

Chechnya: Kadyrov to Rule for Years

Constitutional referendum grants Chechen leader right to be president in perpetuity. Parliamentary elections in Chechnya at the weekend not only delivered the highest vote in the country for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party on behalf of local president, Ramzan Kadyrov, but also lifted restrictions on the president of the republic serving more than two terms.

The results of the December 2 poll in Chechnya were improbable, with the United Russia party - led nationally by President Vladimir Putin and locally by Kadyrov - recording a 99.36 share of the vote, or 574,101 votes in a total electorate of 580, 918 people. The turnout was also stated to be more than 99 per cent.

There was no possibility to verify these figures objectively as virtually the only poll observers were from United Russia itself. Opposition candidates, however, objected strenuously.

Ruslan Umarov of the Just Russia party said, "It's not possible that Just Russia got only 0.06 per cent of the vote. We cannot get hold of the voting protocol forms."

No international monitors came to Chechnya, following a meeting between the international monitoring team and the Russian Central Electoral Commission. However, the head of the commission, Vladimir Churov, maintained at a press conference, "The results received in Chechnya and the 99.5 per cent turnout are absolutely pure, transparent and logical."

Many observers outside Chechnya expressed amazement at how a people who had consistently voted for pro-independence politicians in the 1990s could suddenly have voted en masse for a party named United Russia.

Kadyrov himself answered this by saying, "There's nothing unexpected here. The federal list was headed by head of state Vladimir Putin and in Chechnya the president of the republic was first on the list. The vote showed how much trust the leaders of the country and of enjoy."

At several polling stations, old people were indeed heard to say that they would cast their vote "for the man who is paying my pension" - in other words Putin and Kadyrov.

Those opposed to the current authorities generally preferred not to vote at all. "Just by taking part in the elections I would recognise this regime," said Sultan Imayev, who lives in the village of Alkhan-Yurt. "And I don't want to do that at all."

The vote further strengthens the position of Kadyrov in Chechnya, following his appointment as president a year ago. Due to changes in the voting system, Chechnya had the opportunity to elect a higher number of deputies to the State Duma in Moscow. All four of those elected were members of Kadyrov's team: sitting deputy Akhmar Zavgayev, deputy prime minister Adam Delimkhanov, the head of the constitutional court Magomed Vakhayev and local member of parliament Said Yakhijajiev. Outgoing Duma deputy Ruslan Yamadayev, who is considered to be in opposition to Kadyrov, lost his seat.

Alongside the poll, a referendum was held on changes to the constitution of Chechnya and received 85 per cent support.

Some of the changes were relatively unimportant. For example, the Chechen parliament will go from a two-chamber assembly to one and the number of deputies in it will drop from 58 to 41.

More significant is that the length of the presidential term in Chechnya has risen from four years to five and that the restriction on serving two presidential terms has been lifted. That means that the president of Russia can now nominate his candidate - currently 31-year-old Kadyrov - to be president an unlimited number of times.

Dukvakh Abdurakhmanov, speaker of the Chechen parliament and a close ally of Kadyrov, welcomed the change. "Two terms of four years - that's just a western stereotype," he said. "Who came up with the idea, why do we have to follow it? I think that to end all the transformations and reforms we have begun a leader needs between 22 and 27 years.

"Ramzan Kadyrov has managed to realise his goal of maintaining power in Russia in perpetuity in the territory of one region of the federation," Russian journalist Ivan Sukhov wrote in Vremya Novostei newspaper in Moscow. However Sukhov noted that Kadyrov's position was still not entirely secure as it depended on the Russian head of state. "So an element of risk connected to the forthcoming presidential elections in Russia is still there for Ramzan Kadyrov, even despite his unprecedented success in imposing a Central Asian electoral culture in the North Caucasus."

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