

Israeli sex scandal draws differing views

Charles Levinson | Jerusalem, Israel

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The rape charges faced by Israeli President Moshe Katsav are the latest, and most serious, in a string of scandals to embroil the nation's politicians, signalling the erosion of honest government to some, proof of a thriving democracy to others.

"Today, more and more, civil servants have the notion that anything can be done as long as you're not caught," says Sullam Eli, director general of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel.

"In Hebrew, we don't have any word for accountability and there is a reason for that," he says.

But others counter that the fact that the head of state could be charged with serious offences -- the attorney general must now decide whether to follow police recommendations that Katsav be indicted on charges including rape -- proves that no official is above the law.

"It's not a sign of corruption, it's a sign of health," says Israeli literary giant Amos Oz, shortlisted for the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature.

"I think it's very healthy that a society can persecute its own president. It would never have happened in Sweden, for example, where the king is immune to any legal procedures. No one is above the law in Israel."

An exhaustive list of recent corruption cases in Israel would run for pages -- the Movement for Quality Government says that more than 15% of Israel's 120-member legislature is under investigation for corruption charges.

Just this week, trials began against two other prominent politicians: former justice minister Haim Ramon on sexual harassment charges and senior lawmaker Tzahi Hanegbi on charges of perjury and doling out government jobs to friends.

Other ongoing cases include suspect real estate dealings by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, drug smuggling charges against former energy minister Gonen Segev and campaign finance convictions against Omri Sharon, the son of former prime minister Ariel Sharon.

According to the international corruption watchdog Transparency International, since 2001, Israel fell from 16th to 28th place on its list of least-corrupt countries.

The spate of scandals has led to an increase in voter apathy and mistrust, according to polls. Only 63% of eligible voters voted in March parliamentary elections, a six percentage-point drop from 2003 and the lowest voter turnout in Israeli history.

If the Bible is to be believed, corruption and abuse of power stretches a long way back in the land that is now Israel.

In what was perhaps the nation's first sex scandal, King David himself, the

man Jews believe founded Jerusalem as the Jewish capital about 3 000 years ago, sent a soldier to his death in order to make off with his pretty wife, whom he had impregnated.

More recently, in 1954, Israel's first prime minister and founding father, David Ben Gurion, lied to his Cabinet to cover up the army's massacre of 60 Palestinian civilians in the village of Qibya.

And the legendary Israeli general Moshe Dayan was both a notorious womaniser and a black market antiquities dealer.

But observers say that what differentiates earlier cases of corruption from the contemporary scandals is their motivation, the stature of those involved, and, in King David's case, public contrition.

"We forgive certain things King David did because he showed remorse and asked forgiveness and realised he was wrong and said it loudly," says Meir Shalev, an author and political columnist.

And unlike today's politicians, Ben Gurion lied or cheated for the greater good of Israel, says Joseph Heller, author of *The Birth of Israel: Ben Gurion and His Critics*.

"Ben Gurion didn't do what he did because he was corrupt, or because he cared about his bank account," says Heller. "When he lied, he did it because he thought it was best for the country."

Meanwhile, the public was ready to forgive Dayan's sins because of his stature as decorated war hero and charismatic and hugely popular leader, Shalev says.

This contrasts with the lacklustre Katsav and dry career politician Olmert, who is accused of buying real estate from political allies at well below its market value and subsequently selling it at huge profit.

"You could have forgiven a political giant, but Olmert is not like this. He remains a small politician who became a prime minister just because Ariel Sharon got sick," says Shalev. "Being as such and behaving the way we suspect, this is unforgivable."

The scandals rocking Israeli politicians are a symptom of the broader changes under way in society, says Rabbi David Rosen, who immigrated to Israel in 1967 and now heads the interreligious affairs department for the American Jewish Committee.

"We have become a consumerist and individualist society and therefore there is more personal temptation today than in the past," he says. "Unlike in the past, the corruption today is about purely personal gain."