News



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko attends the Commonwealth of Independent States summit in Turkmenbasy, Turkmenistan, Friday, Oct. 9, 2026. (AP/Sputnik, Kremlin Pool/Sergei Bobylev)

Yuras Karmanau

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A Roman Catholic priest, who has opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and helped Ukrainian refugees, has been sentenced to three years in prison in Belarus, the latest move in the authorities' crackdown on critical voices, a rights group said Nov. 5.

A court in Belarus convicted Fr. Anatoly Parakhnevich, 66, on charges of "insulting the authorities" and "extremism" during a closed-door trial last month, said the Viasna Human Rights Center, which designated him as a political prisoner. It said Parakhnevich rejected the charges and would appeal the verdict.

Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has governed the nation of 9.5 million with an iron fist for more than three decades, and Belarus has been sanctioned repeatedly by Western countries — both for its crackdown on human rights and for allowing Moscow to use its territory in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

Lukashenko's rule was challenged after a 2020 presidential election that kept him in power, when tens of thousands of people poured into the streets to protest a vote widely seen as rigged. In an ensuing crackdown, tens of thousands of people were detained, with many beaten by police. Prominent opposition figures either fled the country or were imprisoned.

Viasna said that Parakhnevich, the parish priest in Alkovichy in northwestern Belarus, had openly opposed Russia's war in Ukraine and condemned Belarus' role in it, while calling for peace and repentance.

He was among the local leaders who organized the collection of aid for Ukrainians. In one of his sermons about the war, he asked his parishioners: "Will our own consciences ever forgive us?"

Parakhnevich has been in custody since his arrest in March and suffered a heart attack behind bars, according to Viasna.

"The authorities are aggressively persecuting, threatening and intimidating those who shape public opinion within the country, and Parakhnevich is a very popular priest whose sermons were heard by thousands of Belarusians," Pavel Sapelka, a lawyer for Viasna, said.

"The trial of the clergyman took place against the backdrop of long-standing, large-scale pressure exerted by the authorities on all religious communities."

Dozens of clergy — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — have been jailed, silenced or forced into exile for protesting the 2020 election. Clergy who supported the protests and sheltered demonstrators at their churches were particularly targeted in the repression.

Orthodox Christians make up about 80% of Belarus' population. Just under 14% are Catholic and 2% are Protestants.

The legal framework for religious organizations in the country has become even more restrictive following Lukashenko's signing of a new law that mandates the reregistration of all religious communities. The document prohibits the use of civic symbols during religious services and bars individuals listed as "extremists" from leading parishes.

Belarusian opposition leader-in-exile Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya condemned the verdict against Parakhnevich as "heartbreaking" and "politically motivated."

"The repression continues, and the authorities are filling the vacancies in prisons with new political prisoners," Tsikhanouskaya told The Associated Press.

According to Viasna, Belarus currently has 884 political prisoners.

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