in extending his U.S. visa. It was not immediately clear what, if anything, Packer received in return.

The decision comes at a tumultuous time for the country. After an inconclusive election in September, both Netanyahu and his chief rival, Benny Gantz, have failed to form a majority coalition in parliament. It is the first time in the nation's history that that has happened.

It is unlikely that a trial will start any time soon. It could take many months before the cases are brought before the court. Netanyahu could also seek a plea deal rather than stand trial.

Netanyahu's allies in parliament, the Knesset, have said they would push to grant him parliamentary immunity from prosecution. But with Israeli politics in unprecedented turmoil, it is unclear whether such a move is even possible.

The decision comes at a tumultuous time for the country. After an inconclusive election in September, both Netanyahu and his chief rival, Benny Gantz, have failed to form a majority coalition in parliament.

What are the investigations?

Case 1000

The investigation into the case, known as the "illicit gift affair" found there was an alleged organized system, which operated for about a decade, with Netanyahu and his family demanding and then receiving gifts from Michlan and Packer worth a total of some NIS 1 million (\$200,000).

In return for the gifts, Netanyahu allegedly used his position to influence government policy for the betterment of his associates, particularly Milchan.

Tax benefits: One such favor was the premier's invested interest in extending tax benefits for returning residents to over 10 years, something the police estimated would have saved Milchan millions of dollars. Finance Ministry officials rejected the proposal, saying it was contrary to the public interest, because fewer taxes would be collected.

US visa: Netanyahu is also suspected of working to aid Milchan renew his visa to the US. The prime minister allegedly turned to then-US Secretary of State John Kerry, then-US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro and Israel's Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer, asking for their help in extending Milchan's visa.

Channel 2 merger: The prime minister allegedly worked to promote the merger of the two TV networks that shared Channel 2 (now Channel 12) Keshet and Reshet, which Milchan sought to run, in addition to owning shares in commercial competitor, Channel 10 (which Channel 12 has since acquired).

"Communications Ministry Director-General Shlomo Filber intervened and acted on behalf of Netanyahu in order to advance Milchan's affairs. In return, the prime minister was promised sympathetic coverage (from Channels 2 and 10)," police said.

The Tata project: According to the police, the most glaring example of Netanyahu working against Israel's interests to benefit Milchan was his efforts promote a free trade zone on the Israel-Jordan border, a project Milchan sought to promote as part of his partnership with Indian industrialist Ratan Naval Tata.

The project, which police noted went against the recommendations of the defense establishment, would have generated Milchan and Tata "a huge profit," but ended up being scrapped because it would've cost the state an unreasonable amount in security expenses.

Channel 10: Netanyahu allegedly acted in violation of the law when he handled the affairs of Channel 10, despite knowing his friend Milchan owned shares in the channel.

Case 2000

Police say that Netanyahu and Yedioth Ahronoth/Ynet owner and publisher Arnon Mozes discussed mutual assistance to promote one another's interests during private meetings that began in 2009 and lasted for several years.

As part of these talks, the two allegedly discussed the possibility of Mozes helping Netanyahu secure his position as prime minister through positive and favorable coverage in Yedioth Ahronoth. In return, the prime minister would aid Mozes to promote Yedioth's financial interests by initiating and supporting moves to weaken rival newspaper Israel Hayom.

The investigation further found Netanyahu and Mozes took actual steps to promote each other's interests as part of the understandings reached between them, "or at the very least made it appear to the other they were doing so," police noted.

Among the steps Netanyahu allegedly took to aid Mozes were: his support of a bill to prevent the free distribution of newspapers, dubbed the "Israel Hayom bill" as the daily is handed out for free; his efforts to reduce Israel Hayom's distribution; and his efforts to cancel the paper's weekend edition.

In addition, Netanyahu, the minister of communications at the time, allegedly mediated between Mozes and potential buyers for Yedioth Ahronoth.

The police investigation was based on two recordings made at Netanyahu's behest and without Mozes' knowledge. The recordings document meetings between Netanyahu and Mozes at the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem and were recorded by his then-chief of staff Ari Harow on his cellphone. Harow has turned state's witness.

Both Netanyahu and Mozes told that they did not truly intend to promote the matters discussed in their talks.

Case 4000

This case, which is also known as the "Walla!-Bezeq affair," is considered by police and the Israel Securities Authority as the gravest of the three cases. Two of Netanyahu's top confidants - former Communications Ministry director-general Shlomo Filber and former media advisor Nir Hefetz - have turned state's witness and are believed to have provided police with incriminating evidence.

