

Spain's PM declines to testify in wife's graft probe

AFP- Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez refused on Tuesday to answer question from a judge investigating alleged influence-peddling by his wife, a case that has put pressure on his fragile minority government.

Judge Juan Carlos Peinado, who is heading the preliminary inquiry, went to Sanchez's official residence to question the Socialist prime minister as a witness but he invoked his right not to testify, lawyers who were present at the hearing told reporters.

Under Spanish law, one can refuse to answer questions in a case affecting close family members, including spouses.

"The hearing lasted exactly two minutes," Antonio Camacho, the lawyer for Sanchez's wife Begona Gomez, told reporters outside the residence, adding that Sanchez was "absolutely calm".

Gomez also invoked her right to remain silent under questioning by the judge earlier this month.

She has not spoken publicly about the case but Sanchez has denied any wrongdoing by his wife and dismissed the allegations as part of a right-wing smear campaign against his left-wing government.

The case has stoked acrimony and the main opposition conservative opposition Popular Party (PP) has urged Sanchez to resign.

"Sanchez has not wanted to testify before the courts but he will answer to the Spanish people," PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo wrote on social network X shortly after the hearing ended.

– ‘Look bad’ –

Gomez is being investigated for alleged influence-peddling and corruption following a complaint filed by an anti-graft NGO “Manos Limpias” – Spanish for “Clean Hands” – which has links to the far right.

The only time a sitting Spanish prime minister has testified in a judicial case was in 2017, when Mariano Rajoy was summoned in a graft case that led to the conviction of several members of his party, the PP.

Sanchez asked to testify in writing, as allowed under Spanish law for top government officials, but Peinado rejected the request, arguing he would quiz him in his role as Gomez’s spouse.

The premier has the right to remain silent but “politically this could look bad”, University of Alicante criminal law professor Bernardo del Rosal told AFP.

“It could create the image that he is arrogant,” he added.

Sanchez presided over a regular cabinet meeting on Tuesday morning and is set to travel to the Mediterranean island of Mallorca for a summer holiday audience with King Felipe VI.

Gomez, who has worked in fundraising for years, is alleged to have used her husband’s position as leverage within her professional circles, notably with businessman Juan Carlos Barrabes, who was seeking public funding.

In his testimony, Barrabes – who teaches part of a master’s course at Madrid’s Complutense University that is run by Gomez – acknowledged meeting her several times at the premier’s official residence.

Sanchez was present at two of those meetings, he said.

Barrabes – who obtained two letters of recommendation from

Gomez before pitching for a public tender worth several million euros (dollars) – said they only talked about matters of innovation, judicial sources said.

– Controversial decisions –

Spanish prosecutors have failed to have the case dismissed.

Sanchez's supporters have accused Peinado, whose daughter is a PP city councillor, of political bias.

The judge has taken controversial decisions seen as favouring the right.

In 2015 he accepted another Manos Limpias complaint over tweets made by two left-wing Madrid city councillors deemed offensive.

Peinado allowed a lawyer from the far-right party Vox to accompany him to question Sanchez as part of the probe.

Vox is taking part in the investigation as a so-called "popular prosecutor" – a set-up under Spanish law that allows citizens or organisations to be an accuser in court.

When the probe was opened in April, Sanchez took five days off to consider his future but ultimately stayed on.

Sanchez, who has been in office since 2018, has struggled to pass legislation since he returned to power last year after an inconclusive general election.

AFP