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French judges eavesdropped Sarkozy phone calls over Libya cash

Judicial sources say recorded call between former French President, his lawyer is basis for probe into suspected attempt to influence outcome of ongoing court proceedings in another corruption case.

By Nicolas GAUDICHET, Andrea Bambino

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Sarkozy under the spotlight again

Nicolas Sarkozy is suspected of attempting to pervert the course of justice on the basis of phone taps ordered by judges investigating his links with Moamer

Kadhafi, it emerged on Friday.

The revelation was the latest dramatic development in the labyrinthine web of corruption cases threatening to ensnare the former French president and destroy his chances of a political comeback.

Judges started tapping Sarkozy's phones last year after opening a formal investigation into allegations that the late former Libyan dictator Moamer Kadhafi helped finance his 2007 election campaign, according to respected daily Le Monde.

Judicial sources confirmed that a recorded call between Sarkozy and his lawyer Thierry Herzog was the basis for a new investigation opened last week into a suspected attempt to obtain, via a friendly judge, inside information about ongoing -- and top secret -- proceedings before one of France's highest courts.

The proceedings arise from another election financing scandal in which Sarkozy was embroiled and could have a profound influence on the outcome of yet another corruption case, centred on a 400-million-euro state payout to disgraced tycoon Bernard Tapie.

Herzog said Friday that Sarkozy "is probably still being tapped," and denounced what he said was a politically motivated plot against his client.

"There was no attempt to pervert the course of justice and in due course this monstrous violation will be shown to have been a political affair," the lawyer told AFP.

The ruling Socialist Party said the allegations against Sarkozy were extremely serious. "It is stupefying to think that a senior judge could have been secretly informing Sarkozy on developments in a legal case," said SP parliamentary spokesman David Assouline.

An investigation into allegations that Sarkozy accepted millions of euros from Kadhafi was opened in April 2013 on the basis of claims made by one of the dictator's sons, his interpreter and the man who allegedly delivered the cash.

According to Le Monde, the judges in charge of the Libya probe quickly decided they would be justified in tapping the phones of Sarkozy and two of his former ministers, Claude Gueant and Brice Hortefeux.

In December, they discovered that both Sarkozy and his lawyer, Herzog, had acquired second phones which they used exclusively for conversations between them.

It was once these phones were tapped that evidence which has formed the basis

for the probe launched last week came to light, according to Le Monde.

In one of the recorded conversations, Sarkozy and his lawyer discussed the possibility of approaching a senior judge in connection with a case before France's Court of Cassation.

- Diaries hold the key -

The Court is due to rule next week on whether examining magistrates investigating another election-financing scandal acted legally, notably in relation to the confiscation of Sarkozy's diaries.

The diaries were seized in connection with a probe into alleged illegal financing of Sarkozy's UMP party by France's richest woman Liliane Bettencourt, 91.

Charges that Sarkozy had taken advantage of the L'Oreal heiress when she was too frail to know what she was doing were dropped in October 2013.

But ten other people, including his former campaign treasurer Eric Woerth, have been sent for trial over the allegations that UMP officials were handed envelopes stuffed with cash from the Bettencourt coffers.

The ruling on the handling of the Bettencourt case is crucial because it has the potential to wreck investigators' attempts to build a case over the payout Tapie received from the state in connection with the collapse of the Credit Lyonnais bank.

Sarkozy is suspected of having rigged a dispute-settlement procedure to ensure Tapie got the cash as a thank you for the tycoon, previously a Socialist minister, supporting him in the 2007 election.

According to Le Monde, the diaries are crucial to the case against Sarkozy because they show how close he was to Tapie, who has several corruption convictions, including one for match-fixing when he was the boss of Olympique Marseille football club.

If the diaries are ruled to have been seized illegally in the Bettencourt case, they will also become inadmissible as evidence in the Tapie affair.

The latest Sarkozy developments came two days after an unrelated scandal erupted with the revelation that private conversations and meetings he had while president had been secretly recorded by a close aide.

The former president's request for an emergency injunction against further publication of the content of the tapes will be heard by a court on Monday.

The extracts published so far have included some mildly embarrassing material -
- aides referring to Sarkozy as "the dwarf" for example -- but nothing explosive.