Netanyahu is suspected of taking bribes and acting in a conflict of interest by promoting regulations worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Bezeq and its then-majority shareholder Shaul Elovitch, including Bezeq's merger with the satellite TV company Yes. In return, the prime minister allegedly demanded - both directly and indirectly - to receive favorable coverage on Walla! News, which is owned by Bezeq.

According to the police investigation, from 2012 to 2017 the prime minister and his associates "blatantly intervened" on a near-daily basis in the Walla! News site, using the connections with Elovitch and his wife Iris to influence appointments there and to promote flattering articles and pictures while quelling critical stories of the prime minister and his family.

Police also said the Elovitches influenced the content published on Walla! News in return for regulatory decisions made by Netanyahu, which benefitted Shaul Elovitch and the Bezeq company.

Elovitch and his wife Iris are also suspected of giving bribes, obstruction of justice and money laundering. In addition, Stella Handler, the former CEO of Bezeq, and Amikam Shorer, the former chief strategy and corporate development Officer at Bezeq, could also face charges.

Arnon Mozes is the publisher and owner of Yedioth Ahronoth Group, which includes Ynet and Ynetnews.

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AG set to announce decision on Netanyahu indictments

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PM faces charges of fraud and breach of trust in two investigations and more serious charges of bribery in a third case; Netanyahu takes to Twitter to defend alleged attempts to improve his media profile via quid pro quo deals

Ynet,i24News| Updated: 11.21.19 , 17:05

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit will announce on Thursday evening if he intends to recommend charges against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in three corruption cases, the Justice Ministry said in a statement. Israel's leader has denied any wrongdoing. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, during his stint as cabinet secretary
Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, during his stint as cabinet secretary (Photo: Marc Israel Sellem)
Netanyahu could be charged with fraud and breach of trust in Case 1000, in which he and his family are suspected of receiving illicit gifts from wealthy donors. He also faces charges in Case 4000, in which he stands accused of a quid pro quo arrangement that saw him provide regulatory benefits in exchange for positive news coverage.

The case - also known as the "Walla!-Bezeq affair" - is considered by police and the Israel Securities Authority as the gravest of the three cases. Netanyahu is suspected of taking bribes and acting in a conflict of interest by promoting regulations worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Bezeq and its then-majority shareholder Shaul Elovitch, including Bezeq's merger with the satellite TV company Yes. In return, the prime minister allegedly demanded—both directly and indirectly—to receive favorable coverage on Walla! News, which is owned by Bezeq.

In third investigation, known as Case 2000, Netanyahu and Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet owner Arnon Mozes allegedly discussed mutual assistance to promote one another's interests during private meetings that began in 2009 and lasted for several years. As part of these talks, the two allegedly discussed the possibility of Mozes helping Netanyahu secure his position as prime minister through positive and favorable coverage in Yedioth Ahronoth. In return, the prime minister would aid Mozes to promote Yedioth's financial interests by initiating and supporting moves to weaken rival newspaper Israel Hayom.

Netanyahu took to Twitter early Thursday to argue that equating positive news coverage with a form of bribery would “remove Israel from the advanced countries that advocate freedom of expression and the press.”
Mandelblit announced earlier this year that he intended to charge Netanyahu with fraud and breach of trust in all three of the pending cases as well as bribery in Case 4000. Other reports circulated suggesting the attorney general will announce the charges early next week.

But even if Netanyahu is indicted, the announcement does not likely spell the end of the saga ensnaring him and the electorate, given that his supporters contend he need only step down should he be found guilty.

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Rivlin hands mandate to form government to Knesset, slams 'miserable political situation'

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Rivlin hands mandate to form government to Knesset, slams 'miserable political situation'

President lambastes politicians for failing to set aside own interests, calls for soul-searching and an end to 'politics of disruption,' says their professional fates no more important than the people they claim to represent

Ynet| Updated: 11.21.19 , 14:33

President Reuven Rivlin on Thursday handed back the mandate to form a government to the Knesset, lambasting both Blue and White leader Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud for failing to put together coalition in the wake of the Sept. 17 elections.

Gantz on Wednesday evening conceded that he was unable to form a government in the allotted time, after Netanyahu came to the same conclusion.

Appearing alongside Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein at the president's official residence in Jerusalem, Rivlin said that this is the first time Israel's leaders have been unable to form a government - even after an unprecedented two elections in six months - and called on politicians to set aside their own interests in the interests of the people they serve.

"Mr. Speaker, yesterday MK and former IDF Chief of Staff Benjamin Gantz informed me that he was unable to form a government," Rivlin said.

"Mr. Gantz is the second candidate who has tried and failed to form a government, after the outgoing prime minister Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu failed to form a government.

"This is the first time in the history of the State of Israel that we have got to this point. I would like to remind you that this miserable political situation comes after a second round of elections, forced on Israeli citizens after the 21st Knesset decided to dissolve itself.

