

Beat: Vips

Sarkozy under formal investigation in corruption probe

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USPA News - Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who lost his bid for re-election two years ago, has been placed under formal investigation on charges of corruption, French media reported on Wednesday, a day after the former leader was detained for questioning. Sarkozy, 59, is suspected of influence-peddling and is believed to have attempted to obstruct a previous inquiry into his election campaign seven years ago.

The former French president appeared before judges late on Tuesday night after spending the day in police custody for questioning. A formal investigation typically means that there is "serious or consistent evidence" implying the likely incrimination of a suspect, TV channel France24 reported. Investigators, after tapping phone conversations between Sarkozy and his lawyer, have accused the country's former leader of offering high-ranking judge Gilbert Azibert a prominent job in Monaco in exchange for information into the inquiry concerning illegal campaign funding. The initial inquiry stemmed from allegations that Sarkozy exploited the frail mental condition of one of the world's most wealthy women, French L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt, to obtain money for his election campaign. Sarkozy's lawyer Thierry Herzog, is also under federal investigation. "We oppose these facts that are based only on phone tapings which don't carry much weight and we intend to question their legality," Herzog's attorney Paul-Albert Iweins told reporters, as quoted by France24. In a joint interview with radio network Europe 1 and TV channel TF1 on Wednesday, Sarkozy refuted all accusations against him and claimed there had been "political interference" in the case. "Everything is done to give a picture of me that does not conform to reality," he said. Sarkozy added: "I want to tell those listening and those watching: I have never committed an act contrary to the republican principles or the rule of law. ... Last night convinced me to express myself here that I am deeply shocked at what has happened. ... I ask no privilege. And if I made mistakes, I will assume the consequences. I am not a man who flees his responsibilities." If Sarkozy is convicted, influence-peddling is punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine up to 500,000 euros (\$683,000). The corruption probe is the latest blow to hit the 59-year-old conservative politician following his 2012 election defeat after five years in office. As such, Sarkozy no longer has access to presidential immunity, a benefit he lost one month after leaving office in May 2012.

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