

Belarus Readies Quick Inauguration for Lukashenko

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MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, re-elected last month in what the opposition and international monitors said was a rigged vote, faces inauguration as early as Friday, an election official said.

"Jan. 21 is being considered as a working date. It is a tentative date. The date will be set finally by the presidential administration," said Nikolai Lazovik, secretary of the Central Elections Commission.

An independent political analyst said the timing suggested that Lukashenko was in a hurry to legitimize his victory in the Dec. 19 presidential election, which led to huge protests and hundreds of arrests.

"This relatively early date for the inauguration reflects his uncertainty in the support of the population and of the political elite," said the analyst, Valery Karbalevich.

Many observers had expected an inauguration in mid-February.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994 in an autocratic style that led the U.S. administration of former President George W. Bush to describe him as Europe's last dictator.

His opponents denounced his landslide election win last month as fraudulent, and an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe monitoring team said at the time that the count carried out at many election centers had been "bad or very bad."

Four challengers for the presidency and scores of political activists who were rounded up remain in custody.

Since the unrest, state-controlled Belarussian media have accused the intelligence services of Germany and Poland of trying to organize a coup to oust Lukashenko and say Western European states financed the political opposition against him.

Germany and Poland dismissed the accusations as absurd.

Western governments have urged Lukashenko to free opposition activists, and the United States and the European Union have warned that they could reinstate sanctions, including possibly a visa ban on the president and his top aides.

The EU imposed sanctions on Belarus after a disputed ballot in 2006 but suspended their application in 2008 to encourage democratic reforms.

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