

Belarus: Opposition under attack amid growing boycott of elections

A spate of human rights violations targeting opposition supporters and journalists in Belarus is nothing more than a clumsy attempt to suppress opposition voices ahead of elections on Sunday 23 September, Amnesty International said amid a growing call to boycott the poll.

The organization has documented a surge in arrests of people for attending peaceful rallies - such detentions violate their right to freedom of expression and assembly.

On 5 September Yahor Viniatski, activist of the "Tell the truth" ("Говори правду") campaign, was arrested and later sentenced to seven days' administrative detention by Pervomajskii District Court in Minsk. The same day his apartment was searched and campaign materials were confiscated.

On 7 September, two activists of Zmena, the youth campaign organization, were detained and later sentenced - one to three and the other to 10 days imprisonment.

"The use of administrative detention is yet another attempt to silence the opposition and any dissenting voices in Belarus," said David Diaz-Jogeix, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

"The ability to exercise the rights to freedom of expression and assembly is essential to the establishment of a climate in which people can participate in the electoral process without fear of intimidation or reprisals."

On 18 September, journalists covering a rally calling for a boycott of the elections were detained for a couple of hours. Several of them reported that they were beaten during the arrest.

Amnesty International calls on the Belarusian authorities to carry a thorough, impartial and effective investigation into the allegations of excessive use of force against journalists and to bring those responsible to justice.

At the same rally, four activists of Zmena campaign were detained, and the next day one activist was fined and three others were sentenced up to 12 days' administrative detention for participation in an unsanctioned meeting.

Some opposition candidates have now opted to withdraw from the contest saying that there has not been positive change in the election environment in Belarus. Representatives of the opposition were not included in the electoral committees which oversee the fairness of the electoral process.

Since the presidential elections on 2010, Amnesty International has observed an unprecedented deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus.

The authorities are engaged in a persistent campaign of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and opposition and civil society activists across the country.

There are daily reports of activists being detained, arrested or charged, of lawyers being disbarred for defending detainees, of journalists being harassed and of media outlets and human rights organizations being intimidated and obstructed from going about their legitimate work.

To date, Amnesty International has identified five prisoners of conscience in Belarus.