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Belarus Strongman Toughens Protest Laws

By AFP

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Protests broke out on the streets of Minsk, Belarus in August 2020 over the country's disputed presidential election. **Flickr / Natallia Rak**

Belarusian strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko on Tuesday signed legislation toughening protest laws, raising the stakes of a crackdown following his disputed re-election last year.

The measures come into force amid an unprecedented legal sweep of government critics and civil society in the ex-Soviet country following the presidential vote last year that sparked huge demonstrations.

The laws mean anyone who has been charged with taking part in two unauthorized protests may be jailed for three years over a repeat offense, according to government documents published online.

"Extremist activity" – or promoting it – is punishable by up to six years. Financing it carries a maximum term of five years, the documents show.

The independent Tut.by news website, which was recently raided by authorities, said it was difficult to determine what activities could be deemed extremist under the new laws.

Belarus's neighbor and ally Russia has used similar allegations against religious and nationalist groups, and recently used the label to target supporters of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

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The new legislation also envisions up to seven years in prison for "violence or the threat of using violence" against police, and a maximum of three years in prison for resisting police.

Several protesters were recently handed lengthy terms on these charges related to the rallies that erupted following Lukashenko's claim to a sixth presidential term in August.

A new article – carrying a maximum five-year penalty – was also added to the criminal code penalizing publication of personal information of police and their family members.

During the protests, the opposition repeatedly published identities of law enforcement, who wore balaclavas at violently dispersed rallies that sometimes drew more than 100,000 people.

The unprecedented demonstrations saw thousands arrested and left several dead. They have since subsided, but activists and journalists are still receiving jail terms.

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The United States and the European Union slapped sanctions and asset freezes on regime officials and Lukashenko, who has been in power for over two decades.

His government was hit with fresh penalties in May after Lukashenko forced a Ryanair flight with an opposition activist on board to land in Minsk and arrested him and his girlfriend.

A delegation from the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Japan met with Belarus's Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei on Tuesday and called for an end to the "inhumane treatment" of activists and independent journalists.

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