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HHR Paris Wins Acquittal for Former French PM in Corruption Trial

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March 5, 2021 - HHR Paris won an acquittal for Edouard Balladur before the Court of Justice of the Republic in the former French prime minister's trial over allegations that he financed his 1995 presidential campaign with illegal kickbacks from international arms deals.

On March 4, a 15-judge panel exonerated the 91-year-old politician after 20 years of public accusations. The Court, which hears cases involving government officials' conduct, found that Balladur was never involved in a fraudulent system of kickbacks; that financing for his presidential campaign in 1995 was legal; and that he was not responsible, even indirectly, for a bombing that occurred in Karachi, Pakistan in 2002 that had been linked to the kickbacks.

Balladur and his former defense minister, François Léotard, were both charged in 2017 with "complicity in the misuse of corporate assets" over the sale of submarines to Pakistan and frigates to Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1995.

Investigators found an estimated 10 million francs (now worth nearly 1.5 million euros) in alleged kickbacks from the deal. The prosecution claimed that the money was funneled to Balladur's 1995 campaign while he was serving as prime minister in the final years of François Mitterrand's presidency. Balladur denied any wrongdoing, insisting that funding for his campaign came from donations and sales at election rallies.

The allegations surfaced during investigations into a 2002 bombing of a bus carrying French nationals in Karachi that left 15 people dead, including 11 French defense engineers. Survivors eventually viewed the bombing as revenge for the cancellation by President Jacques Chirac of commission payments for the arms deals. This lead was nonetheless abandoned.

During the trial, which began in Paris on Jan. 19, Balladur's defense denounced "proceedings based on rumors and launched on the basis of intellectual constructs." His attorneys, supported by detailed facts, contradicted the accusations made by the prosecution. The defense also raised several fundamental rules of criminal law during the proceedings, including statute of limitations, burden of proof, the principle of personal liability and the presumption of innocence.

In his closing argument, HHR partner Félix de Belloy stated, "The presumption of innocence is the fundamental principle of our law since the Revolution. If doubt persists, it must benefit the person implicated. Since the proof of guilt is not made, the proof of innocence is made."

The Court agreed with de Belloy and acquitted Balladur. Léotard was given a two-year suspended sentence and fined 100,000 euros for "complicity" in the misuse of public funds. Léotard will appeal the conviction.

"I welcome the ruling by the Cour de Justice de la République, which finally recognizes my innocence," Balladur said. "I can only deplore the fact that it took a quarter of a century of self-serving and organized slander to get there. In any event, it has been established that this case has no connection with the Karachi attack that claimed the lives of 11 of our compatriots in 2002. And 20 years on, the justice system is still no further forward in establishing the motives or finding the perpetrators."

The acquittal drew widespread media coverage, including in [the Financial Times](#), [BBC.com](#), [The Guardian](#) and [Le Monde](#).

In addition to de Belloy, Ralph Moughanie in HHR's Paris office defended Balladur, with assistance from François Martineau, a partner at French law firm Lussan & Associés.

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