

# Political lessons of the Strauss-Kahn affair

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The overnight discrediting of the rape prosecution of former IMF managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn is an event that suddenly and unexpectedly lays bare the state of political life. It says a great deal about the contemporary political process and the methods of provocation and media manipulation that are used to condition public opinion, especially in the United States.

It is now an open question whether the allegation that Strauss-Kahn sexually assaulted a hotel maid in his room at the Sofitel Hotel in Manhattan will ever be placed before a jury. The complaining witness has lost all credibility after the prosecution's public admission that she lied to the grand jury about the events surrounding the alleged assault, lied in the past about another rape allegation, and discussed with her boyfriend, a jailed drug trafficker, the prospects for financial gain from the case.

From the time of Strauss-Kahn's arrest, there were reasons to be troubled by the process underway in New York City. The arrest was accompanied by a frenzied media campaign to declare Strauss-Kahn guilty, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, whose columnist Maureen Dowd described the arrested man as "a crazed, rutting, wrinkly old satyr." The New York district attorney's office rushed to obtain an indictment before conducting any serious examination of the evidence.

Strauss-Kahn occupied one of the most critical positions for world capitalism, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, in which capacity he had come into conflict with the economic policies of the US government. He was expected to win the presidential nomination of the French Socialist Party later this year, and was the early favorite to defeat the right-wing incumbent, Nicolas Sarkozy. Within five days of his arrest, under heavy US pressure, he was forced to resign from the IMF, where he was replaced by his

American deputy.

This was not the first time in recent years that a highly placed individual was suddenly at the center of a lurid sex scandal. There have been repeated examples of such charges being used for political purposes, to settle scores or provide a definite impetus, generally of a right-wing character, to the course of American and world politics.

In the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, ultra-right forces instigated and manipulated a media-driven sex scandal aimed at overturning the results of two presidential elections. In March 2008, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer was forced to resign in the early stages of the Wall Street crisis brought on by financial swindling that he had sought to investigate. Most recently, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been jailed and threatened with extradition on preposterous charges of sexual assault, concocted by those opposed to his exposures of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are a host of lesser examples.

When Strauss-Kahn was arrested May 14, the *World Socialist Web Site* took a critical approach to the media campaign, pointing out that it was as yet impossible to know the facts of the case and that there were important issues of principle at stake.

We wrote: "In his class position, privilege and social outlook, Strauss-Kahn stands for everything the *World Socialist Web Site* opposes. But he is also a human being who is entitled to democratic rights, which include legal due process and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Judging from the treatment of Strauss-Kahn since his arrest and the coverage of this event in the American media, this presumption does not exist."

The representatives of left-liberal and pseudo-socialist tendencies in the United States, such as the *Nation* magazine and the International Socialist Organization, took a diametrically opposed stand. They

joined in the media witch-hunt of Strauss-Kahn, declaring his guilt to be a fact, without any actual evidence, and arguing stridently as advocates of the victim.

In their political judgments, the identity of the victim, an immigrant woman and single mother from West Africa, and the sexual nature of the alleged crime were the decisive factors, not the evidence. They rejected out of hand the possibility that the case against Strauss-Kahn was being manipulated to serve reactionary political ends.

No one can approach such allegations in a serious fashion without considering their political context. That includes the very real possibility—as was the case in the Clinton impeachment, for example—that the sex scandal may have been deliberately devised as a political trap for the politician being targeted.

The WSWS pointed this out in the case of Strauss-Kahn, asking: “Why is it mad to believe that Strauss-Kahn has powerful enemies who have the means to set him up, or, at the very least, exploit the opportunity presented by the affair to finish him politically? To exclude that possibility is not only politically absurd, it effectively closes off a critical area of investigation. Can one imagine that investigators would not ask Strauss-Kahn if there were people who might be interested in, and capable of, setting him up? Or that investigators should not look into the associations of his accuser?”

We now know that “the associations of his accuser” include a drug-dealing “fiancé” and unnamed “friends” who deposited more than \$100,000 in cash into the woman’s bank accounts in four states. More evidence, particularly about the connections between these “associates” and government agencies in both the United States and France, may well come to light as the investigation unfolds.

Even after the discrediting of the alleged victim, there are still liberals and feminists howling for the head of Strauss-Kahn. Maureen Dowd, in her *New York Times* column Sunday, continued to brand Strauss-Kahn a “predator,” while conceding that the woman housekeeper was a “habitual liar.” She concluded that in such a case “the perp can often get away with it.”

A truly reactionary column appeared in the British liberal newspaper *Guardian* by Katrin Axelson, denouncing any suggestion that the case against Strauss-

Kahn should be dropped. Her response to the demonstration that the alleged victim had repeatedly lied is, in effect, “So what?” She writes: “But why is a woman’s credibility relevant to a charge when that of the accused is not? Does that mean a rape charge can be dismissed?”

The implication of this position for democratic rights is staggering. Axelson writes as if the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth amendments to the US Constitution do not exist. The long and bitter struggle to protect individuals from vindictive and unjust prosecution by the state matters nothing to her.

Anyone accused of rape, as far as Axelson is concerned, should not be allowed to challenge the credibility of the testimony against him. Nothing remains of the presumption of innocence. Ms. Axelson does not seem to know, and certainly does not care, that it is the task of the prosecution in a criminal case to prove the guilt of the defendant *beyond a reasonable doubt*. For Axelson and her ilk, the charge of rape is self-validating and above all criticism.

As a writer, Ms. Axelson is of no consequence. But she does represent a quite distinct social milieu, composed of more affluent sections of the upper-middle class, which wallows in various forms of identity politics—fixated on gender, sexuality, ethnicity or race—which serve as a cloak for its own egotistical and reactionary class interests.

The ruling elite learned long ago how to cultivate and exploit the narrow social interests of these upper-middle class layers in its own interests. It is only a matter of raising certain hot button issues relating to personal “identity” to line them up behind economic and political initiatives of importance to the lords of finance capital.

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