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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus Hands Exiled Opposition Leader 15 Years in Jail

By AFP

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Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. **Radek Pietruszka / EPA / TASS**

Belarus on Monday sentenced exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to 15 years in prison for spearheading historic protests against the former Soviet country's authoritarian leader.

Tikhanovskaya — who was forced to flee to neighboring EU member Lithuania after the protests sparked by a disputed presidential election in 2020 — was sentenced in absentia on charges of high treason and "conspiracy to seize power."

The state-run news agency Belta reported that she was on trial alongside Pavel Latushko, a former Belarusian diplomat and culture minister turned opposition leader, who was handed an 18-year jail term, also in absentia.

The charges stem from massive anti-government rallies that broke out against Belarusian

leader Alexander Lukashenko, who claimed he had won a sixth presidential term.

Tikhanovskaya, who had earlier described the trial as a "farce," said in response to Monday's verdict that she would continue to advocate for political prisoners detained in her authoritarian country.

"Today I don't think about my own sentence. I won't stop until each of them is released," she said in a post on social media, referring to "thousands" of Belarusians convicted for their opposition to the government.

Embed:

> 15 years of prison.
>
> This is how the regime “rewarded” my work for democratic changes in Belarus.
>
> But today I don't think about my own sentence. I think about thousands of innocents, detained & sentenced to real prison terms.
>
> I won't stop until each of them is released. pic.twitter.com/9kQREV0sgl
>
> — Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (@Tsihanouskaya) March 6, 2023

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics condemned the "kangaroo court" that sentenced the leading opposition figures and the "abuse of justice imposed by the illegitimate Lukashenko's regime."

Wave of repression

Lukashenko, who has been in power for nearly three decades, is a key ally of Russian leader Vladimir Putin and allowed the Kremlin to launch its intervention in Ukraine from his territory.

The strongman responded ruthlessly to the demonstrations that unfolded in the run-up to the August vote and in the months after he announced the results, spurring Belarusians to flood the streets across the country to protest at the outcome.

Tikhanovskaya was part of a trio of women — along with Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo — who spearheaded the protracted protest movement.

Since being forced to flee Belarus in 2020, she has urged greater Western pressure on Lukashenko, whose government was sanctioned by the West in the wake of the election.

Tikhanovskaya, a political newcomer, only stepped into the fray after her husband, a popular blogger, was barred from running in the election and jailed.

In 2021, he was found guilty of organizing riots, inciting social hatred and other charges, and was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Monday's sentences came after Minsk last week handed a 10-year prison term to prominent rights activist Ales Bialiatski, a move that drew sweeping international condemnation.

The Nobel Prize winner is the founder of the former Soviet republic's most highly regarded rights group, Viasna, which was shuttered by authorities when they cracked down on critics of Lukashenko after the vote.

Viasna reports that as of this month, authorities in Belarus are holding nearly 1,500 political prisoners.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned what he deemed a "sham court ruling" and called for "the release of Bialiatski and all political prisoners in Belarus."

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