

Authoritarianism, Crisis, and the Fight for Democracy in Belarus

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The world is on fire. Authoritarianism around the globe is on the rise and protests and demonstrations have taken place during the fateful year of 2020, a year one has probably cast off already. The political meltdown in the nation of Belarus is a microcosm of the larger political problems plaguing the world as voting rights and elections have come under greater scrutiny and pressure, destabilizing democracies.

Background

The Presidential Election in Belarus occurred on August 9, 2020. Belarus is not known for having rigid political parties, so both the major candidates this year ran as Independents. Alexander Lukashenko, the incumbent, has essentially been president since the creation of Belarus back in 1994. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was the opposition candidate, as well as a human rights activist, politician, and a former teacher. In Belarus, the president is elected to five-year terms, and much like its neighboring country, Russia; however, it has had a single president (Lukashenko) repeatedly win elections for decades.

The Human Rights Watch has repeatedly warned about the persecution and detentions that journalists and media face in Belarus. Additionally, the death penalty remains in Belarus and is often as quick and brutal as being shot in the head, often without informing families of the date or burial place. Three months before the election occurred, in May 2020, hundreds of protestors and activists were arrested “arbitrarily”

for protesting peacefully human rights abuses, supporting opposition candidates, supporting environmental causes, etc. as Human Rights Watch reported. The US and the EU have a long history of criticizing Belarus' attack on political rights by sanctions; before the previous months, the Belarus government had been slowly attempting to mend relations. Contrasting Lukashenko's regime, Tikhanovskaya's campaign focused on the simple promise to hold free and fair elections if she won. She chose to run after her husband was detained and jailed for trying to register his own candidacy.

The Election and its Aftermath

The official reports from Belarus and the government showed a landslide victory for Lukashenko, the now six-term incumbent, and he was inaugurated on September 23, 2020. Belarus' Central Electoral Commission reported that he won with around 80% of the vote and Tikhanovskaya only receiving about 10% of the vote. She and her campaign immediately protested the results, citing polling data they collected showing her voting shares far exceeding those reported. Regardless, some foreign leaders such as Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin quickly congratulated Lukashenko on the victory. They were soon followed by the governments of the former Soviet bloc countries.

Protests broke out across Belarus in defiance of the election results, which resulted in numerous recorded and photographed instances of police brutality in retaliation. Harrowing stories of police brutality, threats of sexual violence, and beating have arisen as the situation escalated. Only a few days after the election, as many as 7,000 protestors were reported to have been arrested. In October, months later, the protests persist despite continuing abuse and threats by police of using firearms. Reports of the Belarusian authority monitoring and cutting off access to the internet as a means to prevent protest, assembly, and information about police brutality from spreading have surfaced as well.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has fled the country and resides in Lithuania and has called on Lukashenko to resign, a demand echoed by the thousands of protestors taking

to the streets. Multiple journalists covering the government crackdown have been jailed, and instances of police brutality and anti-democratic governance have continued to inflame Belarus. Lukashenko's failure to end police brutality and instate more democratic processes resulted in recent national protests on Tsikhanouskaya's "ultimatum" date of October 25. Even nearly two months after the election, the protests continue, though some pro-Lukashenko marches have also manifested, many carrying flags and promoting traditional values and peace. Regardless of the outcome of these protests, they demonstrate the delegitimization of Lukashenko across many in Belarus and highlight a tense political situation in the country, ready to boil over at any moment.

Numerous international organizations have insisted on inquiries on election fraud. In September, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe launched an investigation into the accusations of police brutality, and the UN Human Rights Commission also commissioned an on-the-ground report on the situation. The United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, expressed concern about the election and called for an end to the violent crackdown in Belarus. Tsikhanouskaya has been charged with, according to Russian news agencies, public calls to harm its security and for calling to seize power in Belarus. Demonstrating Russia's close ties to Belarus and Lukashenko, she is also part of Russia's Wanted List. Early in October, the EU instituted sanctions against Belarusian officials charged with being part of election fraud, and Belarus has responded with sanctions and recalling its ambassadors from Poland and Lithuania. The EU said it would consider putting sanctions against Lukashenko if he does not enter into talks with Tsikhanouskaya, and Lukashenko has increasingly turned to Russia.

Looking to the Future

In the year 2020, an authoritarian government being authoritarian seems like the least surprising thing to happen, as I am sure the rest of this issue makes clear. Besides Belarus' strategic place as a buffer state between the Baltics and democratic Western Europe and Russia and the rest of its Soviet bloc, Belarus' flaring crackdowns reflects the prevalence of (mostly) peaceful protest met by retaliatory police violence growing

around the world, seen most prominently in the situations in Hong Kong, the United States, and Nigeria. Many believe that democracies are at a crossroads right now. Evident is the lingering influence of the cold war and imperialism/colonialism and its effects on the current political situations in countries experiencing much protest. Corruption plagues Nigeria, and its Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) has been widely criticized. Hong Kong's British influence has come into hard collision with mainland communist China. Russia's influence over Belarus lingers, and the world waits with bated breath to see if, at this moment, authoritarianism will reign supreme or if protest and international intervention will manifest itself in concrete change.

A former US Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly, points out, this situation is highly reminiscent of the presidential election in 2010 in Belarus, where Lukashenko won despite many reports of election fraud. Protests quickly sprung up, but they quickly passed from domestic and international memory. Russia is standing by Belarus, paralleling patterns of former and communist states staunchly supporting their allies and former territories, as seen in China's support of North Korea and Russia's continued support of Cuba. The crisis in Belarus today is also reminiscent of the presidential crisis in Venezuela after the contested election in 2018 that remains disputed today. If we look to Venezuela, the international community responded, a humanitarian crisis broke out, but the world remained split on whom to recognize as the legitimate president. Maduro received support from Russia and China, while the US and its allies supported Guaido. The crisis continues in Venezuela as inflation remains high, the people lack food, and emigration out of the country has skyrocketed, but the problem has largely faded from 2020's perceptions. Will Belarus' too?

All in all, it seems that with the dichotomy remaining between authoritarianism in the Chinese and Russian governments and the democratized nations of Europe and North America, the nations sandwiched in between (whose people seek better governments) may ignite international sympathy and response but may result in very little real change.

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