

# Netanyahu won't go quietly

Benjamin Netanyahu “has done a great job as prime minister. He’s smart, strong and tough.” This is what Donald Trump told an Israeli reporter in Hanoi after it was announced that Netanyahu will be indicted (pending a personal hearing) on counts of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is also a fan. After meeting Bibi in Moscow, just a day before the Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit released his legal bombshell, Putin praised the fine bilateral relationship that has flourished. “We must acknowledge the Israeli leadership’s efforts,” he said. “Prime Minister Netanyahu is working on this personally.”

As endorsements go, these are first-class. Nothing is more important to Israel than getting along with the two superpowers that dominate its neighborhood. That’s why Bibi opened his post-indictment defense, an aggressive televised speech, by reminding the public that such intimate friendships didn’t just happen; they have been carefully cultivated by his farsighted statesmanship.

This is true. It also misses the point. Netanyahu is not accused of incompetence. He faces accusations of flagrant corruption and gross dishonesty. It is doubtful that, given these charges, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are perfect character witnesses.

And yet it would be naïve to expect Netanyahu to react differently. Bibi has an election coming up on April 9; until then, he will admit nothing, concede nothing and apologize for nothing.

Chances are that Bibi will pull off an electoral victory despite the charges. His party base is unquestioningly loyal. His voters share their leader’s low opinion of government prosecutors and their supporters in the media and certain official circles. This is also true of his right-wing coalition partners, all but one of whom have pledged solidarity (and more than one of whom has had serious legal trouble of their own).

Netanyahu’s center-left opposition is led by an inexperienced ex-general, Benny Gantz, whose immediate reaction to the charges was to declare that he won’t serve in any government that has Netanyahu in it. This may be laudable civics but

it is terrible politics. Statistically, it will be almost impossible for the center-left to form a government without Bibi.

If Gantz is serious about his vow, there are two likely outcomes. Netanyahu can weather the legal storm and re-establish his coalition after a narrow electoral win. Or there could be an electoral stalemate that leads to post-election chaos. When that happened in the U.S., in 2000, the Supreme Court decided the outcome. But Netanyahu has already made it clear that he believes the courts are fixed against him, and any attempt to give Israel's highest court the final say would be met with resistance.

Were that to happen, Netanyahu would appeal to "the people" (aka his most extreme supporters) in the public squares. He has already laid out the case that he is the victim of an elitist conspiracy: Gantz is a stalking horse for appeasers who want to make irresponsible concessions to the Palestinians and the Iranians, it goes. A Gantz government would rely on the passive support of the anti-Zionist Arab parties, Netanyahu says. Now is the time for patriots to rally for the good of their country!

If the indictment is a sign, as Noah Feldman wrote on Friday, that Israeli democracy is working, Netanyahu's response is a warning that it can also be subverted. It is an invitation to wild demonstrations, which clearly bring the prospect of violence. Gantz and the other leaders of the left-center bloc would be pressured by their voters to respond in kind, to get into a street fight that they can never win.

Should Gantz continue to rule out a coalition, the only alternative in the case of an electoral draw would be to rely on the justice system. But time is on Bibi's side. It could take years to exhaust the various appeals processes he will use to keep the issue tied up in the courts. In the meantime, he could remain prime minister.

Netanyahu is still innocent until proven otherwise. While not expected, he could win the hearing that precedes the indictment and the case would be dropped. He could win in court. Or he could lose in every venue and still stay on with a majority vote of the Knesset.

Theoretically, Bibi could also resign. In 1977, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, caught with an illegal foreign bank account, stepped down in the midst of an election. Ehud Olmert, Bibi's immediate predecessor, quit in the face of

corruption allegations (for which he was subsequently convicted and imprisoned). But Bibi's role models are not Rabin or Olmert; they are Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

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