

Dagestan's Dirty Election

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An election designed to break the hold of ethnic politics is accused of being unfair. Opposition parties have cried foul after a parliamentary election in the largest republic in the North Caucasus, Dagestan, delivered a resounding victory to the pro-Kremlin party, United Russia.

The final results of the March 11 poll were only announced on March 21, following a partial recount.

As a result of the recount, two opposition parties, the Communist Party and Patriots of Russia, which would have been denied representation in the 72-seat parliament by the initial results, were awarded slightly more than seven per cent of the votes, giving them five seats each.

United Russia was declared the overwhelming winner, with more than 63 per cent of the vote and 47 seats, with two other parties, Just Russia and the Agrarian Party also winning seats in the assembly.

The new parliament can be expected to cooperate with Dagestan's president, Mukhu Aliev, but will also probably try to tame his reforming ideas, as powerful businessmen and bureaucrats are well represented among the United Russia deputies.

The election has been a testing one for Dagestan – Russia's most multi-ethnic region – as new rules tried to prevent the poll being contested on purely ethnic grounds. But the campaign was marred by violence and the count by accusations of fraud.

Two people died and four were wounded in the Dakhadai region in an armed clash between supporters of two parties, United Russia and the Union of Right Forces. Another party leader was wounded in an attack, and one candidate has vanished without trace.

The election was held under a proportional representation system based on party lists, with deputies no longer being elected from single constituencies.

Sociologist Zaid Abdulagatov said the new system was a positive development as it meant voters were no longer merely casting their ballot for a candidate from their own ethnic group, but for a party and its programme.

"If, after the election, people will not talk about how many members of parliament come from which nationality, we can call that progress," Abdulagatov said. "But I doubt we will be able to get away from that."

The Union of Right Forces also complained that the new rules were manipulated so that they were disqualified from the election.

With the stated aim of preserving a spread of candidates from across the republic, the lists of each party were required to contain representatives from all 53 districts of Dagestan. Any party that did not represent all the regions was struck from the ballot.

This is what happened to the Union of Right Forces after three of its candidates in the Khasavyurt region unexpectedly pulled out. Some party members said the withdrawals had been deliberately engineered to remove their group from the election.

Most of the new deputies have an allegiance to one or other of the two most powerful politicians in Dagestan, President Mukhu Aliev and the mayor of the capital Makhachkala, Said Amirov.

The deputies from the Patriots of Russia, which has its electoral base in southern Dagestan, are close to Amirov. Party leader Eduard Khidirov was wounded in an assassination attempt during the campaign and is still in hospital.

Patriots of Russia, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party - which did not win any seats - all alleged fraud after the elections, saying that the results given by the electoral commission diverged sharply from the data collected by their own poll observers.

Fikret Rajabov, a candidate for Patriots of Russia, said that his observers estimated that the party had won 18 per cent of the vote and this was backed up by local electoral officials - but that the party ended up with only seven per cent.

As an example, he said that in the Akhtyn region local electoral records had awarded Patriots of Russia 3,500 votes, but the eventual number of votes they were given was 1,089 votes.

Rajabov alleged that President Aliev intervened in the matter, a recount was conducted, and the results adjusted in favour of Patriots of Russia.

The Communist Party has traditionally done well in Dagestan and its local officials are indignant at the final results of the elections.

A group of Moscow lawyers representing the Communist Party visited Dagestan after the elections and concluded that 25,000 votes had been stolen in just ten towns.

"They want to knock us out on the eve of the elections to the [Russian] State Duma," said Mahmud Mahmudov, first secretary of the Communist Party of Dagestan and a deputy in the Duma. "It looks as though this was an order from Moscow, and it was carried out with great enthusiasm in the republic."

Mahmudov said that he had evidence of stuffing of ballot boxes, voting machines being changed shortly before the polls opened, and groups of young men travelling the republic and voting more than once for the governing party.

"In the Akhtyn region they sent two buses with OMON [armed police] officers who sealed off the electoral

commission building, and representatives of opposition parties were not allowed to watch the count," Mahmudov said. "The local electoral commissions were supposed to bring in the voting records but they put them to one side and gave totally different figures."

"The whole process was controlled by an official from the White House [the Dagestani government] who made the electoral commission give the required results."

"At the moment we are restraining our angry people, but if our lawful demands are not met, we will hold a demonstration."

The Central Electoral Commission has declined to discuss specific complaints – although United Russia did lose six per cent of its total vote in a recount.

Another expert, Tagir Muslimov from Dagestan's Centre of Ethno-Political Research, predicted that the new parliament would try to preserve vested interests and the status quo – in opposition to the president's efforts to crack down on corruption.

"Civil society is not a source of authority for us and the elite and big business just re-elect themselves," he said.

"The president promised to battle against clan structures and corruption, to bring in new people and to make changes. Some shifts have taken place – some clans have moved further away [from power], but other clans have got closer."

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