

# What makes you think Strauss-Kahn is guilty?

No one can be sure, but it's highly unlikely that the IMF boss would throw away his lifetime ambition like that

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What I am about to tell you in this column is almost certainly untrue. Indeed, it is probably a pack of lies and load of rubbish. Why then should you bother to read it? The best reason I can think of is that you have been reading lies and rubbish by the boatload for the past few days — and loving it.

I have no idea whether Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and the runaway poll favourite to be the next president of France, is guilty on any or all of the six counts of rape, forcible sex and unlawful imprisonment with which he was charged by the New York District Attorney.

Equally, I have no idea whether the whole episode was a pure fabrication concocted by a fantasist with a grudge against the future French president or, more likely, a KGB-style honey trap by panicking supporters of President Sarkozy or by anti-Semitic elements in the French intelligence sympathetic to the National Front (FN).

After all, it was only three weeks ago that Mr Strauss-Kahn told the French daily *Libération* that he faced three big personal hurdles in his campaign to

become president of France: "Money, women and being a Jew." He then volunteered a hypothetical example of the sort of charge that could bring him down: "A woman raped in a parking lot who is promised half a million euros to make up her story." On the principle of *cui bono*, considered since Roman times to be a useful guide to unravelling criminal mysteries, it is clear that both President Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen, the FN presidential candidate, have been big beneficiaries of this week's events.

This does not mean, of course, that anyone has a right to accuse the President of France or the National Front of creating this scandal. But neither does anyone have the right to assume that Mr Strauss-Kahn is guilty

## He anticipated exactly this danger just a few weeks ago

as charged, or indeed is guilty of anything at all.

The point of invoking the presumption of innocence for Mr Strauss-Kahn is not merely to restate a self-righteous platitude that is habitually ignored usually by the global media and the US judicial system. My real point is that the rush to judgment in an intensely political case such as this could have dangerous implications not only for France but for democracies around the world, potentially interposing judicial

systems and shadowy agencies of law enforcement between elected leaders and their voters.

The universal assumption, within minutes of Mr Strauss-Kahn's arrest (which incidentally French right-wing political blogs revealed well before the New York police), was that his political career was finished. Yet a reasonable balancing of the information available so far would suggest that Mr Strauss-Kahn should enjoy the benefit of the doubt to which he is legally entitled, at least for the time being.

I have no idea whether Mr Strauss-Kahn actually attempted to rape a woman or committed any other serious crime at the New York Sofitel, but I do know that a man who is about to achieve his lifetime ambition of becoming president is unlikely to throw it all away for a moment of sadistic sexual gratification, especially after anticipating exactly this danger just a few weeks ago.

It seems even more unlikely that a middle-aged man who is noted not only for his strong libido, but also for his calm, calculating nature, would emerge naked from his hotel bathroom, jump on a chambermaid, chase her priapically down the hallway, drag her into a room where he attempts to lock the door and then force her to perform a combination of oral and anal sex.

And if we believe all this, it is surely beyond the bounds of credibility that, having perpetrated all these crimes around noon, Mr Strauss-Kahn checked out of his room, sat down calmly at 1pm for lunch with his

daughter in a smart Manhattan restaurant, his defence team claimed, and then called the hotel to inquire about a mobile phone that he had left behind at the crime scene.

It may all be true, of course. But then again, it may all be false. More likely still, there may be some truth to the allegations. For example, if it turns out that what happened at the Sofitel was some kind of pre-arranged sexual encounter, perhaps with a woman who

## Democracies should not be subverted by innuendo or conspiracy

had been hired to seduce Mr Strauss-Kahn, then the political implications of this sordid episode could be truly alarming.

The worry is not just that the people of France will be denied the opportunity to vote for the man they seemed to favour for the presidency. It is not even that an extremist such as Marine Le Pen will gain the credibility of beating the Socialists in the first round of the French election, pushing European politics even further towards the xenophobic Right. Worse still is the encouragement that this case could offer to anti-democratic forces all over the world.

In recent years many of the world's leading politicians have been embroiled in sex scandals that have come close to terminating their careers — Bill Clinton, Silvio Berlusconi, Jacob

Zuma. This may be shocking but is probably inevitable, since politics and libido appear to be strongly correlated. Where politicians are convicted with due process, as Moshe Katsav, the former President of Israel, was last year, then they should of course be treated like any other criminals. But Anwar Ibrahim, now the leader of the opposition in Malaysia, was convicted of homosexual rape on what was almost certainly a trumped-up charge.

In a world where the treatment of women as sexual playthings is no longer tolerated, the indiscretions of former politicians such as President Kennedy would no longer be acceptable. But it is equally unacceptable that democracies should be subverted by sexual innuendos and conspiracies. This is how the Republican Party tried to overturn the will of American voters with their impeachment of President Clinton. Thankfully they failed.

But imagine if Monica Lewinsky had been a Republican extremist who drew President Clinton into consensual sex and then accused him of rape. Could something similar have happened in the New York Sofitel? I have no idea — but neither do you.

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