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Belarus Protests Turn Violent as Opposition Candidates Barred from Elections

By Tatiana Kalinovskaya for AFP

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Hundreds of protesters rallied and scuffled with police in Belarus on Tuesday with more than 100 people detained after officials barred President Alexander Lukashenko's main rivals from running in an election in August.

Hundreds of people took to the streets of the capital Minsk on Tuesday evening, walking peacefully and clapping as passing drivers honked their horns in support.

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But in scenes previously unseen during a recent wave of protests, some also scuffled with police and others cried out "Shame!" and whistled.

Rallies also took place in a number of provincial cities including Brest and Gomel.

Human rights group Viasna said more than 100 people including over 70 in Minsk were detained. Those arrested included around 10 journalists.

Lukashenko, a former collective farm chief, has been president for 26 years and will seek his sixth term in the Aug. 9 election. He will stand against four candidates including a woman opposition activist.

Earlier Tuesday the central electoral commission rejected two major opposition candidates, citing alleged violations including incorrect income declarations and a failure to gather required signatures.

It voted against Lukashenko's strongest election rival, Viktor Babaryko, a 56-year-old former banker who was arrested last month over suspected financial crimes.

It also rejected the candidacy of Valery Tsepkalo, 55, a former ambassador to Washington and another popular opposition figure.

The poll is going ahead despite the country of 9 million people confirming more than 65,000 coronavirus cases. Lukashenko has refused to impose a strict lockdown.

Belarus has seen a turbulent summer of protests and arrests of would-be opposition candidates, with Babaryko seen as the strongest potential opponent.

"It's a clear sign that the authorities are afraid," said his spokeswoman Maria Kolesnikova.

"The authorities removed the strongest candidates and left the weakest," Radio Free Europe political analyst Valery Karbalevich told AFP.

He said a genuine fight was possible only if the remaining opposition candidates chose a single one of them to stand, to avoid dividing the vote.

Central electoral commission head Lidiya Yermoshina read out a letter from the state control committee, an audit body, alleging that Babaryko was part of an "organized criminal group" and failed to declare all his money and assets in 2019.

A lawyer representing Babaryko told the commission the accusations were part of a criminal case that has not yet been heard.

The electoral chief also said Babaryko had used foreign financing for his campaign, referring to the use of staff and resources from his former workplace, the Belarusian subsidiary of Russian state bank Gazprombank.

Babaryko is incarcerated in the prison of the KGB security service.

His team told reporters they would contest the decision on his candidacy at the Supreme Court.

The commission also rejected the other main opposition candidate, Tsepkalo, who took part in the summer protests. It cited a lack of valid signatures and an allegedly incorrectly filled-

out earnings declaration.

Tsepkalo also said he would appeal the decision.

The commission registered five candidates including Lukashenko. He said he will not campaign as a candidate on state media, which already cover his activities in detail.

The commission allowed the candidacy of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the 37-year-old wife of a jailed vlogger who stood for president after her husband was barred.

Tikhanovskaya's husband, 41-year-old Sergei Tikhanovsky, nicknamed Lukashenko the "cockroach" and his campaign slogan was "Stop the cockroach." His supporters waved slippers — often used to kill the insects — at protests.

Tikhanovsky has been charged with organizing a gross breach of public order and barred from running. He is in a police jail and faces a possible prison term if convicted.

Amnesty International has recognised him as a prisoner of conscience along with Babaryko.

Key opposition politician Mikola Statkevich was barred earlier from standing and is currently in jail. He spent five years behind bars between 2010 and 2015.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which carries out international election and war monitoring, has not recognised any elections in Belarus as free and fair since 1995.

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