Kadyrov Steps into the Firing Line

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Within two days of Akhmed Kadyrov being named as Moscow's mouthpiece in Chechnya, one of his closest supporters was assassinated in his home.

Months of speculation are at an end. Choosing from a (very) shortlist of candidates, the Kremlin has finally charged Akhmed Kadyrov, the loyalist Chechen mufti, with the unenviable task of restoring order to the war-torn republic. In doing so, President Vladimir Putin has effectively nominated Kadyrov for the equally invidious job of leading the Chechen people.

As soon as Putin had signed his decree on the Organisation of a Temporary System of Executive Bodies in Chechnya, it became imperative to find a suitable candidate with the minimum delay. The Kremlin was hardly spoiled for choice. Bislan Gantamirov, head of the pro-Moscow Chechen militia, is notoriously unpredictable whilst the entrepreneur Malik Saidulaev is better known for his casino empire than his administrative talents. And Apti Batalov, the former chief of Aslan Maskhadov's staff, was only freed from Lefortovo prison under an amnesty because "it was established that he is not guilty of killing Russians".

In fact, the dramatic release of Apti Batalov - seized last month by Russian special forces - was itself a clear sign that the Kremlin desperately needed to swell the ranks of prominent Chechens prepared to nail their colours to the Russian mast.

At the same time, the state-controlled ORT channel was broadcasting an interview with Maskhadov's elder brother, Lechi, who urged the Chechen president to do everything in his power to "stop the carnage". Lechi Maskhadov added that his other two brothers had also refused to take up arms in a war that served the purposes of the "jaded" rebel leadership but betrayed the interests of the ordinary people. According to Chechen social mores, a younger brother is duty bound to obey his elder sibling. Maskhadov, however, turned a deaf ear to the televised appeal.

It has already become clear that the time for negotiating with Maskhadov himself is long gone. Earlier this month, the rebel leader signed an order to "hunt down all traitors working for the Moscow regime". The Kremlin promptly held the rebel government responsible for a terrorist attack which claimed the life of Sergei Zverev, aide to Moscow's frontman in Chechnya, Nikolai Koshman, and left Grozny mayor Supyan Mokhchaev with serious injuries.

With the "anti-terrorist" operation entering its 10th month, Putin has realised there was nothing to be gained from keeping channels open to Maskhadov indefinitely. Kadyrov was the only reasonable choice. A moderate Chechen who fought alongside Maskhadov during the first war, Kadyrov had repeatedly expressed grave concerns at the rise of Wahhabi extremist groups. Things reached a head last August when he openly condemned the incursions into Dagestan staged by maverick warlords Shamil Basaev and Khattab.

Moscow's statement of intent has provoked howls of indignation from Maskhadov who promptly branded the mufti a traitor and sentenced him to death. In doing so, he is effectively burning any last bridges that might offer him a negotiating channel in the future.

In addition to his spiritual standing, Kadyrov has other significant qualifications for the job. A member of the majority benoi clan, the mufti is the most authoritative and charismatic of all the Chechen loyalists. He enjoys widespread support from other Muslim leaders across Russia. He has also found a common language with Putin and has won the grudging approval of Gennady Troshev, Russia's top general in Chechnya, who described Kadyrov as "a leader who can put life in the republic back on track".
Yet Kadyrov will have to walk the fine line between the Scylla and the Charybdis: the very qualities which make him attractive to the Kremlin may stick in the craw of native Chechens. Last Thursday night, one of Kadyrov's staunchest supporters, Umar Idrisov, imam of the Urus-Martan district, died in his home after assassins shot him twice in the head.

On the one hand, the mufti will have to assert himself as a leader in his own right, rather than merely a Kremlin puppet. On the other, he will have to forge links with the disparate powers-that-be - General Troshev, Victor Kazantsev (head of the newly-created Caucasian district) and Nikolai Koshman, who, against all odds, has managed to hang on to his post.

It is unlikely that, at this stage, the military will be willing to hand over the reins of power completely to Kadyrov. It is more probable that he will act as a mediator to help bring an end to the fighting and win the respect of the population at large.

This interpretation was largely confirmed by Kadyrov in his first address to the nation last Wednesday. He called on the Chechen people to support him in all his undertakings and urged the rebel warlords to initiate peace talks. On the following day, in an interview with the daily newspaper Kommersant, Kadyrov outlined the four essential ingredients of a peace settlement in Chechnya:

1) Moscow should negotiate with any Chechen warlords who are ready to bring an end to the fighting. Kadyrov added that Maskhadov had lost the respect of his people and should "beg for the nation's pardon" but negotiations with the rebel leader were still a possibility.

2) There could be no question of parlaying with Basaev or Khattab. Both, said Kadyrov, should be "put behind bars or simply eliminated".

3) The new administration should focus on improving the quality of life in Chechnya by "fighting unemployment and assuring the safe return of refugees".

4) Wahhabism should be outlawed. The mufti told Kommersant that the Chechens had "suffered a great deal" from this radical branch of Islam.

There are, however, drawbacks to Kadyrov's candidacy. The more pessimistic local observers point out that no single leader is capable of uniting Chechnya's rival clans whilst the West is bound to view any Kremlin-approved candidate with suspicion. But there is no reason why Kadyrov should be any less successful in currying favour with the West than Ilyas Akhmadov, the rebel foreign minister, who travelled to Washington this month at the invitation of the American Committee for the Support of Chechnya (which reportedly counts the likes of Zbigniew Bzhezinsky and filmstar Richard Gere amongst its members).

It remains unclear why Maskhadov's emissary failed to secure the much-coveted audience with the State Department (surely Washington wasn't afraid of incurring Moscow's wrath?). But even the charms of the ageing Hollywood sex symbol were unable to win over Madeleine Albright and assure Akhmadov the ultimate diplomatic victory.

Whatever the true reasons behind Akhmadov's disastrous trip to Washington, the foreign minister was himself forced to admit that his repeated requests to meet the US Secretary of State were stonewalled. So, in the absence of any suitable Chechen leader in the foreseeable future, why not give Akhmed Kadyrov the floor?
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