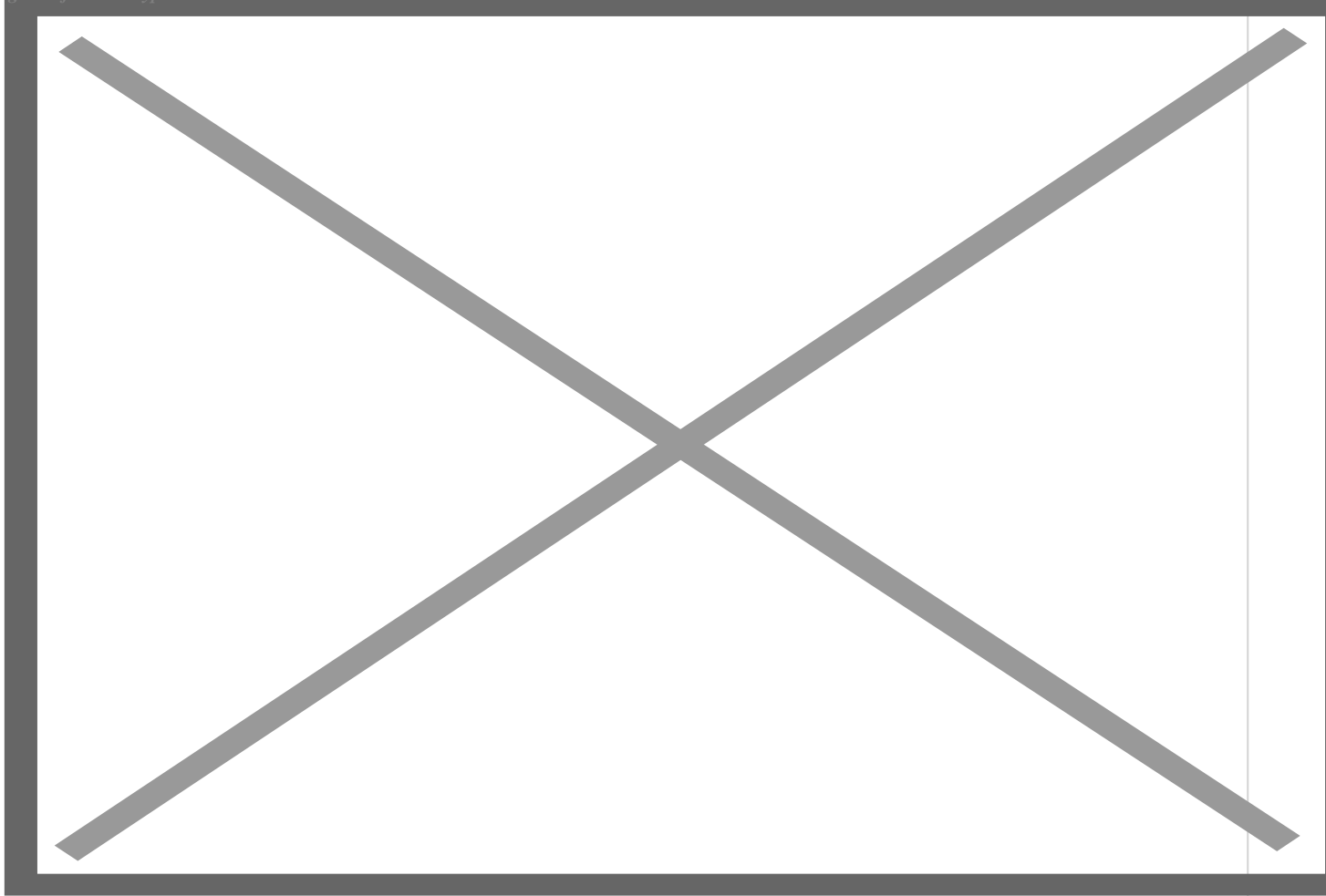


Former Israel prime minister reportedly negotiating plea bargain

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Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is negotiating a plea bargain to end his corruption trial, news agencies have reported.

Tel Aviv, January 16 (RHC)-- Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is negotiating a plea bargain to end his corruption trial, news agencies have reported. Netanyahu, who lost power in June after

12 consecutive years as prime minister and is now opposition leader, has pleaded not guilty to charges of bribery, breach of trust and fraud in three cases for which he was indicted in 2019. All are being tried together.

The deal could be signed as early as this week, a person involved in the talks told The Associated Press news agency on Sunday. Any deal could spare Netanyahu an embarrassing and protracted trial over an issue that has gripped the nation.

A source briefed on the matter told the Reuters news agency that talks have snagged over a condition that would remove Netanyahu from politics. The source said Netanyahu, 72, was discussing a deal with Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit under which he would plead guilty to reduced charges and have any resulting jail term commuted to community service.

But the talks have hit a bump over Netanyahu's demand to be spared a conviction carrying a "moral turpitude" clause, which under Israeli law would force him to quit politics for years, said the source, speaking to Reuters on condition of anonymity. The State Attorney's Office declined to comment.

Reports of a deal angered critics who said it would undermine the rule of law. "The man who worked to destroy the public's trust in the foundations of democracy for personal reasons is not eligible for deals," Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz tweeted.

Horowitz was referring to Netanyahu's attempts after he was indicted to cast doubt on Israel's justice system, saying it was biased and pursuing a witch-hunt against him.

Any deal will likely be challenged in court. A lawyer for Netanyahu, who has denied all charges and accused prosecutors of a politically motivated witch-hunt, did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Netanyahu has pledged to unseat his successor, Naftali Bennett, a nationalist straddling a coalition of highly diverse parties. Netanyahu's conservative Likud party failed to form a new government last year in part because kindred parties refused to join Netanyahu, citing the ongoing trial.

With his legal troubles behind him, Netanyahu might in theory be able to muster a broad new rightist coalition. If he were barred from politics, right-wing members of Bennett's coalition could opt to form a new government with a Likud party under new leadership.

The idea of a plea bargain was promoted by a former Supreme Court president, Aharon Barak. He told Kan radio it would ease the pressure on the justice system, which has spent years defending itself against allegations from Netanyahu loyalists that he was being denied due process. A Likud spokesman claimed he did not know about any such negotiations.

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