

It Begins: Sarkozy's Home Raided by Police

Tuesday, 03 July 2012

French police have raided the home and offices of the former president Nicolas Sarkozy as part of an investigation into allegations of illegal campaign-financing by France's wealthiest woman.

Police searched the mansion rented by Carla Bruni in a chic gated community in the west of Paris early on Tuesday morning. She and Sarkozy have lived there since their marriage, in 2008.

Detectives also searched the office of the legal firm where Sarkozy is a partner and the office he moved into after losing the presidential election to the Socialist François Hollande in May.

The couple were not present as they had left for a holiday in Quebec on Monday, Sarkozy's lawyer said.

As president, Sarkozy was protected by judicial immunity but this expired on 16 June.

A judge in Bordeaux is investigating whether brown envelopes of illegal cash were given to Sarkozy's rightwing UMP party by France's wealthiest woman, the frail and ageing L'Oreal heir, Liliane Bettencourt, during the election campaign in 2007.

The investigating magistrate is trying to establish whether Sarkozy's campaign may have received €800,000 in illegal funding, and whether transfers from Swiss accounts may have been handed over to Sarkozy's campaign treasurer or even to Sarkozy himself.

In February, Eric Woerth, the former budget minister and treasurer of Sarkozy's ruling UMP party, was placed under judicial investigation over cash he was alleged to have received from Bettencourt to fund the 2007 campaign.

Sarkozy has denied any links to the scandal. Magistrates working on the cases have so far kept silent over whether they would call Sarkozy to testify.

The investigation is part of the wider Bettencourt saga, which has gripped France for years with plot twists including a disgruntled butler who hid a tape recorder in the drawing room and, crucially, whether security services at the head of the French state may have spied on journalists to hush it all up.

Sarkozy could also become a focus of a separate investigation into whether or not there was a shady cabinet noir at the highest reaches of the French government, which used the secret services to spy on journalists at Le Monde to uncover their sources for stories about the Bettencourt affair.

A security chief and Sarkozy ally has been placed under investigation in the alleged political spying scandal. Sarkozy has denied any involvement.