

Israeli prime minister accused of illegitimate use of power

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A protester with a mask depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wears a sign with the word 'Liar' in Hebrew. (Photo: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

Jerusalem, April 7 (RHC)-- Israeli prosecutors accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of treating favours as "currency" on Monday at the opening of a corruption trial which, along with an inconclusive election, has clouded his prospects of remaining in office.

Wearing a black mask and dark suit, Netanyahu was seated in the Jerusalem District Court following an order from judges to appear in court to face charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Netanyahu, who denies all wrongdoing in the three cases against him, conferred quietly with lawyers as his supporters and critics held raucous demonstrations outside. He left before the first witness was called to testify.

Israel's longest-serving prime minister misused "the great governmental power entrusted to him, among other things, to demand and derive improper benefits from owners of key media in Israel in order to advance his personal affairs – including when he faced his desire to be re-elected," prosecutor Liat Ben Ari said during opening arguments.

He "made illegitimate use of the great governmental power entrusted to him," Ben Ari added. "The relationship between Netanyahu and the defendants became currency, something that could be traded," she said. "The currency could distort a public servant's judgement."

President Reuven Rivlin, meanwhile, was set to begin talks with Israel's political parties to recommend which candidate should be tasked with forming the next government after an election held on March 23. The vote was largely seen as a referendum on Netanyahu's leadership and produced no clear verdict.

Between witness testimony in a Jerusalem courtroom and the consultations at the president's office across town, it promised to be a day of extraordinary political drama, bringing into sharp focus Netanyahu's increasingly desperate efforts to stay in power.

The first case involves Netanyahu allegedly receiving gifts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars from wealthy friends, including Hollywood film producer Arnon Milchan and Australian billionaire James Packer. In the second case, Netanyahu is accused of trying to orchestrate positive coverage in a main Israeli newspaper in exchange for curbing distribution of a free pro-Netanyahu tabloid.

The third, dubbed Case 4000, which will be the focus of Monday's first witness testimony, alleges that Netanyahu backed legislation worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the owner of Israeli telecom giant Bezeq in return for positive coverage on its news site Walla.

Netanyahu's lawyers sought to make a rebuttal but were cut off by Judge Rivka Friedman-Feldman, who said they had already responded to the charges earlier in the trial. Outside the courtroom, dozens of supporters and opponents of the prime minister gathered to protest on opposite sides of the building amid heavy police presence, highlighting Israel's deep divisions.

Anti-Netanyahu protesters have held weekly demonstrations for months, calling on him to resign.

Netanyahu has dismissed the charges against him as part of a media and law enforcement "witch hunt" to unseat him. His trial began last year and could last for another two years.

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