"This means, according to law, that from today and for 21 days, the decision who will form the government is in the hands of the members of Knesset. And so I would like to turn to each and every member of Knesset. This is one of the most important times for soul-searching the State of Israel has known."

He also urged lawmakers to consider the people they are supposed to represent and what is best for them.

"At the opening of the 21st and the 22nd Knessets, I called on you to put down the cudgels of elections and to wipe the slate clean. I implored you to understand that political considerations can no longer be your only guide," he said.

"And that we do not just need a government that can rule, but also a sense of sovereignty, statehood and responsibility for this entire, dear people – all its tribes and sectors – living on its land, and which you lead," he said.

"Let there be no illusions: this politics of disruption has to stop. Your political fate is no more important than the old person in hospital, than the children in special education, than the victims of violence in the Arab sector, than the residents of the south – Jewish,

Arab, ultra-Orthodox and secular – who need protection from rocket fire, and than the women who need shelter.

"Over these next 21 days, do not be blocs or parties. Each one of you should look to their conscience and answer one question: 'What is my duty to the State of Israel?'"

With the failure of Netanyahu and Gantz, any lawmaker can now try to put together a coalition, requiring the support of 61 of the 120 lawmakers in the Knesset.

Should no govern

11.21.19

Dutch parliament halts EU aid to PA over aid payments to jailed terrorist families

11.21.19

Netherlands halts aid to PA over payments to terrorists

Dutch parliament issues statement expressing its objection to providing funding to Palestinian Authority when some is earmarked for prisoners in Israel 'who commit terrifying acts of murder'

i24NEWS, Ynet | Updated: 11.21.19 , 11:47

The Dutch parliament has voted to halt aid funds to the Palestinian Authority over its payments to terrorists jailed in Israel and their families.

The parliament issued a statement expressing its objection to providing ongoing funding to the PA when some of the aid was earmarked for terrorists "who commit terrifying acts of murder," the Israeli media said.

The move comes a day after the Dutch parliament passed a motion criticizing a recent European Union ruling that EU countries must identify products made in Israeli settlements on their labels.

The motion slams the EU decision as discriminatory against Israel and says that the same standards must be applied to other countries around the world.

New Right leader Ayelet Shaked praised the decision, writing on Twitter that, "It is very gratifying to see that increasing parts of Europe are sobering in their relations toward the Palestinians and are refusing to indirectly fund terrorism."

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Netanyahu calls decision to indict him an 'attempted coup'

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Netanyahu calls decision to indict him an 'attempted coup'

Enraged PM goes on the offensive, slamming AG and police investigators, who he claims were 'after him'; 2 other defendants, Elovich and Mozes, also issue statements expressing their disappointment over what they see as unfair charges

Ynet|Published: 11.21.19 , 21:04

Advertisement

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday called a criminal indictment against him an attempt at a "government coup" and he will continue to "lead Israel." It is the first time in the country's history a sitting prime minister has been charged with a crime.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit on Thursday formally charged Netanyahu in a series of corruption cases, throwing the country's paralyzed political system into further disarray and threatening the long-time leader's grip on power. Mandelblit charged Netanyahu with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three different scandals.

In a televised speech shortly after the indictment was announced, Netanyahu, 70, claimed that the investigation against him was tainted by bias, saying the police investigators "weren't after the truth, they were after me."

"This evening we are witnesses to an attempted government coup against the prime minister, using false allegations and stained investigations," said Netanyahu. "You must have noticed that the attorney general's decision was made and announced at an unprecedented speed, and I would say during the most sensitive time for our political system since the establishment of the state," he said.

"The process is intended to topple an incumbent prime minister from the right. It was designed to bring me down. Me, who unlike many of my opponents and the media, wants to see a free market here not only when it comes to the economy but in the media as well," he added.

"It is time for the public to receive clear answers about all of this and also about the tainted investigations conducted against me, in which they were not after the truth, they were after me."

Netanyahu then went on a lengthy rant, accusing the investigators of threatening and blackmailing state witnesses until they told them "what they wanted to hear, which isn't what actually happened."

The prime minister finished the defiant speech by saying he will not resign and urged to "investigate the investigators."

Other defendants

The other defendants in the indictment have also issued statements expressing their disappointment over Mandelblit's decision.

Shaul Elovich and his wife Iris, both indicted on bribery charges in Case 4000, said they “regret” the attorney general’s decision to indict them

“Based on the evidence in the case, we are convinced that an indictment could have been avoided, said Attorney Jack Chen, who represents Elovitch. “Once the case is passed for judicial review, we hope that the three-year-long slanderous accusation and leaks will finally stop,” he said.

