

Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy arrested in corruption case

By Alex Lantier
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The French judiciary took the unprecedented step yesterday morning of arresting former president Nicolas Sarkozy and placing him in 48-hour investigative detention in Nanterre police headquarters, near Paris.

Late last night, Sarkozy and his lawyer, Thierry Herzog, met with magistrates to discuss their possible indictment on charges of illegal influence peddling. They allegedly offered to help obtain a prestige post in Monaco for Gilbert Azibert—a prosecutor in the Court of Cassation, France’s highest appeals court—in exchange for providing inside information on multiple investigations into Sarkozy.

After the proceedings were over, early this morning, Sarkozy, Herzog and Azibert were indicted on multiple related charges of violating judicial proceedings, active corruption and influence peddling.

Sarkozy’s detention, as corruption scandals and faction fights envelop his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), is a serious blow to the prestige of the French state and political establishment. His predecessor, President Jacques Chirac, was found guilty in 2011 of illegally financing the UMP, receiving a two-year suspended sentence. Now, Sarkozy is the first French head of state to be detained since fascist dictator and Nazi collaborator Marshal Philippe Pétain was imprisoned on treason charges in 1945, after World War II.

The investigations into Sarkozy have brought to the surface not only the corruption of the top rungs of French officialdom, but the bitter divisions erupting inside the ruling class.

Since Sarkozy lost the 2012 presidential elections to the Socialist Party’s (PS’s) François Hollande, he has faced a mounting series of investigations. These include charges that his successful 2007 presidential

bid was illegally financed by Libyan colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who was murdered by NATO in the 2011 Libyan war, or by multimillionaire Liliane Bettencourt. Amid escalating factional infighting in the UMP over the last year, there were also detailed charges that his 2012 campaign cooked its books to hide that it had exceeded the legal spending limit of €22.5 million.

In this context, Sarkozy has moved to reclaim the presidency of the UMP as a stepping-stone to launching a bid for a second presidential term.

The current scandal emerged amid the escalating conflicts inside the UMP and more broadly within the state that were unleashed by these investigations. Wiretaps of Sarkozy and Herzog by officials investigating the Libyan case in January-February 2014 revealed that they had detailed information on the Court of Cassation’s deliberations on the case facing Sarkozy on the Bettencourt affair. It was on this basis that investigators made the connection with Azibert and a fellow high-ranking magistrate, Patrick Sassoust.

These conflicts take on all the greater significance amid the collapse of the Hollande administration, deeply discredited by its right-wing policies, and the rise of the neo-fascist National Front (FN). Hollande himself has said that he may not run for re-election. For now at least, it appears that the UMP’s 2017 presidential candidate would be the leading opponent of the FN candidate, who is widely anticipated to be party leader Marine Le Pen.

Yesterday, some UMP officials charged that the investigations into Sarkozy are politically motivated attempts to block his return to political life. “I am surprised that, fifteen days after the mention of a possible candidacy by Nicolas Sarkozy to become UMP president, there is a new judicial episode—like every time this possibility is raised,” said UMP deputy

Sébastien Huyghe.

Sarkozy's rivals in the top leadership of the UMP, who might consider their own 2017 presidential bids, did not support him yesterday, however. Former prime minister François Fillon refused to make an official statement on the matter, but the daily *Libération* wrote that Fillon had "privately" told them, "Sarkozy can never come back, because of the scandals."

PS officials, for their part, supported the investigation into Sarkozy. Government spokesman Stéphane le Foll told *iTélé*, "The judiciary is investigating, it must proceed to the end." Dismissing UMP charges that the charges were politically motivated, le Foll said, "Those saying that want to give the impression that things are occurring elsewhere."

Marine Le Pen insisted that the affairs meant that Sarkozy could not run in 2017: "Mr. Sarkozy has an absolutely incredible number of scandals facing him that await explanation. This is only one among many, and perhaps not the most serious. I think all this contributes to totally discredit any planned return of Sarkozy to political life, and in particular on the presidential scene."

What is emerging with the detention of Sarkozy and the scandals shaking the UMP is the bankruptcy of the entire political establishment and a crisis of class rule in France. Despite the discrediting of France's bourgeois "left" party of government, its traditional right-wing counterpart, the UMP, is unable to profit, instead descending further into a morass of scandal and factional conflict. With pro-PS pseudo-left parties such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) working to suppress opposition from the left and workers' struggles against Hollande, the main beneficiary is the FN and Marine Le Pen.

While there is every reason to believe that Sarkozy and his entourage have committed serious offenses, what the different factions of the French ruling class are fighting out with the Sarkozy indictment are matters of state going far beyond campaign finance scandals and influence peddling. Key decisions are being made, on the shape of the 2017 elections, that could determine such questions as whether France has a neo-fascist president.

The UMP in particular has found itself in a quandary as the PS has shifted far to the right, starting more wars and imposing tens of billions of euros more in social

cuts than Sarkozy. Unable to outflank the PS on the right without becoming virtually indistinguishable from the FN, the UMP is deeply divided over how to proceed.

Some sections, such as the Strong Right tendency of Guillaume Peltier, are pushing to brand the UMP more along the lines of the FN. Others—like Fillon and former prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who together with Alain Juppé have temporarily taken over leadership of the UMP since the ouster of Jean-François Copé over the 2012 campaign finance scandal—have called for allying with right-wing parties closer to the PS, such as the Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI) or the Democratic Movement (MoDem).

This has led to bitter infighting inside the UMP. Last month, Peltier, Laurent Wauquiez and two former top officials of the Sarkozy administration, Henri Guaino and Rachida Dati, issued a public appeal denouncing plans for closer ties to the UDI and MoDem. "We oppose the path proposed by some of a fusion with the MoDem and UDI, before even reflecting on our ideas. It is a panicked flight into the void, towards a type of socialist radicalism in which we would take the final steps towards betraying our ideals," Wauquiez claimed.

In fact, the policy differences between the PS, the UMP and the FN are constantly narrowing, as the entire ruling elite shifts sharply to the right. The indictment of Sarkozy sets the stage for even more violent infighting inside a reactionary political elite totally divorced from the broad masses of working people.

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