

French politicians convicted in money-laundering

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Paris — A French court convicted the spokesman for President Jacques Chirac's party in a money-laundering scandal eight years ago on Monday, the latest guilty verdict to rattle the party.

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Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, spokesman for Mr. Chirac's Union for a Popular Movement, was fined about \$25,000 Canadian for his role in the secret financing of the now-defunct Republican party in 1996.

Former defence minister and Republican leader François Léotard, meanwhile, was convicted and given a 10-month suspended prison term for having financed the party with "false loans" in 1996.

Mr. Donnedieu de Vabres was office director for Mr. Léotard while he served as defence minister from 1993-95. They were convicted of helping deliver almost \$1.2 million in government money to an Italian company that then returned the cash to the party in the form of a loan that was never declared.

It was not immediately clear whether either would appeal. Neither they nor their lawyers spoke to reporters after the verdicts were announced.

The verdicts were the latest to expose broadly employed techniques of improper funding for political parties in France. The verdicts have hit close to home for Mr. Chirac.

The decisions against Mr. Léotard, who has retired from politics, and Mr. Donnedieu de Vabres involved funding through improper loans to the Republican party in 1996 — before it became part of Chirac's Mr. UMP party.

Last month, former prime minister Alain Juppé, one of Mr. Chirac's closest allies, was found guilty of having a role in another party-financing scandal when they served at Paris's city hall. Mr. Juppé was finance director for Mr. Chirac during part of his tenure as Paris mayor in 1977-95.

Mr. Juppé, president of the UMP, received a suspended 18-month sentence and was barred from running for office for 10 years. He is appealing the verdict and has said he will leave politics if the decision is upheld.

There had been efforts to question Mr. Chirac in the Juppé case, in which city funds were used to pay staff of another UMP predecessor party, the Rally for the Republic. Mr. Chirac, however, is protected by presidential immunity, which he will lose if not re-elected in 2007.

