

EUROPE

Dominique Strauss-Kahn's Defense: He Didn't Know Prostitutes Were at the Orgies

By DAN BILEFSKY FEB. 10, 2015

LILLE, France — There was testimony about lavish sex parties with high-flying power brokers and prostitutes. There were questions about whether certain sex acts were entirely consensual, and the finer points of libertinage. For good measure, topless protesters threw themselves at the car carrying the chief defendant, a man once expected to be president of France, Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

Yet the burlesque-like atmosphere at his trial, and that of 13 others accused of pimping and abetting prostitution, in the northern city of Lille on Tuesday was perhaps topped only by the silver-haired Mr. Strauss-Kahn's defense: Lust is no crime.

“When you read the criminal complaint, you get the impression it was this unbridled activity,” Mr. Strauss-Kahn told the court, “but it was four times a year.” The rest of the time, he was too busy trying to save the global economy as head of the International Monetary Fund, he said.

In any case, his lawyers argued publicly before the trial, everyone looks the same without clothes, and who can really tell the difference between a prostitute and a naked socialite at an orgy?

If Mr. Strauss-Kahn, 65, who has sought to remake his image in pursuit of public redemption, had hoped that the spectacle surrounding his legal troubles and lifestyle would have receded since the allegations against him first broke in 2011, it was not to be.

The trial, which began last week and is expected to last three weeks, is only the latest legal challenge for Mr. Strauss-Kahn, who scaled the heights of the French establishment and of international banking before a series of scandals sent his political career crashing. In 2011, he resigned as head of the I.M.F. after he was

accused of sexually assaulting a housekeeper at a hotel in New York. The charges were later dropped, and a lawsuit was settled.

The case has titillated France, exposing trans-Atlantic orgies from Lille to Paris to Washington, attended by judges, lawyers, journalists and police officials. And in a country where the privacy of public figures has long been considered sacrosanct, some have cringed along with Mr. Strauss-Kahn as details of his sexual predilections, described as “animal” during testimony on Tuesday by a prostitute identified only as Mounia, have been dissected in front of the global news media.

Others, however, have applauded the trial for challenging a culture in which men can behave badly, as long as it remains behind closed doors.

Not least in France, where sex with prostitutes is not illegal but soliciting and pimping are, the case has generated questions about whether the laws against prostitution should be updated. Some argue that the country should adopt Sweden’s practice of prosecuting the clients of prostitution rather than the prostitutes themselves, some of whom can be victims of abuse, coercion or trafficking.

At the opening of the trial, Judge Bernard Lemaire said that the court was not an arbiter of public morality but was adjudicating whether laws had been broken.

If convicted, Mr. Strauss-Kahn could face up to 10 years in prison and fines of more than 1.5 million euros, or \$1.7 million.

Mr. Strauss-Kahn acknowledged being present at sex parties. But he said he had played no part in organizing them, and he insisted that he had not been aware that some of the women at the parties were prostitutes.

Given his position at the I.M.F., and his political ambitions, he said he would never have attended had he been aware of that fact. “It would’ve been far too dangerous,” he said, noting that prostitutes could have been susceptible to “pressures.”

Mr. Strauss-Kahn characterized the sex parties as libertinage, or freewheeling sex and pleasure among multiple and consensual partners, an age-old and legal practice in France dating from the 16th century.

He said the festive nature of libertinage would have been sullied had he known that the women were being paid for sex. Supporting his case, Fabrice Paszkowski, a businessman accused of being one of the main organizers of the orgies, told the court on Tuesday that he had never told Mr. Strauss-Kahn that the women had been paid.

“I dare you to distinguish between a prostitute and a naked socialite,” Mr. Strauss-Kahn’s lawyer, Henri Leclerc, told Europe 1 radio after the accusations against his client emerged in 2011.

But Mr. Strauss-Kahn’s professed ignorance prompted Judge Lemaire to ask Tuesday, with more than a hint of sardonic doubt, whether he was naïve.

Mounia, a prostitute who met Mr. Strauss-Kahn at a sex party in 2010 at the chic Murano hotel in Paris, told the court that it had been obvious that those at the party were prostitutes, even though she acknowledged that money was never spoken of.

She said she had not been dressed revealingly and that Mr. Strauss-Kahn had forced her to engage in a “brutal” act. He denied that, saying that “no” meant “no.”

Judge Lemaire said: “In libertinage, there are consensual relations and pleasure. Were there consensual relations and pleasure?”

“No, that was not the case,” she answered. “I felt like an object.”

Jade, another prostitute at the Murano hotel party, said she had been engaged in prostitution, not libertinage. “I was not a person, but a thing that was supposed to complete a task,” she told the court.

She said she had also been paid 2,000 euros to meet Mr. Strauss-Kahn in Washington. She said she had not realized that Mr. Strauss-Kahn was famous “until I saw him on television with his clothes on.”

Mr. Strauss-Kahn, while confident and resolved, has seemed a much diminished figure in court. Dressed in a dark suit, he has appeared alongside a cast of defendants, including a former Lille police chief, several local businessmen and Dominique Alderweireld, a sex club owner known as Dodo la Saumure, all of whom are accused of facilitating the hiring of prostitutes for the sex parties. Mr. Alderweireld named one of his clubs the DSK, though he has since closed it. (Mr. Strauss-Kahn has sued him for using his initials, but Mr. Alderweireld contends that DSK stands for Dodo Sex Klub.)

At the center of the trial is the Carlton Hotel in Lille, which, with its faded glamour, palatial suites, marble statues, plastic flowers and ornate furniture in the style of Louis XVI, was a nexus for some of the orgies.

Mr. Strauss-Kahn, who has been trying to resurrect his career by advising foreign countries like Serbia as well as companies in Russia, Latin America and Africa, has repeatedly said he never set foot in the hotel. Just steps from the main square, the hotel has become synonymous with a sex scandal that has brought

notoriety to this picturesque city, not far from the Belgian border.

The timing of the case, which came to light when Mr. Strauss-Kahn was being spoken of as a leading candidate for the 2012 presidential election, has also raised questions. Mr. Strauss-Kahn's defense team has argued that the pimping accusations were a result of illegal tapping of Mr. Strauss-Kahn's telephone to try to ensnare him in a scandal and upend his political ambitions.

While conspiracy theories have swirled, Mr. Strauss-Kahn's defense has been supported by the fact that the Lille prosecutor recommended in 2013 that the charges be dropped, indicating that the evidence was feeble, at best. But the magistrates investigating the case overruled the prosecutor and decided to proceed to trial.

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