

At the Crossroads with Akhmad Kadyrov

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During the three years that he has served as Chechnya's chief administrator,¹ Akhmad Kadyrov has rarely spoken to Western interviewers. His interest in doing so now is clearly connected to the critical juncture at which his personal biography is rapidly converging with the history of his republic and that of the Russian Federation. The election of a Chechen president scheduled for October 5th is, in many ways, a culmination of a plan for Chechnya's future that was proposed by Kadyrov barely six months after his appointment. On 18 January 2001,² Kadyrov offered Russian President Vladimir Putin what was in essence a three-step plan to stabilize the situation in his war-torn republic. According to Kadyrov's proposal Moscow would withdraw troops and then appoint a consultative body, subordinate to Kadyrov, to draft a new Chechen constitution and electoral regulations, to be followed by the election of a new Chechen leader. During the past two years events in Chechnya have occurred roughly according to that plan, at least in so far as there have been limited troop withdrawals. The program is now approaching its finale.

In his interview with *Pravada.ru*, Kadyrov recognizes the double-bind to which this plan inevitably has led him: If he proceeds with the election then critics will deny its legitimacy on the grounds that it will take place in what remain highly unstable circumstances. Yet if he does not move quickly toward an election critics will charge that he is stalling in order to benefit his own autocratic ambitions. That the election is nonetheless the only way forward from the current Chechen morass, the only achievable political process, is suggested by Kadyrov's recognition of the growing irrelevance of militants such as former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov.³

Kadyrov claims that Maskhadov had prior knowledge of Basayev's plan to conquer Dagestan and use it as a staging ground for the invasion of Azerbaijan. While impartiality may not be a virtue of this account, the claim is particularly interesting in light of recent controversy regarding Maskhadov's involvement with the Nord Ost hostage incident in Moscow in October 2002. It is easier to substantiate Kadyrov's claim that Maskhadov sidelined himself when he allowed Shamil Basaev and Ibn Ul Khattab to invade Dagestan in August and September 1999, and then allowed them to return to Chechnya, where he neither arrested nor repudiated them, but recognized them as military commanders. This sentiment is widely held in the region. In Dagestan, people have told me that if a Dagestani had led an invasion of Chechnya or any other neighboring region, and then returned to Dagestan, he would have been killed by his own family. Dagestanis who initially hoped that the Chechen government might help them to

¹ Since 12 June 2000.

² Following his criticism, on 26 September 2000, of Moscow's failure to formulate a comprehensive plan for the reconstruction of Chechnya.

³ In a sense, the recent increase in terrorist attacks can be seen as the militant's own recognition of their growing irrelevance, and as their attempt to avoid it.

defeat the insurgents, but who found assistance only from Moscow, were subsequently outraged when Maskhadov failed to apologize for the invasions.⁴

Kadyrov points out that the invasions of Dagestan were a violation of Chechnya's peace treaty with Russia, as much as they were a violation of Islamic sharia, and suggests that insurgent leaders should have been handed over to Russia. It is sometimes overlooked that Putin was prepared to avoid war by negotiating the crisis in essentially criminal terms prior to ordering troops to enter Chechnya. On September 29, 1999, two days before federal troops crossed the border, Putin offered to open negotiations with Chechen leaders on condition that Maskhadov condemn terrorism, that he eliminate groups of armed insurgents from Chechen territory, and that he be willing to extradite 'criminals' to Moscow. When an interviewer asked why Maskhadov would not arrest Basaev, Raduev⁵, and Khattab, "or at least strip them of their operational bases in the Chechen mountains," Maskhadov responded: "I cannot simply have Basaev arrested as a gangster; people here would not understand that. After all, we fought together for our country's independence."⁶

Nor was this the first time that Maskhadov was warned. When Major-General Gennadii Shpigun was kidnapped in Grozny in March 1999, Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin cautioned that further "terrorist acts" would prompt Russian military intervention aimed at the destruction of bases occupied by the "criminal formations."⁷ Nor was Shpigun the first high-level Russian official to be kidnapped in those years. The Russian presidential envoy to Chechnya, Valentin Vlasov, was also held hostage for six months.

Like many people in the North Caucasus, Kadyrov places primary responsibility for the situation in Chechnya with the Chechens themselves. After Russia withdrew from Chechnya in 1996, Kadyrov says that Chechnya opened its doors to criminality, sometimes in the guise of Islam. This straightforward acceptance of responsibility offers Chechnya's only real hope for transformation. Yet it stands in sharp contrast to many Chechen leaders in the 1990s who cast their appeals for support and political legitimacy in terms, whether radically nationalist or radically Islamist, that aimed to villainize others. Kadyrov assigns part of the blame to the fragmentation of Chechen society, what he describes as the incapacity of Chechens to "trust each other". Chechen society repeatedly has been undone by its endemic fragmentation, as Chechen leaders have been tempted toward radical nationalism and radical Islamism in their efforts to transcend the traditional social cleavages. It is therefore ironic that a similar tragedy could result from the mutual dependence of Kadyrov and the Kremlin.