“We trust that the court will reach the conclusion that, based on the evidence, Shaul and Iris Elovich did not commit the offenses attributed to them.”

Arnon Mozes, indicted on bribery charges in Case 2000, said the interpretation of the relationship he had with the prime minister as bribery is a “distorted interpretation” of facts.

"Moses did not offer Netanyahu any benefits,” said attorneys representing Mozes in a statement. “The conversation between the two shows that Moses tried to convince Netanyahu to be interviewed, and suggested a writer who would occasionally write opinion pieces in the newspaper, which was clearly in the interest of Yedioth Ahronoth,” said the statement. “That was offered to Netanyahu even before the conversation that is at the heart of the case.”

Arnon Mozes is the publisher and owner of Yedioth Ahronoth Group, which includes Ynet and Ynetnews.

11.21.19

Netanyahu charged in corruption cases, deepening Israeli political disarray

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Netanyahu charged in corruption cases, deepening Israeli political disarray

by Reuters

Thursday, 21 November 2019 18:42 GMT

(Adds details of cases against prime minister)

* Bribery, breach of trust and fraud among the charges

* Netanyahu under no legal obligation to resign

* Denies any wrongdoing in three cases against him

By Jeffrey Heller and Dan Williams

JERUSALEM, Nov 21 (Reuters) - Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was charged with bribery, breach of trust and fraud on Thursday, a criminal indictment that plunged Israel deeper into political disarray.

The decision announced by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit was the first of its kind against a serving Israeli prime minister and represented the gravest crisis in the political career of the man popularly known as "Bibi".

Netanyahu, in power since 2009, has dominated Israeli politics for a generation and is the country's longest-serving leader. He has denied wrongdoing in three corruption cases, saying he is the victim of a political witch hunt.

The indictment posed no immediate threat to Netanyahu's decade-long hold on power, a grip loosened by elections in April and September in which neither the right-wing Likud leader nor centrist challenger Benny Gantz secured a governing majority.

Netanyahu remains caretaker prime minister and is under no legal obligation to resign once charged. The opening of a trial could be delayed for months by a possible new election and any moves by Netanyahu to secure parliamentary immunity from prosecution.

"This is a difficult and sad day," Mandelblit said, announcing the indictment in a televised statement.

Mandelblit, who was appointed to his post by Netanyahu, said he had a duty to Israel's citizens to ensure that no one was above the law.

Netanyahu, 70, was due to make a statement from his official residence at 1830 GMT.

CASES 1000, 2000 AND 4000

Police recommended in February that Mandelblit file criminal charges against Netanyahu in the long-running investigations dubbed Cases 1000, 2000 and 4000.

Netanyahu is suspected of wrongfully accepting \$264,000 worth of gifts from tycoons and of allegedly dispensing favours in return for favourable stories about him in Israel's biggest selling newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, and the Walla website.

Case 4000, the most serious of the three, alleges that Netanyahu granted regulatory favours worth about 1.8 billion shekels (about \$500 million) to Israel's leading telecommunications company, Bezeq Telecom Israel.

In return, Mandelblit said, Netanyahu and his wife often received positive coverage on the Walla site, which is owned by Bezeq's former chairman, Shaul Elovitch.

He indicted Netanyahu on charges of breach of trust and fraud in all three corruption cases against him, as well as bribery in Case 4000.

Netanyahu could face up to 10 years in prison if convicted of bribery and a maximum 3-year term for fraud and breach of trust.

Earlier, during one of the most unusual days in Israeli political history, the country's president told lawmakers to name a candidate to form a new government after Netanyahu and Gantz both failed, a development that probably sets the stage for a third election within a year.

"These are harsh dark days in the annals of the State of Israel," President Reuven Rivlin said as he announced that Gantz had not mustered enough support for a stable coalition.

The prolonged political stalemate comes at a tricky time for Israel and its most prominent statesman on the domestic and international fronts.

Its conflict with arch-foe Iran has deepened - Israeli warplanes hit Iranian targets in Syria on Wednesday after rockets were fired toward Israel - while fighting with Palestinian militants in Gaza flared last week.

The introduction of criminal charges could further complicate the eventual rollout of the U.S. administration's long-delayed Middle East peace plan by imperilling the political future of one of the key players whose support is needed.

And if a new Israeli election is in the cards, Netanyahu would be running as an indicted suspect, displaying a rare vulnerability that could entice potential challengers within his own party to make a move against a weakened prime minister.

Palestinians greeted the news with grim pleasure. Palestine Liberation Organization official Wasel Abu Youssef said that for years Netanyahu had sought to avoid this outcome by "launching wars against the Palestinian people" to boost his domestic popularity. (Editing by Stephen Farrell and Giles Elgood)

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