

Israel's Netanyahu faces key witness in corruption trial

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Former aide Nir Hefetz will testify in Netanyahu's trial over the course of several weeks [Maya Alleruzzo/Pool via Reuters]

Tel Aviv, November 22 (RHC)-- A key prosecution witness has begun testifying in the trial of former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who stands accused of fraud, breach of trust, and corruption.

Nir Hefetz, a former media adviser to the former prime minister and his family, gave his testimony to a Jerusalem District courtroom on Monday pertaining to regulatory favours Netanyahu allegedly awarded to media tycoons in return for positive press coverage and receipt of gifts.

In his opening testimony, Hefetz said that Netanyahu was a “control freak” when it came to his public image, and that “his control over everything relating to media matters and in his social media channels could not be higher.”

“Netanyahu spends at least as much of his time on media as he spends on security matters, including on matters an outsider would consider nonsense,” Hefetz told the court. The former journalist became the Netanyahu family’s spokesman and adviser in 2014. In 2018, after he was arrested in connection with one of Netanyahu’s corruption cases, he signed a state’s witness deal and provided investigators with recordings of conversations with Netanyahu and his family.

Nir Hefetz is one of a small group of ex-aides to turn state’s witness against the country’s former premier and is expected to deliver critical testimony over several weeks.

Netanyahu, now opposition leader, attended the hearing despite not being mandated to do so. He made no comment to reporters as a cluster of his supporters faced off with a small group of anti-Netanyahu protesters outside the court.

The trial was delayed by a week after Netanyahu’s defence lawyers requested time to review new evidence. The information presented last week alleged that Netanyahu’s wife, Sara, had accepted an expensive bracelet as a gift from two billionaire friends, Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan and Australian billionaire James Packer.

The 72-year-old former leader is a defendant in three separate cases. The first alleges that Netanyahu received gifts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars from wealthy friends, including Milchan and Packer.

In the second case, Netanyahu is accused of orchestrating positive coverage in a major Israeli paper in exchange for promoting legislation that would have harmed the news outlet’s chief rival.

The third, nicknamed Case 4000, alleges that Netanyahu promoted legislation worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the owner of Israeli telecom giant Bezeq in exchange for positive coverage on its Walla news site.

Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing. He rejected calls to step down from the country’s leadership after being indicted in 2019 and has repeatedly lashed out at law enforcement, the media, and the courts for launching a “witch-hunt” against him.

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