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**Protest against Turkey’s Failed Coup Colored by Fear of Strongman President**

Istanbul- They ostensibly rallied Sunday to protest the attempted overthrow of their government.

However, what seemed to worry them was the direction of that same government and a crackdown led by its powerful leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

“I’m afraid. Erdogan is trying to become a dictator,” said Ahmet, a 21-year-old university student who joined thousands of other demonstrators in Istanbul’s Taksim Square.

He declined to give his last name because, like many in Turkey, he feared being swept up in the extraordinary purge of state institutions triggered by a failed coup by renegade soldiers on July 15.

The measures have involved the detention, suspension and firing of tens of thousands of people, including soldiers, police, judges and civil servants.

On Saturday, Turkey’s presidency ordered the closure of 1,043 schools, 1,229 charities and foundations, 15 universities and 35 medical institutions.

Participants at the rally waved Turkish flags and chanted nationalist slogans. Some drank beer — an unspoken rebuke to the Islamist orientation of Erdogan’s government — and held up posters showing the visage of Turkey’s secular founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

They were united in expressing concern about the turbulence shaking this Middle East nation of 75 million people. Many also seemed careful not to criticize the president — at least not in public or in front of foreign journalists.

A climate of fear has gripped many Turks, who say the government’s response seems more about Erdogan consolidating his power than just rooting out coup plotters. Turkey’s allies, including the United States, have expressed similar concerns.

Supporters of the Republican People’s Party — the country’s main opposition, referred to as the CHP — have long been critical of the Turkish leader’s religious agenda and attempts to silence journalists and critics.

Even so, the CHP’s secular-leaning leadership tried to extend an olive branch to Erdogan and his Islamist allies.

The party organized Sunday’s rally, and its officials formally extended an invitation to Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its supporters.

That gesture felt at odds with comments Friday by the CHP’s head, Kemal Kilicdaroglu. He suggested that Erdogan had taken the purge too far.

“We want all those who are prosecuted on coup-related charges to be tried in line with democracy and the rule of law. We don’t want a witch hunt,” Kilicdaroglu told NTV, a private broadcaster.

Government officials say the crackdown is meant to root out loyalists of Fethullah Gulen, a dissident cleric who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania.

Authorities have accused Gulen of orchestrating the attempted coup, which included warplanes targeting the parliament and rogue soldiers carrying out an apparent attempt on Erdogan’s life, and Gulen has denied any involvement.

The Reuters news agency reported Sunday that Turkey’s air force head issued a pledge of “absolute obedience” to the chief of the military’s general staff, ­Hulusi Akar. Akar was held hostage during the coup attempt.

Erdogan has vowed to restructure the military, and authorities have detained nearly a third of its serving generals in connection with the coup.

Sunday’s rally seemed to attract a variety of people representing the country’s complex ideological spectrum.

Most dressed in Western attire, such as jeans and tank tops. Others — apparent supporters of the AKP — wore religious attire, including veils for women.

Like others at the rally, Deniz Yazar declined to elaborate on his views of hot-button political issues here, such as the emergency measures imposed last week that give authorities enhanced powers to impose curfews and detain people.

“Look, I don’t want to criticize Erdogan or those people.

I’m not a supporter of the president. I’m just here to show that I support democracy,” said Yazar, 50, a hotel owner in Istanbul.

Nor did many seem willing to discuss the recent rallies involving Erdogan supporters, who have filled the streets and squares of Istanbul since the coup attempt.

During the evenings, Taksim Square has felt like a festival for the Turkish leader’s supporters, even drawing fundamentalist Islamists who sport bushy beards and robes.

The presence of religious conservatives has alarmed many of the city’s more secular residents.

In 2013, a small park near the shopping district turned into a rallying point for large demonstrations against Erdogan.

Sarra Akcan, a photographer, recalled observing those protests and how, ultimately, they failed to curb the Turkish president’s powers.

She found herself taking pictures of protesters in the Taksim area on Sunday, but she didn’t hold out much hope.

“This feels more like a festival, but I’m still not convinced,” she said. “I’ve not been optimistic about our future for a long time, and this doesn’t change that.”

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**Tags:** Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey, coup d’etat,