

Israel's ex-PM Ehud Olmert released from prison

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Jerusalem: Ehud Olmert, Israel's former prime minister, was released from prison today days after a parole board granted him early release from his 27-month corruption sentence, a Prison Service official said.

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Spokesman Assaf Librati said Olmert, 71, was whisked away by Israel's security service after his release and driven home. He said that under the terms of his early release, Olmert for the next few months has to do volunteer work, must appear before police twice a month and cannot give interviews to the media or leave the country. He added that President Reuven Rivlin could relieve him of the parole restrictions.

Olmert was convicted in 2014 in a wide-ranging case that accused him of accepting bribes to promote a real-estate project years in Jerusalem and obstructing justice. The charges pertained to a period when he was mayor of Jerusalem and trade minister before he became premier in 2006. His imprisonment ended the last major Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and ushered in the era of Benjamin Netanyahu in 2009.

Olmert was a longtime fixture in Israel's hawkish right wing when he began taking a dramatically more conciliatory line toward the Palestinians more than a decade ago. He played a leading role in Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and became prime minister in January 2006 after then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a debilitating stroke. He resigned amid a corruption scandal that clouded his administration. He was later charged, convicted and imprisoned.

A gifted orator, Olmert broke a series of taboos while in office warning that Israel could become like apartheid South Africa if it continued its occupation of the Palestinians and expressing readiness to relinquish parts of the holy city of Jerusalem under a peace deal.

He led his government to the Annapolis peace conference in November 2007 launching more than a year of ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful US-brokered peace talks.

Olmert has said he made unprecedented concessions to the Palestinians including a near-total withdrawal from the West Bank and an offer to place Jerusalem's Old City under international control and was close to reaching an agreement at the time of his resignation.

- AP