

## Benjamin Netanyahu ‘the Magician’ Is Re-Elected Israel’s Prime Minister—but at What Price?

[Neri Zilber](#)

*Daily Beast*

April 12, 2019

---

Facing multiple indictments, Netanyahu may try to keep himself out of jail by annexing the West Bank, but what happens to the 2.5 million Palestinians living there, and to Israel’s identity?

At exactly 2:00 a.m. in the deep dark before dawn on Wednesday, Benjamin Netanyahu finally strode on stage at a half-filled sports arena outside Tel Aviv and the crowd of supporters erupted in raucous cheers. “He’s a magician! He’s a magician! He’s a magician!” they chanted. The Israeli premier had done it again—securing a fourth straight term as prime minister (and fifth overall dating back to the 1990s), overcoming three looming corruption indictments and three former military chiefs who had joined forces to unseat him.

Netanyahu’s Likud party topped a wave of nationalist parties—his “natural partners,” he called them—who together will surely give the premier a strong right-wing majority in parliament. But the “magician” will likely need to offer up some tantalizing new tricks—annexation of swaths of the West Bank, for instance, with Trump administration support—to keep even this coalition loyal and intact through the legal circus ahead.

After all, Netanyahu called this snap election last Christmas Eve precisely to forestall the expected decision by the attorney general to indict him on bribery, fraud, and breach of trust charges. The attorney general’s decision came regardless in early March, in the midst of an election campaign described by many as a referendum on the incumbent. That the public has now had a chance to look closely at Netanyahu, and returned him to office, will be used as ammunition in the legal and political wars to come.

“I’m very touched that the people of Israel gave me their vote of confidence for the fifth time, and an even bigger vote of confidence than previous elections,” Netanyahu said last night, flanked by his grinning wife Sara, also the subject of an ongoing corruption case. “Twenty-three years ago, for the first time, Sara and I stood here, and here we are again because of you.”

“Bibi, King of Israel,” the crowd kept chanting, using Netanyahu’s nickname, and nobody—not on this night—could dispute it. With the victory still fresh, Netanyahu’s loyalists are already trying to leverage the political win into the legal realm, and with good reason: Netanyahu’s final hearing in front of the attorney general is fast approaching in July.

“The people decided that the cases [against Netanyahu] aren’t criminal in nature,” [one Likud backbencher argued today](#). “The people are sovereign.”

There is already speculation that Netanyahu will force all his potential coalition partners to support a law conveniently shielding incumbent prime ministers from prosecution, including retroactively for any previous crimes. Which is where Donald Trump likely comes in.

In return for such a law—and continued support through his legal travails—Netanyahu may make his right-wing partners an offer they can’t refuse: immunity for him in return for annexation of the West Bank. The issue of annexation reared its unprecedented head in the final days of the campaign, with Netanyahu repeatedly saying his plan (if re-elected) was to extend Israeli sovereignty to all the settlements in the West Bank. He tied it directly to Trump’s recent decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights, contrasting it (favorably) with the Obama administration’s past hostility to any such moves.

There was now, Netanyahu said, a “possibility to undertake this [West Bank] plan in a gradual way, I prefer with American recognition.” Crucially, not one Trump administration official pushed back against Netanyahu’s newly stated intentions; the silence speaks volumes. Such a move by Israel would likely mark the death knell for any negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump’s inscrutable “Deal of the Century” included. The Palestinian Authority would face severe strain, up to possible collapse; Israel, in turn, would have to do something with the 2.5 million Palestinians living in the territory, imperiling its own status as both a Jewish and democratic state.

One far-right party head and likely coalition partner, Bezalel Smotrich, argued today that his two goals for the upcoming government were annexation of the West Bank and a law allowing parliament to bypass the Supreme

Court's decisions. The latter is a long-standing settler wish, the Supreme Court being a thorn in their side due to the myriad illegalities of seizing private Palestinian land. For Netanyahu, however, such legislation is essential to ensure his immunity ploy is rammed through despite the court's inevitable opposition.

Annexation of the West Bank may simply be the price for Smotrich's (and others') loyalty as the legal process unfolds. By law a sitting prime minister does not have to step down even if indicted. He would only have to leave office after all appeals are exhausted—which turns the question into a primarily political concern for Netanyahu in the immediate term.

In addition to Smotrich, there are several other right-wing leaders that need to be swayed. In the past, one other potentially key coalition partner (Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon) as well as a few senior Likud ministers signaled their disquiet with such "personalized" legislation only benefiting the premier. And of course, Israel's is a parliamentary system requiring a majority governing coalition: the horsetrading to form such a coalition is legendary and much will depend on the final allocation of seats.

Yet the real power dynamic, for now at least, has to favor "King Bibi." Standing on stage last night, a large screen played images of Netanyahu meeting with various world leaders he terms "personal friends," including several with Trump.

"When did we get so many mandates?" the newly returned premier asked the crowd. It was partially a brag, and partially a warning to the Likud officials seated below him. "The right-wing bloc will continue to lead Israel for four more years...We will continue turning Israel into one of the strongest among the nations of the world."

You need me, he intimated to everyone watching—especially his future partners in government—and I intend to serve out my entire new term. Massive sparklers fired up, confetti rained down from the rafters, the magician was done speaking. He was now on to his next great escape.

*Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute.*