

Belarus: From rigged elections to open revolt

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The uprising in Belarus has reached a decisive point, as President Alexander Lukashenko told workers demanding his resignation and democratic elections, "as long as you don't kill me, there won't be any other elections".

A wave of popular protests and strikes has swept the country since Lukashenko claimed a landslide victory in a brazenly rigged election on 9 August. Peaceful protests calling for free and fair elections were initially met by brutal police repression, with thousands arrested and at least two killed, and widespread reports of beatings and torture in state prisons. Photos of their injuries went viral and inflamed yet more people to active resistance.

These included workers, who walked out of the state-owned Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ), the Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) as well as the giant BElaz automobile plant at Zhodino, near the capital. In the following days, workers in nearly every major industry have organised strikes in solidarity with the demonstrators, calling for new elections and freedom for all detained protesters and oppositionists. On Sunday, over one hundred thousand marched in what is being called the biggest demonstration in the country's history.

The sham election was the spark that lit a powder-keg of social discontent in Belarus, whose government has propped up a crisis-ridden economy through increasingly harsh anti-worker measures in recent years, and where the state has refused to take any responsibility for managing the coronavirus pandemic, which Lukashenko, following fellow "strongmen", Trump and Bolsonaro, dismissed as a "psychosis".

Origins

The origins of the present crisis can be traced back to the disintegration of the USSR and independence in 1991. Uniquely among the states of the former USSR and Eastern Bloc, Belarus has so far avoided the shock market therapy which destroyed the bureaucratically planned economies and plunged tens of millions into dire poverty.

Instead, the caste of ex-Soviet bureaucrats, Lukashenko himself is a former manager of a collective farm, transformed themselves into national administrators of state capitalist enterprises and successfully consolidated power at the head of a still largely state-owned economy. The ruling elite's strategy for maintaining power and social stability has been to conduct a careful balancing act between the expansionist ambitions of Western and Russian imperialism, leveraging the benefits of foreign loans and subsidies while denying its people basic democratic freedoms to suppress internal opposition.

Existing as it does within the confines of an international capitalist market, Belarus's state-owned and bureaucratically managed economy has been unable to attract sufficient foreign investment or develop the productivity of its heavy industry and has become heavily dependent on Russian oil subsidies and export

markets.

Even today state industry is responsible for more than 50 percent of GDP. Belarus is very different from the oligarchic capitalism of Ukraine or Russia, but far away from a planned economy: its state industries are organised in holdings operating on the global markets in the centre of which are the 3 big state banks. With credits growing far ahead of real growth and lacking domestic sources of capital, foreign debt has inevitably risen and was at 80 percent of GDP even before the Corona-crisis. For more than a decade, Belarus has been in the vicious circle of debt-refinancing, stagnation, currency-crisis and price stability problems. It is therefore more and more dependent on Russia for subsidies, especially in the form of cheap oil, and export markets.

To keep the oil flowing, Lukashenko has indulged successive Russian attempts at greater integration between the two states, but delayed or resisted any decisive moves towards privatisation, which would threaten the dispossession of domestic elites in favour of Russian oligarchs. Likewise, if he followed through on his flirtations with the EU, loans and private investment would no doubt be conditional on ?reform?, that is, wholesale opening to market forces.

Despite creeping economic stagnation, for decades Lukashenko was able to redistribute the profits from sales of Russian oil to provide an at least reasonable standard of living for the country?s population, including universal healthcare, free education, subsidised rents, high state pensions, and other state welfare programmes. As a result, his government has been able to maintain a certain degree of legitimacy amongst the rural and urban workers, notwithstanding its iron grip on Belarusian civil society. Periodic expressions of pro-democracy sentiment have failed to win wider support and been easily repressed.

Stagnation

Yet Lukashenko?s stubborn refusal to accept his designated role as Putin?s stooge has led to growing tensions between the two countries, resulting in cuts to Russian oil subsidies and contract disputes frequently interrupting oil supply flows. The increasingly pressing need for economic diversification, alongside a desire to avoid aligning itself with Russia in the Ukraine crisis, have led Lukashenko to make overtures to the European Union, engaging in ?dialogue? about economic liberalisation in exchange for increased European aid. The process has been slow, however, a fully-fledged partnership and cooperation agreement has been blocked by opposition from Lithuania and is ultimately limited by the regime?s need to hedge its bets between East and West to maintain its own position.

In recent years, that balancing act has reached its limits. During the deep recession of 2015 to 2017, the highly indebted state was unable to act countercyclically and real income fell by 13 percent as a result of currency devaluation and price increases. Faced with falling growth and increasingly unable, or unwilling, to draw on Moscow?s patronage, Lukashenko has turned to an assault on his own working class to claw back losses and stave off economic disaster.

In 2015, the so-called "parasite law" was brought in, forcing anyone not in state-recognised employment to pay a special tax or be sentenced to community service. The decree was withdrawn in 2018, but the unemployed are instead being forced to pay for all state services. A series of amendments to the labour code in 2017 unilaterally shifted 90 percent of workers from permanent to temporary contracts.

Widespread cuts have been implemented across health and education and the retirement age has been raised. All this, combined with the steadily falling value of the Belarusian Rouble, has meant a serious decline in the standard of living for Belarusian workers. With the Corona-crisis, the economic problems of its main trading partner (Russia) and the amount of accumulated debt, Belarus is now on the brink of economic collapse. Given the "crisis management" of Lukaschenko during the Corona-crisis so far, the

working class and parts of the ruling class have lost confidence in the ability of the existing regime to prevent the approaching disaster. At the same time, the prolonged shutdown of the global economy is causing both Russia and the EU to re-evaluate their budget priorities.

