

Scandal detracts from serious international business

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Dominique Strauss-Kahn resigned last week as the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) amid allegations of sexual assault in New York City — leading to larger questions of how this will affect French politics and financial matters across Europe. Natalie Bormann, a visiting assistant professor of political science at Northeastern University, assesses the implications of this situation and the media coverage that followed.

What are the implications of these events for the French presidential election and the dynamic of the country's political parties?

Dominique Strauss-Kahn was assumed to play a key role in the upcoming French election, and thus, this scandal could affect the election in many ways. The socialists will clearly need to redesign their election strategy, as will President Nicolas Sarkozy. The scandal also certainly plays into the hands of the Front National, which has been running on an 'anti-elite' platform. In a wider context, the scandal has shaken up France's international reputation somewhat. There has always been a tad of contempt — by some — with regard to France's supposed overrepresentation in international institutions.

What impact will this scandal have on the IMF and the debt crisis in Europe?

There have been demands to appoint a non-European IMF chief, while others are quick to note the IMF's chief is far less relevant than the institution itself. Regardless of Strauss-Kahn's successor, it is unlikely that there will be any major shift in the overall philosophy of the IMF.

In a way, the shift in attention — away from the details of the European debt crisis, involving Ireland, Greece and Portugal, and toward the sex scandal — is disappointing and even dangerous. The IMF's move to bail out yet another EU debtor ought to be scrutinized harshly: To begin with, the IMF appears to have moved toward becoming the extended financial arm of the EU, and these bailouts come with austerity measures that burden ordinary EU citizens. Portugal will deliver the price for its 78 billion Euro package by way of enforcing strict public spending cuts, and such strategy continues to be a point of contention in Greece.

What is the public's response to this situation in France, and has the media played a role this?

The media was quick to situate the [scandal](#) within the contours of the supposed cultural differences between the United States and France on a number of levels. For instance, there is a focus on the ways in which the French were seemingly outraged at the American criminal justice system, in particular at showcasing Strauss-Kahn as already guilty. In similar fashion, the nature of the alleged charges was discussed and made intelligible through a dichotomized cultural lens: The puritan American versus the permissive French, suggesting that this alleged sexual misbehavior is more common or more accepted in French society. This is, of course, not the case.

On a different, yet, related note regarding the media: The affair has been a classic instance in which political bodies and activities — the IMF, the French elections — were personalized to the detriment of their political

contexts and complexities. This is not to suggest that we can, or should, separate the personal from the political. However, the media coverage of Strauss-Kahn and especially the ‘perp walk’ photos may lead to a focus on personality rather than the bigger issues at stake.

Provided by Northeastern University

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