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## Sex scandal latest to hit Israeli politicians

By Charles Levinson

JERUSALEM: 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, signaling 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 saying that the head of state could be charged with serious offenses—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 percent of Israel's 120-member legislature is under investigation for corruption charges.

Just this week, trials began of 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 percent 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 some 3,000 years ago, sent a soldier to his death in order to make off with his pretty wife whom he had impregnated on the sly.

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 womanizer 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.