

Former French president Sarkozy complains of being victim of six years of 'slander'



Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy

Paris, December 1 (RHC)-- Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy says he has been the victim of a six-year-long "slander," in his first comments to the court at his landmark trial on charges of corruption and influence peddling.

"I don't accept any of the slander that has been leveled at me over the past six years," 65-year-old right-winger Sarkozy, who led France from 2007 to 2012, told the criminal court in Paris on Monday, a week after he appeared at the dock.

The ex-president is accused of trying to bribe a magistrate in return for information about an investigation into his party finances 13 years ago.

According to prosecutors, Sarkozy and his then lawyer, Thierry Herzog, promised former senior judge, Gilbert Azibert, a plum retirement job in Monaco in exchange for inside information on an inquiry into claims he had accepted illicit payments during his 2007 presidential campaign.

The bribery probe saw Sarkozy become the first former president that was apprehended for questioning after the investigation was launched in 2014. The former French leader, who has already denounced the case as "a scandal that will go down in history," fought furiously to have the case thrown out, but all to no avail.

If convicted, Sarkozy risks a prison sentence of up to 10 years and a fine of \$1.2 million. Azibert, who was a senior advisor at France's highest appeals court at the time, and Sarkozy's lawyer Thierry Herzog are also on trial. Herzog faces the same charges and a further allegation of violating professional secrecy.

Sarkozy's court hearings have so far been disrupted due to the coronavirus pandemic and Azibert, a key figure in the case has not appeared in court due to a high risk of contracting COVID-19 given his long-term heart condition. The ex-president's hearing in his first trial opened on Monday after the court dismissed a request by Azibert's attorneys to have it postponed for medical reasons.

Sarkozy's case is known as the "wiretapping case" in France, because phone calls between him and his then lawyer were tapped in 2014, in which Sarkozy used the alias "Paul Bismuth" and they discussed Azibert. Sarkozy denied any wrongdoing, also underlining that Azibert did not get the Monaco position.

Only one other French president, Jacques Chirac, has been put on trial after leaving office. Chirac, who was president from 1995 to 2007, was convicted of misusing public funds by creating ghost jobs at Paris town hall. He was ultimately excused from having to attend his 2011 corruption trial due to ill health, but was given a two-year suspended sentence.

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