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Tens of Thousands March in Belarus Despite Police Detentions

By AFP

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Tass

Belarusian police on Sunday detained around 200 people as tens of thousands took to the streets in support of protest figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya days after the country's strongman president staged a secret inauguration.

The opposition movement calling for an end to President Alexander Lukashenko's regime has kept up a wave of large-scale demonstrations since his disputed election win last month, with around 100,000 or more people taking to the streets every weekend.

AFP correspondents estimated a similar turnout on Sunday as crowds built up in Minsk despite rain.

Tens of thousands of protesters including prominent athletes, drummers and a choir marched through the capital, with some demonstrators sporting cardboard crowns.

"We have elected our president," said protester Eleonora Naumova, holding a portrait of Lukashenko's opposition rival Tikhanovskaya.

"We don't want to live in a concentration camp," the 48-year-old designer said.

Another protester, 36-year-old Sergei Mikhailov, said he wanted Belarus to become free and safe.

Wearing a makeshift crown from Burger King, he said: "If every impostor here can be crowned so why not me too?"

Armoured vehicles and water cannon were deployed on the streets ahead of the protest, several metro stations in central Minsk were closed, and the Palace of Independence, Lukashenko's residence, was heavily guarded by riot police and barriers.

Interior ministry spokeswoman Olga Chemodanova told AFP that "around 200" people were detained across Belarus.

Police used tear gas in the second largest city of Gomel and stun grenades in the eastern city of Mogilev, Viasna rights group said.

The interior ministry's Chemodanova denied that police used stun grenades but confirmed that members of law enforcement used "riot control" equipment.

50th day of protests

Ahead of Sunday's march the top opposition Telegram channel, Nexta Live, which has more than two million subscribers, urged Belarusians to stage a symbolic "people's inauguration of the real president" Tikhanovskaya.

Tikhanovskaya, who claimed victory over Lukashenko in the August 9 election and has taken shelter in EU member Lithuania, said she supported the demonstrators.

"Today is the 50th day of our protests," she said in a video address.

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"We've come out to stop this regime, and we are doing this peacefully."

Sunday's march came a day after riot police in balaclavas detained 150 people at women's rallies where protesters chanted "Sveta the president".

Central squares and shopping centers where protesters have sought refuge from violent police detentions during earlier rallies were closed, AFP journalists reported.

Over the past month riot police have detained thousands of protesters who have reported torture and abuse in custody, prompting international condemnation and proposed EU sanctions.

Several people have died in the crackdown.

Lukashenko has dismissed opposition calls for his resignation and sought help from Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who has promised military backup if needed and a $1.5 billion loan.

Lukashenko 'has to go'

Lukashenko, who has ruled ex-Soviet Belarus for 26 years, has also accused Western countries and NATO of supporting protesters or trying to destabilize the country.

He put his military on high alert after the vote and Belarus will host war games with several other ex-Soviet countries including Russia next month in what is being touted as a show of force against NATO.

European leaders have said they do not recognize, Lukashenko's re-election and promised to impose sanctions on Belarus for rigging the vote and waging a post-election crackdown on peaceful demonstrations.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday was scheduled to visit the Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania, which border Belarus and have expanded their own sanctions on Minsk along with Estonia.

On Sunday, he told the French weekly the Journal du Dimanche he was impressed with the courage of protesters and that it was clear Lukashenko "has to go".

Britain said this week it was coordinating with the United States and Canada on sanctions after EU penalties were stalled by Cyprus.

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