

Chechnya: Kadyrov Promotion Fury

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Human rights activists appalled by Moscow's elevation of the notorious prime minister to lead the republic. A year before he leaves office, President Vladimir Putin has made his ally, 30-year-old prime minister and warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, acting president of Chechnya, defying widespread criticism of his human rights record.

On February 15, Putin accepted the resignation of Alu Alkhanov, who was formally elected president of Chechnya two and a half years ago, but has long since been eclipsed by his younger rival. Ramzan Kadyrov is the son of Alkhanov's predecessor as president, Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated at a Victory Day parade in 2004.

Alkhanov, who will now become a federal deputy minister of justice, was also awarded the medal "For services to the fatherland" fourth class by Putin to sweeten the pill of his departure.

Kadyrov is now acting president. Few doubt he will now get the job on a permanent basis but some formalities have to be gone through first. Dmitry Kozak, presidential envoy for the Southern Federal District, must now present Putin with a list with at least two names - Social Development Minister Magomed Vakhayev is likely to be the other candidate. Putin then has 14 days to nominate his favoured candidate for a vote of approval in the local parliament.

Relations between Alkhanov and Kadyrov had deteriorated long ago. Alkhanov's recent 50th birthday went virtually unnoticed in Chechnya, in strong contrast to the public celebrations of Kadyrov's own 30th birthday last October when a lavish concert was held with Russian pop stars.

Kadyrov himself in an interview with Profile magazine mocked Alkhanov for spending almost half his time outside Chechnya, while Alkhanov warned that his rival had created a "cult of personality" in Chechnya.

Analysts say that Putin, who has linked his own presidency very closely to events in Chechnya, wants to be sure that Chechnya looks stable ahead of the coming presidential elections in the spring of 2008, when he must step down.

"Russian power stems from PR," said political analyst Sergei Markedonov. "The current administration was created thanks to PR and Chechnya is a very important element in this. Vladimir Putin will remain president for one more year and it is extremely important for him to preserve the semblance of peace in Chechnya."

Markedonov, however, believes that by backing Kadyrov the Kremlin authorities have only set a trap for themselves.

"The character of the political relationship between Putin and Kadyrov is based on personality and that will create problems for the successor to the president of the Russian Federation," he said. "So as to create the illusion of peace in Chechnya Kadyrov can pose a new set of conditions for the Kremlin and the new president, he can blackmail him with the threat of destabilisation."

Kadyrov and armed men loyal to him, known as “Kadyrovtsy” stand widely accused of human rights abuses and in particular of abductions and torture of those who stand in their way. He has so far been shunned by international diplomats and delegations.

Tatyana Lokshina, an analyst and human rights activist with the Demos centre, said Putin’s nomination of Kadyrov was an act of “arrogance” towards the outside world.

“Kadyrov or, to be more accurate, his people are referred to not just in human rights reports but in documents of the official European organisations,” she said. “The word ‘Kadyrovtsy’ has acquired international usage. The nomination of Kadyrov means that on the one hand Russia doesn’t care what the West thinks of it and on the other that Russia thinks the issue of Chechnya is closed.”

Usam Baisayev of the human rights group Memorial said that, having reached the pinnacle of power, Kadyrov now faces a choice, “He could either tone himself down or on the contrary get even more excited and begin to wave his sword around [persecuting his enemies even more].”

Kadyrov will still have less than total control in Chechnya, when he takes up the presidency, facing opposition especially from federal security agencies loyal to Moscow, such as army, the FSB and parts of the interior ministry - not to mention what remains of the pro-independence rebels.

A wide circle of figures, both in Chechnya and Russia, some of whom have criticised Kadyrov in the past, have rushed to endorse him for president.

Amongst them are Boris Gryzlov, leader of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, Aslan Aslakhonov, Chechen adviser to Putin and Ruslan Yamadayev, a deputy to Russia’s State Duma representing Chechnya who predicted that Kadyrov has a “100 per cent” likelihood of becoming president.

Even separatist Chechen foreign minister Akhmed Zakayev, now exiled in London, told Radio Liberty that Kadyrov’s appointment was a “positive” development as he would treat the rebels sympathetically. In contrast to Alkhanov, Kadyrov and his father were on the rebel side in the first Chechen war of 1994-6.

Zakayev may have been deliberately trying to embarrass Kadyrov as the main fear in Moscow is that Kadyrov has surrounded himself with former rebel fighters and supporters of Ichkeria, as the unrecognised independent Chechnya was known.

“With Alkhanov’s departure we can shout out: goodbye, Chechnya, long live Ichkeria!” wrote North Caucasus commentator Vyacheslav Izmailov in Novaya Gazeta. “There are now former Ichkerians sitting in all the key posts in the republic.”

Political analyst Edilbek Khasmagomadov said that Kadyrov knew where to stop in pursuing a Chechen nationalist agenda.

“Kadyrov knows well that his power is based on federal resources,” he said.

Baisayev concurred, saying, “Neither Alkhanov nor Kadyrov were independent. Everything in Russia is done under the control of a power vertical.”

In the Chechen capital Grozny, the news of Alkhanov’s departure and Kadyrov’s promotion met with a mixed reaction.

“Alkhanov didn’t have a team,” said schoolteacher Asiyat Jabrailova. “But if he had openly declared that he was ready to stand up to Ramzan, he would have found supporters.”

Much of the public support for Kadyrov derives from his successes in reconstructing the city of Grozny and rebuilding the economy of Chechnya.

In one of his first statements in his new post, the acting president said that he wanted to remove Chechnya “from the needle of federal subsidies” by investing in local resources, such as the oil industry.

“Ramzan Akhmadovich Kadyrov is doing a lot for the city,” said Rustam, a construction worker. “He is restoring it. Thank you to him for that.”

Earlier, Kadyrov tended to be referred by his first name only, but now more people are calling him by the more respectful “Ramzan Akhmadovich”, which also underlines that he is the son of his late father.

Umalt Akayev, a former philosophy teacher, is less impressed by Kadyrov. Saying that he welcomes the rebuilding of Grozny, he added, “But it makes no difference to me. Class divisions are opening up here. Ramzan and his people will get richer and ordinary people will just stagnate and do nothing.”

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