

Chechen Parliament Hails Putin

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The pro-Moscow elite in Grozny demonstrates its loyalty to the Russian president. In a surprise move, the parliament of Chechnya has voted to call for a change in the Russian constitution to allow President Vladimir Putin to stand for a third term in 2008.

The resolution, passed unanimously by the assembly in Grozny, appealed to other legislatures and political movements in Russia and called on the lower house of the Russian federal parliament, the State Duma, to initiate legislation that would amend the present constitutional ban on a president serving more than two terms.

“President Putin took on this country at the most difficult moment in its history,” Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, speaker of the Chechen parliament, told his colleagues. “Political turmoil and legal chaos reigned and the country was in economic ruins.”

Putin’s achievements in overcoming these problems entitled him to seek another four-year term, said the speaker.

The resolution was drafted at the request of Chechnya’s pro-Moscow president Alu Alkhanov. It was also supported by the most powerful figure in the republic, Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov, without whose approval the parliament would almost certainly never have pursued the idea.

“We can see how the authority of the Russian state is growing in the international arena, and we can see how much attention the president pays to the regions of Russia, including the Chechen Republic,” said Kadyrov.

Most commentators have seen the resolution as a carefully staged act of political theatre which has as much to do with portraying Chechnya in a positive light as with Putin’s actual political future.

Russian politicians and parliamentarians have expressed doubts about the resolution.

Mikhail Yemelianov, a member of the pro-government party Edinaya Rossia, said, “Both from a political and legal point of view, there is no sense in changing the constitution. As for the political position, President Putin has expressed his view more than once, saying he has no intention of changing the constitution and extending his term.”

Putin himself told French television recently, “There cannot be a stable situation in the country if we destabilise the basic law of the state.”

The key point for most observers has been not the substance of the resolution but where it came from.

“It is precisely because of the controversial character of this proposal that the laws of politics dictated that it had to be initiated by the ‘most troubled’ region in the Russian Federation, the Chechen Republic,” said Marina Litvinovich, adviser to Russian opposition politician and former world chess champion Garry Kasparov.

Litvinovich noted that a related suggestion to hold a referendum on a third term for Putin had come from North Ossetia, another troubled region and the location of the Beslan school tragedy.

“That means that even in these regions [the message is that] there are no complaints against Putin,” she said.

“The current political elite was born as a result of PR,” agreed political analyst Sergei Markedonov. “Public relations is a substantial part of its political strategy. Chechnya is being presented as an oasis of peace in the North Caucasus. [Militant leaders Shamil] Basayev and [Abdul-Khalim] Saidullayev are dead, and an amnesty has been declared which they are already rushing to call a political success.

“In this PR construction, a special role is assigned to the regional authorities in Chechnya, who are portrayed as the most consistent strategic partner of the Kremlin.”

As a result of this, said Markedonov, when Putin leaves office, it is very possible there will be a re-think of Moscow’s strategy in Chechnya – and this could work against Kadyrov and his team.

“Putin is the creator and political patron of the policy of ‘Chechenisation’,” said Markedonov, referring to Moscow’s promotion of loyal Chechen officials to govern the republic.

“For Kadyrov and his comrades-in-arms, it is very important that Putin’s powers should be extended for as long as possible. There is a danger for them – even though it’s a hypothetical one – that with the arrival of a new leader, the priorities of Chechen policy will be changed.”

However, it is not only parliamentarians who consider Putin the best option for Chechnya. Some ordinary people say they are comfortable with Putin, fearing that if defence minister Sergei Ivanov becomes the next president, he will turn to the Russian security establishment to govern Chechnya and “Chechenisation” will be abandoned.

Thirty-five-year-old Ilyas Amayev drew an analogy with his time as a draftee in the army, when a new commander came to an accommodation with his Chechen conscripts, “Putin has understood that it is convenient for him to rely on Chechens, and the Chechens like this arrangement.”

Others are less forgiving, blaming Putin for what they have suffered since the start of the second military campaign in Chechnya in 1999.

“For many Chechens, Putin personifies absolute evil,” said literature teacher Usam Bakayev. “People are hoping that when he leaves, the policy will change even a little.”

Bakayev said that the local leadership would be best advised to “keep silent, because the majority of the population is against Putin serving a third term. By calling for this, the authorities are discrediting themselves in the eyes of their own people.”

Shahman Akbulatov, head of the Nazran office of the Memorial human rights organisation, agreed, saying, “Those in power don’t care that ordinary people in the republic regard Putin as a killer.”

“Politics in Chechnya is remarkable for its high degree of personalisation,” said Chechen political analyst Edilbek Khasmagomadov. “So a change in leader entails a re-division of both power and property.”

Khasmagomadov said that if a replacement for Ramzan Kadyrov is found, he is likely to come from the prime minister’s own entourage.

“That’s why Ramzan Kadyrov is more afraid of his own circle than competition from outside,” he said. “And it’s already becoming noticeable that the entourage is getting fed up with its leader and his unpredictable, authoritarian actions.”

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