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By Jean Shaoul
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Netanyahu, indicted on corruption charges, refuses to resign

The long-expected indictment of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on serious charges of corruption, fraud and breach of trust stemming from three long-running corruption cases has brought the political crisis that has deadlocked the country for the last year to the boiling point.

The 70-year-old Netanyahu has refused to resign the premiership in the face of these charges.

Instead, he lashed out at the police, investigators, the attorney general and the entire judicial system, denouncing the indictment as an “attempted coup” that sought to overturn his premiership. In a provocative speech, he used terms such as “a governmental coup against the prime minister,” “libels,” “a tainted investigative process,” “the world of crime,” “fabricating cases,” “suborning witnesses,” and “extortion.”

His aim was to incite his far-right supporters against the justice system and encourage them to take to the streets on his behalf.

On Thursday, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced the charges, following four days of preliminary hearings last month and weeks of discussion in his office. Speaking at a press conference, Mandelblit, who was for many years a close political associate of Netanyahu and was appointed to his post on that basis, said his decision was made “with a heavy heart, but wholeheartedly.” He stressed that it was not a matter of left-wing or right-wing politics and that law enforcement was not a matter of choice.

He pointed regretfully to the extraordinarily vicious and vituperative atmosphere that has surrounded the whole process, saying, “while conducting a professional hearing process, we’ve witnessed repeated attempts to delegitimize the people who were involved” in the investigations. He defended his colleagues, saying, “These people acted out of proper motives.”

Notorious for hobnobbing with the financial elite, Netanyahu was showered with “gifts,” which he does not deny, from wealthy friends as down payments for favours, highlighting the degree to which Israeli politicians are in the pocket of media networks and big business. He and his family, like almost all of Israel’s prime ministers after the first, David Ben-Gurion, have faced numerous allegations of corruption and even preliminary investigations. His immediate predecessor, Ehud Olmert, received a jail term for bribery offences when he was mayor of Jerusalem prior to becoming prime minister.

But Netanyahu is the first sitting prime minister to be indicted for offences allegedly committed while occupying that position. If found guilty, he could serve up to 10 years in jail, after a legal process that could take seven years. The surrounding scandals and the prospect of a lengthy prison sentence prompted him to call early elections in 2015, as well as early elections in April this year, then to dissolve parliament in a pre-emptive bid to force a second election in September, and most recently to refuse to form a national unity government with the opposition Blue and White Party, likely precipitating a third election. Behind all these sordid manoeuvres was—and remains—his quest for a government that will secure legislation granting him immunity from prosecution. It highlights the degree to which Israeli politics has been subordinated to the personal interests of the Netanyahu family and the corporate and political layers he represents.

The investigations, which have dragged on for years, demonstrate, on the basis of tapes released thus far, open and shut cases of bribery. They provide a devastating insight into the nature of Israeli politics and the way political influence and favours are bought and sold on behalf of the corporate and political elite at the expense of workers, both at home and overseas, in what Israeli politicians like to claim is “the only democracy in the Middle East.” The reality is that Israel is no different in this regard than the corrupt capitalist regimes all over the world or the mafia-style rule that characterises its godfather in the White House.

Netanyahu is charged in the most important case, Case 4000, also known as the Bezeq affair, with bribery, fraud and breach of trust. The case relates to allegations that the

telecoms billionaire Shaul Elovitch gave Netanyahu favourable coverage on his Walla news website in exchange for regulatory favours.

Case 2000, in which he is charged with fraud and breach of trust, relates to Netanyahu's ultimately unsuccessful attempts to strike a deal for more favourable coverage with Arnon Mozes, publisher of the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in exchange for hurting its rival freesheet, *Israel Hayom*, a pro-Netanyahu newspaper founded and financed by US casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson.

