

Netanyahu's Trial Closely Resembles Trump's Impeachment

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought in vain to escape his mandatory appearance in court Sunday in his trial for fraud, bribery and breach of trust. At the insistence of the bench, he turned up surrounded by loyalists from his Likud bloc, adopted a defiant stance, and threatened to purge the country's judiciary. He donned a mask before standing before the defendants bench for the 50 minute hearing, during which he announced he understood the charges he faces, plead not guilty and the schedule was fixed for he testimony of witnesses. It is unlikely that he will attend every session of the trial.

The first serving Israeli prime minister to be indicted, Netanyahu stands accused of accepting presents worth \$250,000 in Cuban cigars, pink champagne and jewelry from wealthy supporters, and conspiring with media moguls to secure positive coverage of himself and his family from newspaper and television outlets. If convicted and the conviction stands up to lengthy appeals, he could face 10 years in prison.

He was indicted more than a year ago and the trial, delayed for two months due to Covid-19, could continue well after he concludes his current premiership. His is the first incumbent to go on trial although every other prime minister has been investigated for corruption over the past 20 years. Ehud Olmert, another Likudnik, resigned before indictment for bribery before he had the top job. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

It must be remembered that Netanyahu's wife, Sara, also stood trial. She eventually reached a plea deal in a case involving charges of illegally charging to the government \$100,000 worth of meals ordered from up-market restaurants for the prime minister's table at a time she had a full time cook. She got off lightly by paying a fine of \$15,200. She has also been accused of misusing security personnel and mistreating household staff.

The ongoing trial has more than ever divided an already divided Israel between Netanyahu's supporters, who exonerate him, and his opponents who convict him and want him out of office. On the political stage, the trial closely resembles the impeachment of Donald Trump, the current occupant of the White House who is a close ally of Netanyahu. Both men accused those investigating them of conspiring in a "witch hunt" and claimed they were innocent of charges raised against them. Both men are pugnacious, determined to remain in power, and prepared to lie and fabricate to do so. Both rely on a right-wing base of backers constituting about 30 per cent of voters. Both cultivate "culture wars" between less well-educated, rightist followers and liberal, leftist detractors.

Netanyahu promotes the Zionist agenda of Ze'ev Jabotinsky who sought to impose Israeli rule on all of Palestine at the expense of the Palestinians. Trump touts "America First"

domestically by creating a “great economy” and abroad by reducing US commitments to international treaties and regulations, which he deems harmful to the country’s interests. For ideological and electoral purposes, Netanyahu pledges to annex the West Bank/Jordan Valley despite opposition from the international community. To appeal to white evangelical Christians as well as powerful-right wing members of the US Jewish community, Trump has given full support to Netanyahu’s ambitions.

Ahead of Israel’s elections, Trump gifted Netanyahu by granting US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and of Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, the shift of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, defunding of the UN agency caring for Palestinian refugees and all US aid to Palestinians, and incorporating US acceptance of Netanyahu’s annexation of the West Bank/Jordan Valley in the “Deal of the Century” peace plan of the administration. Trump’s aim was to see Netanyahu’s Likud secure a strong showing enabling him to serve a fifth term. Trump failed to boost the Likud. Netanyahu has a truncated 18-month term as premier coalition with the Benny Gantz, head of Blue and White, who takes over and serves for the final 18 months while Netanyahu becomes his deputy.

Netanyahu is motivated by ideology as well as self-interest. His father Benzion Netanyahu served as secretary to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, a Russian Jewish scholar who was a founder of the “Revisionist” Zionist movement, which initially advocated the creation of a Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan River. He differed from his current followers, including Netanyahu, by calling for a state dominated by a Jewish majority but granting rights to Palestinians who refused to emigrate. Many Likudniks and their extreme-right wing allies seek the expulsion of the Palestinians. They already form the majority in the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Netanyahu swears fealty to most of Jabotinsky’s ideological agenda, as he was brought up with it and it appeals to both religious and “nationalist” Israelis on the right of the political spectrum. Trump has no ideology. His agenda has been set by the right-wing “Tea Party” which has taken over the Republican Party and has been intimidated into backing every move Trump makes however destructive or absurd.

Both want to divert public attention from current challenges. Netanyahu is keen to play down his trial and less than perfect handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Israel, which has infected more than 18,000 cases and killed 280. Trump has failed to deliver on promises he made to the electorate when standing in 2016 and seeks to contain negative fallout over his failure to halt the spread of the deadly coronavirus across the US and preserve its economy. At present the US has more than 1.7 million cases and 100,000 deaths. On the corona-issue, both can command the full backing of right-wing media, which does not hesitate to demonise opponents and critics and issue false reports about their successes. However, even successful populist politicians in top positions cannot fool all the people all the time.

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