

Security Dominates Chechen Poll Preparations

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Presidential candidates are setting up fortress-like campaign headquarters and employing armies of guards.

Former freedom fighter Aпти, 27, can now be seen every day in front of the Oil Institute building in downtown Grozny. Together with 20 other men of around the same age, he guards the campaign headquarters of presidential candidate Malik Saidullaev, a Moscow-based tycoon.

"I stayed home for four years, doing nothing. Now I'm here, wearing this uniform and carrying an AK-47," said Aпти.

Since the building was rented by Saidullaev's election team, both sides of the street have been blocked off, one with concrete slabs and the other by a crossbar. Security is every presidential candidate's primary concern. They have turned their campaign headquarters into veritable fortresses and employed armies of guards.

Nine politicians are contesting the controversial October 5 poll - taking place against a backdrop of de facto martial law and regular outbreaks of violence - but political analysts say only two, the incumbent pro-Moscow head of government, Ahmad Kadyrov, and Saidullaev, who owns Russian Lotto, are serious contenders.

An obvious absentee is Aslan Maskhadov, regarded as an outlaw by Moscow and its proxies in Chechnya. So far, the separatist leader has said nothing about the elections.

Analysts say the contest is less about policies - neither of the principal players appear to be offering any - than a trial of strength, in which Kadyrov is most likely to triumph, although Moscow is expected to have the final say.

Kadyrov's campaign team, based in a government compound surrounded by multiple rows of barbed wire, have reportedly employed several thousand, and electoral officials have apparently been ordered to curb the activities of other candidates.

"Kadyrov will win these elections if only because he and his people organised them," said Chechen political analyst Edilbek Hasmagomadov. "My friend who works for a district electoral centre told me they have recently been ordered to prevent all other candidates from meeting with voters, ban their media campaigning and get rid of all but Kadyrov posters from government institutions. Violators will be sacked."

The incumbent Chechen leader seemingly began preparing for the election in June, when he dismissed his government and local administration chiefs, in what was seen as a calculated move to bolster his authority in the run up to the poll.

A significant number of central and local authority posts were filled with loyal supporters - some relatives of the Benoi clan to which Kadyrov belongs.

More recently, at the beginning of August, he got rid of the minister for print media Beslan Gantemirov

after he declared support for another candidate, merging his department with that for ethnic minorities, headed by Kadyrov election campaign chief Taus Jabrailov.

The Chechen strongman appears to be keen to leave nothing to chance in these elections because all the indications are that he is deeply unpopular. Indeed, most of the people IWPR interviewed said they would not vote for him.

Hasmagomadov said his lack of popular support is not surprising given his loyalists' rough treatment of ordinary Chechens, "Like every single Chechen leader before him, Kadyrov is surrounded by people who are so corrupt and out of control that they should be pronounced clinically insane."

Kadyrov may hope his tactics will address his low ratings, but observers believe that, ultimately, the result of the election is in Kremlin's hands. Chechen human rights campaigner and journalist Usam Baisaev said whoever Moscow wants to win, will win, "So far, one gets the impression Moscow is unsure who to bet on, Kadyrov or Saidullaev."

For the moment, though, both camps have their eyes on electoral victory, and political tensions have occasionally erupted in violence. At the beginning of August, Kadyrov's guards fired on a jeep that displayed a picture of Saidullaev - fortunately, the occupants were ordered out of the vehicle first and no one was hurt.

And in the last few days, a hand grenade was thrown into Saidullaev's headquarters. "There was no one but security guards in there. Luckily no one was hurt. We proved we are worth the money they pay us," smirked Apti.

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