Despite the former's installation by the latter, their relationship has not always been cozy. As early as September 16, 2000 Kadyrov warned that continued Russian atrocities against Chechen civilians would spark reprisals that he would be morally

⁴ That apology came many months later from Bislan Gantimirov.

⁵ In January 1996, Chechen warlord Salman Raduev led a party of fighters on a raid that culminated in their holding as hostages more than 3000 men, women, and children in a hospital in Kizlyar, Dagestan. The raid appeared to mimic that of Shamil Basaev who held more than a thousand hostages in a maternity hospital in the Russian town of Budenovsk in June 1995.

⁶ Joerg R. Mettke, interview with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, *Der Spiegel*, no. 39, 27 September, 1999.

⁷ "Stepashin Issues Ultimatum to Grozny As Chechen Leadership Vows to Find Kidnapped General and Opposition Warns of Reprisals," RGE/RL *Newslines*, vol. 3, no. 47, pt. 1, March 9, 1999.

obligated to support. He has returned to this theme throughout his administration, and particularly following abuses that occurred last year. Yet as their plan has gradually been realized a bond of mutual reliance has developed between Kadyrov and Kremlin officials. On the one hand, Kadyrov's proven ability to work with Kremlin leaders is a point in his favor, but at the same time it appears that Moscow has placed all of its cards in Kadyrov's corner. In the complex, relentlessly fragmented field of Chechen politics, this may prove to be an error.

Faced with a tradition of fragmentation, it appears unlikely, at least in the short run, that Chechen society will come to terms with the institution of individual executive power prescribed by the new constitution. Ominously, the newly-adopted Constitution of the Chechen Republic, which is supposed to provide for societal accord, may in fact lay the foundation for future intra-Chechen conflict. Hence, Chechnya has reached a crossroads at which a new crop of elites may either forge power sharing arrangements that provide a foundation for consensus and viable coalition, or entrench new cleavages that set the stage for further instability and federal intervention. Contenders are now standing to oppose Kadyrov not because the Chechen presidency is an inherently attractive position, but because they do not wish to risk their exclusion from these arrangements.

The field currently includes Russian Khasbulatov, former speaker of the Russian Supreme Council, Aslanbek Aslakhanov, Duma Deputy and a former general in the Interior Ministry, Malik Saidullayev a Chechen businessman based in Moscow, Alkhat Khanchukayev of the Chechen University, banker Abubakar Arsamakov, and a businessman named Hussein Jabrailov. Since independent candidates may file as late as August 20, the list is likely to grow.

Several polls have indicated that voters may favor the Moscow-based Chechens over the Chechnya-based Chechens. This may be in part because the former, especially Khasbulatov and Aslakhanov, are sometimes viewed as more likely to rise above the cleavages that have so destructively divided Chechen society. If this occurs then Kadyrov will be, at least in part, a victim of his own success. In the midst of Chechnya's recent tumult, anyone in Kadyrov's position would have made enemies, and Kadyrov has made plenty of them. The Moscow Chechens inevitably will profit from their distance.

This is why Kadyrov attempts to turn the tables, and to challenge their legitimacy, by asking where they were in 1997-1999 when he was fighting Wahhabis for the soul of Chechnya. He is not exaggerating when he says that "they constantly had me in their sights." There have been numerous attempts on his life, and on the lives of his family members. On June 16, 2000, Chechen Republic-Ichkeria Vice President Arsanov posted a \$250,000 reward for anyone who would capture or kill Akhmad Kadyrov. He contrasts his own tough response with that of Saidullayev, whom he claims paid half a million dollars to ransom two of his family members from the notorious war lord and kidnapper, Arbi Barayev. Aslan Maskhadov's presidency failed in no small part because of his inability to control those such as Barayev who financed their military and political exploits through their trade in human beings. By contrast, only two days after his appointment Kadyrov declared his willingness to talk to anyone except "those who made slave-trading and hostage-taking their business."

This is also why Kadyrov cites his own Islamic credentials and challenges those of previous Chechen elites. In recent years, Chechen political rivalries often have been

framed in terms of competing claims of religious fidelity. Yet this has proved a dangerous expedient since it has opened the door to extremism. Some Dagestanis see this competition as an indication of Chechen culture's relative inexperience with Islam, which arrived there in the eighteenth century, a thousand years after it came to Dagestan.

While Kadyrov points to the first fragile signs of Chechnya's economic recovery, he withholds any view on Chechnya's ultimate economic status. For the moment it is wise for all sides to avoid controversy over these arrangements. Yet most Chechens, like many other North Caucasians, clearly favor ample portions of autonomy, and Moscow would be prudent to grant it to them.

Finally, it is encouraging to find Kadyrov calling for international election monitors while cautioning against efforts to burden local politics with international political agendas. Though serious scrutiny of the October election is likely to prove difficult, monitors might be wise to examine opportunities for macro-irregularities arising, for example, from an overestimation of the electorate that might follow from inflated census figures. As Kadyrov emphasizes, the people of Chechnya are exhausted, and it is past time that they had a genuine opportunity to choose a normal life.

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