Protest

Thus, growing discontent with the regime has, for the first time since independence, exploded into a mass popular movement drawing in huge swathes of the working class and backed by industrial action across all sectors and across every part of the country. The scale and breadth of the actions reveals the depths of the country's political and economic crisis and the authentic character of the uprising; a US-orchestrated 'colour revolution' this is not.

In the first few days of protests, the movement's official demands were limited to calls for new elections monitored by international observers and the release of detained activists but, by Sunday, mass protests were demanding Lukashenko's immediate resignation. The movement has developed a momentum of its own which is quickly eroding the regime's legitimacy.

If the protests continue and, crucially, if the strike movement grows to paralyse greater parts of the economy, Lukashenko will face a choice between a bloody crackdown and surrendering power. For now, the regime still controls the police and the military, though there have been reports of some police and army personnel joining demonstrations, and protesters have been filmed appealing to soldiers to join the uprising.

The democracy movement is determined and enjoys mass support; its suppression would be likely to involve prolonged violence, risking defections in the military. Putin has promised Lukashenko military assistance in accordance with the two countries' military pact, but stopped short of endorsing Lukashenko, who he regards as an altogether unreliable ally. In any case, Russian support would come at a high price; Lukashenko would surely be forced to abandon his policy of constructive ambiguity towards Russia and accept a future as a custodian of a Russian protectorate.

A 'managed transition' of some sort may become a preferable alternative for parts of the bureaucracy which will hope to placate the democracy movement but preserve parts of the governing apparatus and reap the profits from any forthcoming privatisations of state-owned enterprises. The democracy movement thus far has little organised political leadership, taking the form of a spontaneous upsurge of popular discontent. Many leaders of the liberal opposition, who support economic liberalisation and full integration into world markets, are in prison or abroad. The movement stands on a critical threshold, what comes next will be determined by what kind of political leadership emerges to channel the discontent.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the opposition candidate in last week's elections, has declared that she is ready to take up the presidency and announced the creation of a national 'coordination council' from her self-imposed exile in Lithuania. She stated

"I ask you to unite in the coordination council. We desperately need your help and experience. We need your connections, contacts, expert advice and support. This coordination council should be joined by everyone interested in dialogue and peaceful transfer of power - working groups, parties, trade unions and other organizations of the civic society."

Many are now calling for international recognition of Tikhanovskaya's claim to the presidency and for the EU to mediate negotiations between civil society leaders in exile and the incumbent government. But it would be a catastrophic mistake for the movement to place its faith in the thoroughly capitalist self-

appointed leaders of the opposition or their "friends" in the EU. Nor should it recognise a "coordination council" even with bureaucratic union representatives. It is the mass forces of the working class that has brought the movement this far and they should not allow the representatives of the liberal middle classes to reap the fruits of their actions.

Nor will "free elections" on their own alleviate the suffering caused by the contradictions of Belarus' economy. In fact, unless the mass movement can organise itself around an alternative political programme and prepare to administer the transition itself, Lukashenko's departure is highly likely to herald a neoliberal programme of privatisations which will further destabilise the economy and turn Belarus into a semi-colony dependent on the EU and Germany.

The experience of Poland and the Baltic states in the 90s shows that this will lead to even greater attacks on workers, unemployment, austerity and inflation which will rapidly erode the remaining protections of workers' living conditions. Every worker should know: A new "shock therapy" under conditions of accumulated debt and in the circumstances of the global Corona-crisis would be a social disaster in Belarus. To avoid this kind of "experiment" by the liberal opposition and its "economic experts", the working class has to have its own organisation and programme to survive this crisis.

Programme

Far from being a reason for the movement to hedge its bets and wait for a "less risky" moment to press its claims on the government, such a perspective means that it is absolutely essential for the movement, in particular the workers in the factories, to launch an all-out general strike, to force the tyrant out. Only when Lukashenko realises beyond a doubt that his soldiers will not restore his dictatorship, is arrested or flees the country, will the revolution be safe.

The first task is to create a working class leadership capable of extending the strike and seizing control of the revolution from the liberal exiles and their big business backers. To be truly democratic and responsive to the needs of the movement, this leadership should be composed of elected and recallable delegates to workers' councils based on the big factories, collective farms, and working class communities and linked up regionally and nationally. To defend this leadership, it is vital to win over the rank and file soldiers and disarm the police, replacing them with a workers' militia based on the factories and big farms.

The free elections Belarusians need are to a sovereign constituent assembly conducted under the supervision of the workers' councils. All the institutions of the ruling class and bureaucratic state should be dissolved and replaced with elected bodies and these should be the basis of a workers' government.

This government should take advantage of the fact that the economy is still highly concentrated to take it over by establishing workers' control of production in the large enterprises, cancelling the debt and replacing the control of the state banks by a democratic emergency plan.

Likewise, all the social services need to be defended against privatisation or the introduction of market forces and transformed by the workers who run them. In short, the answer lies neither in the EU's neoliberal nightmare or Putin's oligarch capitalists but a programme of transition to socialism.

Of course, socialism cannot be built in isolation, especially in a small country like Belarus, but the example of the Belarusian workers and youth would inspire the workers of Eastern Europe, in the Baltic states, Poland, Russia and Ukraine, especially as the world plunges into another huge capitalist recession.

This whole strategy, from today's burning task of bringing down Lukashenko, to preventing either Western or Russian imperialists from subordinating and exploiting the country, requires a working class party able

to give leadership to the mass movement.

Socialists around the world need to mobilise in solidarity with the revolution in Belarus and oppose intervention either by Russia or the EU and the USA

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