Millions demonstrate throughout Turkey against July 15 coup attempt

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On Sunday, August 7, millions of people gathered throughout Turkey in the latest round of demonstrations against the failed coup of July 15.

In an unprecedented show of unity, the largest demonstration was organized in Istanbul's Yenikap? parade ground with the participation of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), along with their follower organizations and numerous NGOs. The "Democracy and Martyrs Rally" was organized upon the call of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

It was apparently the largest rally in Turkish history. The state-run Anatolian Agency and Istanbul Police Department gave the number of participants as close to five million, while Reuters—and many European news agencies—reported participation by "more than one million people." According to the authorities, some 7,000 municipality buses and more than 200 boats and passenger ships provided participants free transport service.

However, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third-largest party in Turkey, was not invited to the rally, on the grounds that it maintained its links with the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is waging a guerrilla war against the Turkish state.

One of the main features of the rally was, for the first time in the history of the country, the participation of the command echelon of the Turkish army in a rally along with the political parties. Gen. Hulusi Akar, chief of the Turkish general staff, said in his speech at the rally that the people behind the attempted coup, the Fethullah Terrorist Organization or FETO, should be sentenced to "the heaviest penalty."

MHP Chairperson Devlet Bahçeli, who was the first to provide open support to Erdogan and his government against the coup attempt, called the rally a "fresh chapter in history," saying, "A new voyage begins from Yenikap?."

In his address to the rally, CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said that the defeat of the July 15 coup attempt marked a new beginning for the country. "The July 15 coup attempt has opened up a new door of compromise. After July 15 there is a new Turkey. If we can carry this power and the culture of reconciliation even further, we will leave a better Turkey for our children," he said.

Emphasizing that all political leaders should take lessons from the attempted coup, Kilicdaroglu repeated the points he made at his "Republic and Democracy Rally" of July 24 in Istanbul. He expressed nominal support for the republic and for democracy, for equality before the law, for the importance of the parliamentary system, and called for an independent media. He declared that politics should be left out of mosques, barracks and courthouses in the post-coup Turkey.

Since the failed putsch, carried out by sections of the military and with the undoubted acquiescence of Washington—Turkey's Incirlik Air Base, which hosts thousands of American soldiers and is the main base for the US-led bombing campaign against Syria and Iraq, was the organizing center of the coup—the AKP government has arrested or detained over 60,000 political opponents, closed at least 15 universities and over 1000 private schools. Also a large number of news agencies, television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines and publishing houses allegedly close to FETO have been shut down.

Describing the coup attempt and popular resistance against it as "Turkey's second war of independence,"

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Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim praised the leaders of CHP and MHP "for their support for the national will and democracy." He quoted from the poems of well-known right-wing, left-wing and Islamic Turkish poets and vowed to maintain and boost the atmosphere of reconciliation between the government and the opposition. "We will do our best to maintain this historic unity," he said.

In his speech to the crowd, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an weighed an attempt to present an air of compromise and unity with harsh words for Turkey's Western allies, saying, "Our presence today upsets our enemies just like it did on the morning of July 16."

Erdogan harshly criticised the German government for preventing him from addressing the rally of some 40,000 people, who gathered last week in Cologne to denounce the coup attempt in Turkey, via a video link. "Where is democracy [in Germany]?" he asked, claiming that the German authorites had permitted the PKK to broadcast a video conference from the Qandil Mountains in Iraq. "Let them feed the terrorists, they will hit them back like a boomerang," he said.

He reiterated his stance that the decision on a reinstatement of the death penalty in Turkey would be left up to Turkish lawmakers, saying, "I will approve reinstating the death penalty if the parliament approves."

The "Democracy and Martyrs' Rally" in Istanbul has drawn media coverage in the US and Europe. However, in line with their governments, the media largely focused on the post-coup investigations and suspensions, and Erdogan's "show of strength after the coup attempt" (Reuters). The international media outlets have hardly dealt with the reasons and far-reaching consequences of the attempted coup, which cost hundreds of civilian lives and was defeated by mass opposition.

Largely isolated from their Western allies, Erdogan and his government effectively use mass opposition to the coup to strengthen their position against the US and Germany—the powers, that apparently backed the coup attempt—by promoting nationalism. Thus Prime Minister Binali Yildirim stated that the attempted coup had unified the country. "Every coup which does not kill us, makes us stronger. Just like here and now," he said, while Erdogan referred to "the faith and determination of this nation."

Today, (August 9), Erdogan will visit Russia to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin for the first time after the shooting down of a Russian military aircraft by Turkish fighters last November.

Following the replacement of then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu by Binali Yildirim in late May, the AKP government has sought to reorient the country's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. Soon after he took office, Yildirim said that he had the aim of increasing the number of Turkey's friends, while reducing the number of its foes.

He quickly attempted to improve Turkey's relations with Russia and Israel in late June and expressed his willingness to do the same with Iraq, Egypt and even Syria. However, a possible rapprochement between Istanbul, Moscow and Damascus is not acceptable to the Western powers. Turkey has played a key role in the US-backed war for regime change in Syria and NATO's aggression against Russia in the recent period.

"That support is now under threat," warned the *Wall Street Journal* in a recent article. According to the newspaper, many of the top Turkish military and intelligence officials involved in funneling money and arms to assist the largely Islamist rebels in Syria, including the commander of Turkey's 2nd Army responsible for the borders with Syria and Iraq, have been arrested for their involvement in the coup.

"The generals who were leading the Turkey-Syria policy and the Turkish policy on Syrian Kurds are all in jail now, and we now see the crumbling of the Turkish security establishment," said Gonul Tol, director of the Center for Turkish Studies at the Washington-based Middle East Institute. "This makes Turkey very vulnerable and weak, and will make it less confrontational."

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