

Lukashenko Urges Supporters to Defend Belarus Independence

By [AFP](#)

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Lukashenko spoke in front of a crowd of supporters. **Valery Sharifulin/TASS**

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on Sunday spoke in front of a crowd of supporters at a rally in central Minsk asking them to defend the country and its independence.

As mass protests continued against his rule, Lukashenko spoke on the capital's Independence Square, telling supporters: "I called you here not to defend me... but for the first time in a quarter-century, to defend your country and its independence."

"If we kowtow to them, we will go into a tailspin and will never stabilize our aircraft," he said.

"We will perish as a state, as a people, as a nation," he said, as security staff stood nearby with his teenage son Nikolai.

Lukashenko called the rally ahead as the opposition movement called for nationwide "March of Freedom" protests and tens of thousands gathered in Minsk.

On a nearby street, his opponents shouted "Leave!"

The strongman who has ruled Belarus for the last 26 years is facing the greatest challenge to his leadership from a growing protest movement fanned by a brutal police crackdown.

"I'm not a fan of rallies but alas, it's not my fault I had to call you to help me," the 65-year-old said as some 10,000 supporters waved national flags and shouted "Thank you!" and "Belarus!"

Wiping his brow, the president, standing at a podium in a short-sleeved shirt, insisted on the legitimacy of last Sunday's presidential poll in which he claimed victory over popular opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

"The elections were valid. There could not be more than 80% of votes falsified. We will not hand over the country," he said, as Tikhanovskaya has called for fresh elections after the official count gave Lukashenko 80% and her 10%.

He referred to the country's history and the successes of his rule.

"We built a sovereign independent country for the first time in our history," he said, reminiscing about the "difficult years" of the 1990s.

"What do you want now?" he asked supporters.

He warned of a threat from neighboring NATO countries as well as from the opposition movement calling for new elections, as the crowd shouted "No!"

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