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Ukraine's parliament votes to dismiss President, hold new elections

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Activists burn tyres at barricades close to Independence Square, the epicenter of the country's current unrest, in Kiev, Ukraine, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2014. The heavy black smoke rising from burning tyres obscures the aim of police snipers. Fierce clashes between police and protesters in Ukraine's capital have shattered the brief truce Thursday and an Associated Press reporter has seen dozens bodies laid out on the edge of the protest encampment.

In a fast-moving day that could significantly shift Ukraine's political destiny, opposition leaders signed a deal Friday with the country's beleaguered president that calls for an early election, a new constitution and a new unity government

The MPs also voted to release Mr. Yanukovych's rival, Julia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister who has been in jail for more than two years on charges many believe were orchestrated by the former president. She left her prison hospital late Saturday and is expected to be in Kiev soon to address thousands of supporters at Independence Square.

Mr. Yanukovych "has lost everything. This is the end," said Arseniy Yatseniuk, who leads the Fatherland Party, the largest opposition group. "We want to bring to justice everyone who is responsible for the violence, the crackdown and the death toll of more than 100 people."

Even members of Mr. Yanukovich's party, the Party of Regions, turned on him and voted with the opposition. "I believe he should be in court," said Anriy Derkach, an MP who quit the party this week. "Because of the death of the people."

Mr. Yanukovich called the vote a "coup d'etat" and said he would not resign. "The decisions they are now taking [in parliament] are unlawful. I won't sign anything," Mr. Yanukovich said in an interview with UBR TV Channel on Saturday. "These are not opposition-minded people, these are gangsters... Lawmakers are beaten, stoned, intimidated at the parliament building's exit," he said.

The streets around the parliament were filled with thousands of people who cheered the MPs as they left with shouts of "Thank you, thank you." They also started singing the national anthem. And in Independence Square, where the protests against Mr. Yanukovich started months ago, there was applause for the parliamentary action.

The reception was a far cry from Friday, when opposition leaders were booed and shouted down by thousands of people in the square after parliament had agreed to a deal with Mr. Yanukovich that would have seen him remain in office until up to December, with some reduced powers.

There is still much uncertainty in the country and fears that it could fall apart with some regions deciding to join Russia. The economy is also struggling and the hard work of governing is only beginning. MPs started work on putting together an interim government Saturday, filling some cabinet posts with caretaker officials until upcoming elections.

Mr. Yatseniuk said he believes Saturday's vote is the first step toward integrating Ukraine into the European Union, something Mr. Yanukovich rejected in favour of closer ties to Russia. "These people want a future and they want a European future. This is the revolution," he said.

That was certainly on the mind of Antonina Mavrodiy as she stood in Independence Square Saturday. Removing Mr. Yanukovich "was the main goal but there are many others. They still have much work to do," she said. "We are experiencing economic difficulties and political difficulties and we need people who can deal with that."

While Kiev was generally calm, fears that the country would split in two – a nightmare scenario that European diplomats had hoped to avoid by brokering a deal for a unity government just Friday -- grew Saturday.

Independence Square, the wrecked centre of the uprising where dozens of people were killed this week in a sudden spike of violence, was packed. The riot police that had held them off behind barricades for three months, and attacked them this week, were nowhere to be seen.

In Lviv, in western Ukraine where anti-Yanukovich forces had already taken full control and declared their independence, the local security services compound was partially burned.

A few blocks from parliament, several dozen protesters guarded the presidential office building, standing with shields and clubs in front of a cement barricade that had been lined by police in

riot gear. “We are here so there won’t be any windows broken and to prevent any provocation,” said Volodymyr Pravosudov, who said he was the commander of one of the protesters' self-defence units.

“We are not terrorists,” he added as he took a group of journalists up to the main doors of the building. Mr. Pravosudov said there were still some people dressed in civilian clothes inside, although he had not yet gone in himself. A man could be seen briefly looking through a window in the front door. One protester appeared to have a handgun, but Mr. Pravosudov insisted no one was armed and that what looked like a gun may have been a cigarette lighter.

When asked how many men he had guarding the building, Mr. Pravosudov replied: “There’s enough to make sure we have order.”