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Israeli FM Lieberman resigns after indictment



Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, a key ally of the premier, resigned on Friday after having been charged with breach of trust, barely five weeks ahead of general elections. "I am not legally bound to submit my resignation... but I have decided to step down from my duties as foreign minister and deputy premier," the controversial ultra-nationalist leader said in a statement.

But Lieberman said he would fight the charges and could return to the political scene in time for the January 22 polls. "I have taken this decision from the conviction that the citizens of Israel will be able to go to the polls after this problem has been resolved," said the leader of the Yisrael Beitenu party, a member of the ruling coalition. "That means the judiciary must give its verdict before the elections," said Lieberman, who has long proclaimed his innocence of all charges. "I will then be able to serve the citizens of Israel and form part of the next strong and unified leadership to face up to the security, political and economic challenges with which Israel is confronted." On Thursday, after he was charged with fraud and breach of trust, Lieberman said he would confer with his lawyers before deciding if he should resign. Israel's attorney general charged him but dropped more serious allegations against Lieberman, whose party is running in alliance with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party. Thursday's decision closes an episode that included explosive allegations of fraud, money-laundering and witness tampering. While the closing of the main case against him was something of a victory for Lieberman, analysts had said the ultimate decision on whether he resigned might be forced by Netanyahu. The alliance had been expected to win at least 38 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, far ahead of the opposition.