Dagestan: Opposition Cries Foul Over Elections

Putin’s party predictably wins in turbulent electoral contest in which two candidates were murdered. The ruling party, United Russia, won around 90 per cent of the vote in Russia’s parliamentary elections in Dagestan, the biggest autonomous republic in the North Caucasus, which were marred by murder and fraud allegations.

Only one other party, the Communist Party, managed to clear the seven per cent threshold that guarantees seats in the State Duma.

The republic’s electoral commission reported that over 91 per cent of the electorate had voted on December 2. Dagestan’s opposition parties countered that the turnout was minimal, with voters put off by the rainy weather and lack of belief in the electoral process.

This IWPR correspondent, who visited five polling stations in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala, estimated that turnout could not be more than a third. But such observations count for little, as there’s no longer any minimum turnout requirement for elections to be valid.

President Vladimir Putin topped United Russia’s list of candidates nationwide with local leaders following suit and heading local party lists. Dagestani president Mukhu Aliev was the first candidate on United Russia’s electoral list in the north Caucasus republic.

The election in Dagestan, in which around 90 per cent of the vote went to United Russia, was a turbulent affair. In one violent incident, Farid Babyev, a human rights activist and candidate for the liberal Yabloko party, was shot outside his home on November 21 and died of his wounds three days later.

Babayev had been a thorn in the side of the authorities, criticising official corruption and abuse of so-called anti-terrorist operations in the republic.

Commenting on the murder, President Aliev said, “I’d like to repeat that this party [Yabloko] presented no danger to Dagestan’s government. The manner in which leaders of parties like these, who enjoy no broad public support and have to rely on critical and sometime abusive statements, try to attract attention to themselves is offensive.”

Local media criticised the president for making “unethical” comments.

“The phrase would make an unsophisticated reader think that Babayev had tried to assassinate himself,” said the newspaper Svobodnaya Respublika.

Yabloko’s leader Grigory Yavlinsky visited Dagestan after Babayev’s death and managed to hold a press conference, despite efforts to stop him from doing so, in which he lashed out at the authorities.
“Killing a man only because he’s been telling the truth - and what happened to Babayev has nothing to do with either money, business or communal quarrels - is a hideous crime,” said Yavlinsky.

Eduard Khidirov, a local member of the Dagestani parliament, was more outspoken,

“Here, in the republic, they keep on talking about religious extremism, while shutting their eyes to political crimes,” he said. “And the motive for the killing of Farid Babyv is definitely political. The forces that are responsible for the attack on Babayev are seeking to destroy the institutions of elections, opposition and pluralism.”

In another violent incident, on November 26, Nariman Aliev, who was candidate for Russia’s Public Chamber, was shot dead in his own house in the Mamedkala village of Dagestan’s Derbent District.

Throughout the electoral campaign, candidates complained of threats and intimidation.

Leaders of the Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party and the Just Russia party said they were being pressured to withdraw from the campaign.

Observers and public organisations claimed numerous violations during the voting, including massive rigging by officials in favour of the United Russia party.

Ballot box-stuffing cases were registered at polling stations in Makhachkala, Akushin, Lak, Akhvakh and Uhtsukul districts. People were seen voting more than once at various polling stations in Derbent. In the Dakhadai district, more than 50 mobile ballot boxes never reached voters.

First Secretary of the Communist Party in Dagestan Makhmud Makhmudov said there had been no elections in the republic.

“Officials adjusted voting results to the figures imposed from above, and votes were not even counted after the opening of ballot boxes at some polling stations,” he said.

On December 3, Magomed Khalitov, chairman of Dagestan’s electoral commission, declared the election had bee free of violations.

On December 4, around 100 members of the local branch of the Communist Party held a rally against the election results in Makhachkala. The protesters carried banners saying “False elections, rotten power” and “Give the election back to the people” and chanted slogans against the local and federal authorities - in particular, against presidents Aliev and Putin.

Political analyst Magomed Akhmednabiev told IWPR, “The results of the election were quite predictable. We are slowly returning to the stagnant Brezhnev rule”.

Gaji Gasanguseinov of the opposition Right Forces Union said the elections had been conducted without the participation of the voters.

“If the turnout had been really as high as the republic’s central election says it was, there would have been a great stir and queues at polling stations. Alas, the polling stations were empty, and there was nothing even for the local television to show.”

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