In Case 1000, Netanyahu is similarly accused of fraud and breach of trust. The case relates to the receipt of substantial gifts and benefits from several wealthy businesspeople, including Netanyahu's well-known benefactor, billionaire and Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan, apparently in return for pressing his case with US Secretary of State John Kerry for a 10-year visa, which was ultimately successful. Netanyahu and his family also received gifts from Australian billionaire James Packer, reportedly to obtain Israeli citizenship or permanent resident status for tax purposes. The receipt of such largesse, the indictment said, meant that Netanyahu was involved in a conflict of interests.

Attorney General Mandelblit has also indicted Israel's two most powerful media tycoons, Shaul Elovich and Arnon Mozes, for their role in the quid pro quo schemes.

Netanyahu's indictment takes place amid an unprecedented political crisis, with the failure to form a government after two deadlocked elections. The previous day, former military chief and opposition leader Benny Gantz, who has no substantive policy differences with Netanyahu, announced that he had been unable to cobble together a coalition with Netanyahu's Likud bloc. He blamed Netanyahu for the impasse, accusing him of "insisting only on the best interest of one person" and using "insults, slanders and childish videos" to sabotage his efforts.

Netanyahu has insisted on retaining the premiership so as to preclude his prosecution while he secures legislation granting him immunity. He also waged a vicious campaign against any attempt by Gantz to form a minority government with the support of the Arab Joint List, a coalition of political parties led by Palestinian citizens of Israel, claiming that such a government would strengthen "terrorism."

The 120-seat Knesset now has 19 days left to prevent a third election. This depends upon the legislators' ability to nominate someone to form a government who can command the support of 61 legislators, which in turn depends upon Likud electing a new leader to replace Netanyahu.

The attorney general is expected to advise President Reuven Rivlin that an MK (Member of Knesset) charged with bribery and fraud may not receive a mandate to form a government—as opposed to remaining as caretaker prime minister—a ruling that Netanyahu would contest all the way through the courts, which would likely rule against him.

The media commentary has been extraordinary, pointing to the bitter, if unexplained conflicts within ruling circles. Channel 12's Amit Segal wrote in *Yediot Ahronot*, “This will not be an election, it will be a civil war without arms,” adding, “There is a broad constituency that believes what Netanyahu said yesterday, but it is far from being enough for anything close to victory.”

Another columnist, Sima Kadmon, compared Netanyahu to the Roman emperor Nero, writing, “He will stand and watch as the country burns... he won't leave [the PM's residence] without leaving scorched earth behind.”

Chemi Shalev, writing in *Ha'aretz*, said that Netanyahu responded to the news of his indictment like a “self-absorbed tyrant” and “common criminal,” and added that it was reminiscent of Trump's approach to his impeachment hearings, while Yossi Verter warned that Netanyahu's portrayal of himself as the victim of a “Kafkaesque witch hunt” had put the country in “great danger.” He added, “The man whose hands are on the wheel is fighting for his life, and he's capable of anything.”

David Horovitz wrote in the *Times of Israel* that Netanyahu's handling of his criminal cases was exacerbating internal divisions, stating, “What Israel faces now is weeks, months, maybe years of heightened internal division, of supporters of Netanyahu pitted against opponents, with potential consequences one hesitates even to delineate in writing.”

The pro-Netanyahu free sheet *Israel Hayom*, in an effort to undermine the attorney general, compared the investigation into two of Netanyahu's aides as reminiscent of the techniques used by the former Soviet Union, accusing Mandelblit of establishing a new legal precedent “that sympathetic coverage is a bribe,” and concluding that Netanyahu's indictment has caused public trust in the justice system, which he claimed was already at a “historic low,” to sink even further.

Under such conditions, it becomes ever more vital that the working class not line up behind one or another reactionary faction of the ruling class, but sets forth its own, independent attitude to the crisis. The working class must orient to the growth of the class

struggle in Israel and throughout the region, which testifies to the primacy of class over ethnicity and religion.

The key question is to give this movement of the working class an understanding of its own aims and how they can be achieved. It means building a political leadership to break out of the straitjacket imposed by the treacherous trade union leaders and political parties and direct these struggles to the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of socialism.

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