

The Brookings Institution
5 on 45: Netanyahu to be indicted for bribery. What's next?
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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

SACHS: Hi my name is Natan Sachs. I'm the director of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings.

Today the dramatic announcement Israeli Attorney General informed Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister, that he has decided to indict Netanyahu subject to a hearing on three cases. One of them including bribery. This is a decision, it's not just a recommendation as it's been reported sometimes. But the hearing allows anyone as lawyers to appeal this decision. Most dramatically, we're just weeks ahead of elections in Israel and Netanyahu will now face the electorate with this hanging over his head before any final decision is made. First something about the three cases that are nicknamed 1000, 2000, and 4000.

The first, 1000, involves a years long practice of Netanyahu and his wife Sarah demanding and receiving gifts from multimillionaire friends abroad. The gifts were mostly rosé, champagne, and cigars. Not a great look for a prime minister in a democracy. And this lasted for years and the worth of hundreds of thousands of shekels.

The second case, 2000, involves what was recorded to be negotiations between Netanyahu and the publisher of a newspaper in Israel a paper not generally very favorable to Netanyahu. In it they discuss the possibility that Netanyahu would limit the publication of a rival paper friendly paper to Netanyahu that has given out free and funded by his donors. Edelson, a donor also of Donald Trump. And in exchange Netanyahu expected more favorable coverage. That never happened in fact. But the recording showed the negotiation over it.

The last case, 4000, did happen allegedly. That was a deal again with the publisher or the owner of an online website who received it. So, this is the claim very favorable terms

in terms of regulation and in exchange the website gave Montaña very favorable coverage on this case 4000 Netanyahu is likely to be indicted for bribery. A very serious crime, of course.

What does this mean? Well legally Netanyahu does not have to resign until he's actually convicted of a serious crime. And that's a long way away. We're not quite at indictment yet even But publicly there are two very serious ramifications.

First, on April 9th voters will go to the polls. And so a big question is how will they respond to this news. Netanyahu is popular. He was in the front position in these elections but he has a very serious challenger named Benny Gantz from the center. The elections could have gone either way even without this decision. And now maybe some voters on the center side of the right wing may flip over to the center and oppose it. And you know it's very hard to predict. But this certainly does not help Antonio.

Secondly, Netanyahu even if he won would then need to convince coalition partners to join in a government with him. Israel has a parliamentary system and a system with very many parties so no one party including Netanyahu is Likud party has ever reached a majority by itself. These coalition partners would now be under pressure by their own people perhaps not to join in a government led by someone indicted for bribery if he succeeded in forming a coalition likely wouldn't Netanyahu would try to do is to pass something known in Israel as "the French Law." It's really the Roman system, where people in executive power, Prime Minister, in this case perhaps also the Israeli president would be immune from indictment until they left office. This would give Netanyahu immunity while he's prime minister and if he ran for president then as well. That would be hard to do. Again these coalition partners would have to sign on to such a bill to pass it would be under pressure by their own voters not to cover up for corruption. This throws of course the political system into a fray.

Now everyone is jockeying for the day after Netanyahu and already have been for several weeks now and months expecting this decision. On the right wing we saw breakoff of what used to be the Jewish Home, someone named Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, his partner, had formed a new party very much with an eye towards the day after Netanyahu, where both of them hope to advance to leadership position. On the center, everyone is thinking of the possibility that now Netanyahu is vulnerable, and that even if he won the election, the next election might not be far and with a new leader on the right perhaps they could win.

Most importantly, Netanyahu is own Likud party. We see a struggle for the day after Bibi. There are all the different officials are proclaiming their loyalty to Netanyahu. Right now, that's popular to do inside the Likud, especially during a campaign. But, you can rest assured they have their eye towards the day after Netanyahu, with many of them hoping to be the successor. In short, Netanyahu could win this election. He still has a strong showing in the polls and we don't know yet how voters will respond to this news. It's not quite the end of the Netanyahu reign yet. Nonetheless, this is a very serious blow to serious about him personally. He may find himself in jail or in prison. He wouldn't be the first prime minister in Israel to do so. But politically especially he may now see at least the end of his term. And if we're not at the end we're certainly not at the beginning either. Israel is preparing in essence for the day after Netanyahu.

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