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Lieberman resignation a gamble Israeli media



Avigdor Lieberman is hoping for a quick return to government after resigning as Israel's foreign minister over graft charges, but his bid for a quick plea deal could be a gamble, Israeli media said Sunday. Lieberman announced he was stepping down on Friday, a day after the attorney general decided to charge the ultranationalist leader with fraud and breach of trust offences. But he did not surrender his parliamentary seat, and is still expected to stand in a snap January 22 general election, paving the way a return to government if he can quickly resolve the case against him. "He is seeking a quick and easy plea bargain that would let him off with almost nothing and would bring him back into the cabinet within a few months, where he will choose whatever portfolio he desires -- defence, foreign affairs or finance," the left-leaning Haaretz newspaper wrote in an editorial. The daily pointed out that Lieberman's main concern will be to avoid a conviction with a finding of "moral turpitude" and imprisonment, which could prevent him from returning to parliament. "Lieberman is not worried about a conviction, but the severity and type of moral turpitude that might be attached to it," the editorial said. Israeli legal precedent means that a person convicted of a crime with a finding of "moral turpitude" attached to it, as well as a prison sentence, must wait seven years before returning to government. For now, Lieberman remains head of the rightwing Yisrael Beitenu party, which he is expected to continue to lead. The faction is running on a joint list with the Likud party of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the election. Polls put the joint list far ahead of the opposition, with the latest numbers taken before Lieberman's resignation showing them garnering around 38 of the Knesset's 120 seats. "The ideal situation for him is to put an end to this entire affair before the elections on January 22," wrote commentator Shalom Yerushalmi in the Maariv daily. "To wit, to lift his immunity, to sign a convenient plea bargain agreement, to take a light sentence and to start over as a relatively clean foreign minister." But Yerushalmi pointed out that the decision is something of a gamble for Lieberman, who could find himself out in the cold if the legal process drags on, or the final conviction has a moral turpitude finding attached to it. "Lieberman is counting on a friendly legal system," he wrote. "That is a good bet, but he could just find himself in for a nasty surprise." Law professor Suzie Navot, also writing in Maariv, warned that holding a trial by January 22 would be "complex," deeming it "doubtful" that a court would agree to clear its schedule to help speed up the proceedings. Reaching a plea deal would require court approval, and still contained no guarantee of a resolution before the election, she wrote.