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Lukashenko Rival Maintains Innocence as He Faces Jail

By AFP

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Viktor Babaryko was arrested last June ahead of a disputed election that sparked historic nationwide demonstrations. **Natalia Fedosenko / TASS**

One of Belarus's leading opposition figures on Monday denied any wrongdoing as he addressed the court in a trial that may see him jailed for 15 years on fraud charges.

Former banker Viktor Babaryko was arrested in June last year ahead of a disputed presidential election that sparked historic nationwide demonstrations that gripped the ex-Soviet country for months.

Babaryko had planned to run in the presidential race and was considered one of the strongest opponents to incumbent Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for close to three decades.

Babaryko was accused of receiving bribes and "laundering funds obtained by criminal means"

when he was head of Belgazprombank, the Belarusian branch of a bank belonging to Russian energy giant Gazprom.

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Prosecutors last week requested 15 years in jail for Babaryko, 57 — the maximum possible punishment.

"I cannot confess to a crime that I did not commit," Babaryko told a court in the capital Minsk during his final statement.

"I am not ashamed in front of my family and friends," he added.

His words were greeted by a round of applause, an independent journalist reported from court.

Seven other defendants in the case, including several Belgazprombank executives, are being prosecuted on the charges.

They all pleaded guilty and are facing more lenient sentences of between three and six-and-a-half years.

A verdict is expected on July 6.

Several key opposition figures were arrested in Belarus last year ahead of the presidential vote, clearing the way for Lukashenko, 66, to secure a sixth term.

Lukahsenko's only rival was Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a political novice who took the place of her jailed husband in the vote and quickly gained popularity.

Despite Lukashenko's proclaimed victory, the opposition believes Tikhanovskaya was the true winner and that the vote was rigged.

Tens of thousands took to the streets of Belarus for weeks to protest the result but were met with a harsh police crackdown.

Western nations have slapped a slew of sanctions on Lukashenko and his regime but they appear to have had limited effect as Belarus maintains backing from key ally and creditor Russia.

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