

Nicolas Sarkozy to face French court over campaign finance



Paris, October 2 (RHC)-- A French court has ordered Nicolas Sarkozy stand trial for illicit campaign financing, adding to the former president's legal woes as he also prepares to answer on charges of exerting pressure on a judge.

Sarkozy, 64, lost his final appeal to France's highest criminal court and risks a year in prison and a fine of 3,750 euros (\$4,085) if found guilty. The ruling on Tuesday came on the same day as another court ordered a trial for former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur on charges of campaign finance violations in an unrelated case.

Sarkozy is not the country's first former president to be prosecuted - Jacques Chirac, who died last week, was given a two-year suspended sentence in 2011 for embezzlement and misuse of public funds during his time as mayor of Paris.

Prosecutors say Sarkozy spent nearly 43 million euros (\$40 million) on his failed 2012 re-election bid - almost double the legal limit of 22.5 million euros (\$24.5m) - using fake invoices.

The former Republican party leader has said he was unaware of the fraud by executives at the public relations firm Bygmalion, who are among 13 others being pursued in the case. Since losing a 2012 election and leaving office, Sarkozy has fought a barrage of corruption and campaign financing charges,

all of which he rejects.

He faces another trial on charges of corruption and influence-peddling over his alleged attempts to try to get information from a judge about an investigation focused on him. He has also been charged over accusations he accepted millions of euros from the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi towards his first presidential campaign in 2007.

Sarkozy will face a standard criminal court, while Balladur, 90, will be tried by the Court of Justice of the Republic, a tribunal set up to hear cases of ministerial misconduct. The court has no jurisdiction over heads of state, except in treason cases.

Balladur and former Defense Minister Francois Leotard, 77, were charged in 2017 with "complicity in misuse of corporate assets" over the sale of submarines to Pakistan and frigates to Saudi Arabia when Balladur was prime minister, from 1993 to 1995.

The kickbacks are estimated at some 13 million francs - almost two million euros (\$2.2m) in today's money - which are suspected of including a cash donation to Balladur's 1995 presidential campaign of a little over 10 million francs, prosecutor Francois Molins said in a statement. Balladur also has to answer to a charge that he concealed the crimes.

The claims came to light during an investigation into a 2002 bombing in Karachi, Pakistan, which targeted a bus transporting French engineers. Fifteen people were killed, including 11 engineers working on the submarine contract.

Al-Qaeda was initially suspected of the attack, but the focus later shifted to the arms deal as investigators considered whether the bombing may have been revenge for the non-payment of promised bribes after Chirac pipped Balladur in the vote and cancelled the payment of commissions.

Balladur's lawyers on Tuesday said he was "confident" he would be cleared of any wrongdoing, "given that he never committed any of the acts of which he is accused."

Six others facing trial in the case include Balladur's campaign manager Nicolas Bazire; Thierry Gaubert, who worked for Sarkozy, who was budget minister at the time; and a French-Lebanese middleman, Ziad Takieddine. They will go on trial this month in a Paris criminal court.

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