

Dominique Strauss-Kahn victim of Conspiracy: Lawyer

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A detailed study has unearthed fresh doubts over alleged rape and sexual assault charges in New York against former IMF chief, Dominique Strauss Kahn.



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New questions have been raised about the events in the New York hotel room where the former International Monetary Fund head and French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn was alleged to have sexually assaulted a hotel maid.

The case against Strauss-Kahn was eventually dramatically dropped by a Manhattan court, but the scandal forced him to resign his IMF post and destroyed his chances of becoming the leading leftwing candidate to challenge Nicolas Sarkozy for the French presidency.

An exhaustively researched article in the New York Review of Books, published by veteran American investigative journalist Edward Jay Epstein, has cast fresh doubt on exactly what happened in the Sofitel hotel room on 14 May between Strauss-Kahn and his accuser, Guinean-born maid Nafissatou Diallo.

In passages sure to delight Strauss-Kahn supporters and conspiracy theorists, Epstein's lengthy article studied hotel door key and phone records and traced links to Strauss-Kahn's potential political rivals, appearing to suggest the possibility that he had been set up.

Such allegations have been raised before, especially by some French media commentators. Some polls taken in France as the scandal dominated world headlines revealed sympathy for Strauss-Kahn. One showed that 57% of French people thought he had been the victim of a smear campaign. Diallo and her lawyers, however, have maintained that she was the victim of an unprovoked attack. She is now suing the French statesman in a civil court, which could result in a hefty damages award.

But Epstein's article does appear to raise some odd questions about the case. It points out numerous holes and discrepancies in the accounts of those who portrayed Strauss-Kahn as an attacker, identifies a missing BlackBerry which may contain warnings to the Frenchman that he was being set up, and examines possible links between Sofitel staff and Strauss-Kahn's political opponents.

The most unusual evidence described by Epstein is a security video of the hotel's engineer, Brian

Yearwood, and an unidentified man apparently celebrating the day's events. Earlier, Yearwood had been communicating with John Sheehan, a security expert at Accor, which owns Sofitel, and whose boss, René-Georges Querry, once worked with a man now in intelligence for Sarkozy.

The unidentified man with Yearwood had been spotted previously on hotel security cameras accompanying Diallo to the hotel's security office after the alleged attack. The video shows the men near the area where Diallo is recounting her story and, less than two minutes after police have been called, they seem to congratulate each other. "The two men high-five each other, clap their hands, and do what looks like an extraordinary dance of celebration that lasts for three minutes. They are then shown standing by the service door ... apparently waiting for the police to arrive," Epstein writes.

Epstein meticulously pieces together the movements of hotel staff and Strauss-Kahn by examining the electronic records left by their room keys and phones. These show Diallo entered the room between 12.06 and 12.07pm. At 12.13pm, Strauss-Kahn called his daughter about having lunch. During those six or seven minutes, Diallo said she was brutally sexually attacked and dragged around the room.

Strauss-Kahn has conceded that a sexual encounter took place but that it was consensual. By 12.28pm, he had left the hotel and by 12.54pm he had arrived at a restaurant to meet his daughter. Meanwhile, the records show that at 12.26pm Diallo entered a nearby room - number 2820 - which she had visited several times that morning before its guest had checked out. A few minutes later, she returned to Strauss-Kahn's vacated room and soon after reported an attack to her supervisor. Sofitel has refused to name the occupant of room 2820. During her account to investigators, Diallo did not reveal that she had visited 2820, so the room was not searched by police.

Another potentially odd fact turned up by the room-key records Epstein examined was that another hotel employee, room service worker Syed Haque, also entered Strauss-Kahn's hotel room just one minute before Diallo, apparently to pick up dishes. The keys only record entries, not exits, so it is not known when Haque left. Haque has refused to be interviewed by Strauss-Kahn's lawyers.

A final twist is provided by Strauss-Kahn's missing BlackBerry. Sources close to Strauss-Kahn have told Epstein that the Frenchman believed the device might be the subject of electronic surveillance. They claimed that a friend of Strauss-Kahn working as a researcher for Sarkozy's party in Paris had sent him a text that morning, warning him that at least one email possibly sent from that BlackBerry to Strauss-Kahn's wife had turned up at her party offices and been read by her colleagues.

They also claimed another friend in the French diplomatic corps had warned him that he might be embarrassed by a scandal. That morning, Epstein claims, Strauss-Kahn rang his wife and asked her to ask a friend to arrange for his BlackBerry and iPad to be seen by experts. However, the BlackBerry, with all its messages, went missing that day. It was about this phone that Strauss-Kahn rang the hotel from his taxi on the way to the airport, which allowed staff to tip police off about his whereabouts. He also asked his daughter to search for it at the restaurant where they had lunch. A security video shows her looking for it under tables. Records kept by BlackBerry show the device was disabled at 12.51pm, stopping it from sending out signals showing its location. The phone, which does not appear to have left the Sofitel, has never been found.

Sarkozy's ruling UMP party has dismissed allegations of a political plot. The secretary-general of the UMP, Jean-François Cope, said allegations of a political plot were a clumsy manipulation. "As long as these are just allegations based on anonymous testimony we know nothing about, you will understand that we remain extremely cautious and are not fooled," Cope said. "Let me say that it's a

bit obvious as a manipulation."

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