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Freedom in the World 2009 - Chechnya [Russia]

Capital: N/A

Population: 1,200,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 7

Status: Not Free

Overview

Although Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov tightened his grip on power in 2008, he was unable to completely crush rebel groups, who continued to use violence indiscriminately against state and civilian targets. In September, an unidentified assassin killed one of Kadyrov's rivals in Moscow. In October, noncompetitive Chechen parliamentary elections replaced a bicameral pro-Kadyrov legislature with a unicameral one. Murders and disappearances continued unabated in neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia, while Russia's August invasion of Georgia and subsequent recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia further undermined stability in the Caucasus region.

Chechnya, a small, partly mountainous North Caucasus republic, has a history of armed resistance to Russian rule dating to the czarist period. In February 1944, the Chechens were deported en masse to Kazakhstan after Soviet leader Joseph Stalin accused them of collaborating with Nazi German forces. Officially rehabilitated in 1957 and allowed to return to their homeland, they remained politically suspect and were excluded from the region's administration.

After winning election as Chechnya's president in October 1991, former Soviet air force general Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed the republic's independence. Moscow responded with an economic blockade. In 1994, Russia began assisting Chechens opposed to Dudayev, whose rule was marked by growing corruption and the rise of powerful clans and criminal gangs. Russian president Boris Yeltsin sent 40,000 troops into Chechnya by mid-December of that year and attacked the capital, Grozny. As casualties mounted, Russian public opposition increased, fueled by criticism from much of the country's then independent media. In April 1996, Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile.

A peace deal signed in August 1996 resulted in the withdrawal of most Russian forces from Chechnya. However, a final settlement on the republic's status was put off until 2001. In May 1997, Russia and Chechnya reached an accord recognizing the newly elected president, Aslan Maskhadov, as Chechnya's legitimate leader. The elections were

considered reasonably free and fair by outside observers, but Maskhadov proved to be an ineffective ruler, and the region degenerated into chaos.

Following incursions into neighboring Dagestan by renegade Chechen guerrillas and deadly apartment bombings in Russia that the Kremlin blamed on Chechen militants, Russian prime minister (and later president) Vladimir Putin launched a second military offensive in Chechnya in September 1999. Russian forces' indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets caused more than 200,000 people to flee Chechnya, with most heading to the neighboring Russian republic of Ingushetia. After federal troops finally captured Grozny in February 2000, the military focused on rebel strongholds in the mountainous south. Russian security sweeps led to regular atrocities in which civilians were beaten, raped, or killed, while Russian forces were subject to almost daily bombings and sniper attacks by rebels.

As the war persisted and atrocities increased, some Chechen fighters engaged in terrorist acts. A group of rebels stormed a Moscow theater in October 2002, resulting in the death of more than 120 hostages, most from the effects of a sedative gas that Russian troops used to incapacitate the assailants. In September 2004, the rebels attacked a school in Beslan, in the Russian republic of North Ossetia, leading to the deaths of more than 330 people, including numerous children.

A March 2003 referendum on a new Chechen constitution passed with 96 percent of the vote, amid 85 percent turnout, according to official results. However, an independent survey by the Russian human rights group Memorial found that 80 percent of the indigenous population opposed the referendum. Kremlin-backed candidate Akhmad Kadyrov won the Chechen presidency in an October 2003 election, though the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said the poll had not offered voters a significant choice. Chechen rebels assassinated Kadyrov in a May 2004 stadium bombing.

Despite the subsequent election of Alu Alkhanov as president, de facto power shifted to Kadyrov's son, Ramzan Kadyrov, who could not become president until he turned 30 in 2006. Alkhanov resigned in February 2007, allowing Kadyrov, then the prime minister, to become acting president, and Putin confirmed him in office the following month. Kadyrov had support from some factions within the Kremlin but was clearly working to expand his own power base as well. He rebuilt central Grozny, adding a giant new mosque, and restored some municipal services; the efforts were financed by large federal subsidies and funds extorted from contractors and government workers. Despite assertions of stability under his rule, serious business activity remained absent, and the republic was still host to approximately 50,000 Russian troops and a 40,000 member security force under Kadyrov's control.

Kadyrov and his force of former rebel troops took over much of the fighting within Chechnya and largely quashed the secessionist guerrillas, while Russian forces helped to kill the key leaders. Nevertheless, the rebels – who had been transformed from a separatist movement to a militant underground espousing explicit Islamist rhetoric but no coherent political agenda – continued to carry out episodic attacks and recruit new members, even as Kadyrov's forces devised harsh countermeasures. For example, foreign journalists have reported that his troops routinely burned the houses of suspected insurgents' relatives. Violent incidents have also occurred in the neighboring republics of Kabardino-Balkariya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.

In September 2008, Ruslan Yamadayev, a former member of the Russian parliament, was murdered in Moscow. Yamadayev's brother Sulim had been in charge of the Vostok battalion, one of just two Chechen battalions that remained under the direct control of Russia's defense ministry. He lost the leadership of the unit after his troops clashed with Kadyrov's in April. The killing echoed the 2006 Moscow murder of Movladi Baisarov, another opponent of Kadyrov and the commander of the Zapad battalion under the command of the defense ministry.

Also during 2008, Kadyrov continued to provide political support for Moscow. In the

Russian presidential election in March, Chechnya produced an 88.7 percent vote for Putin's handpicked successor Dmitry Medvedev, well above the national average of 70.3 percent. Snap Chechen parliamentary polls were held in October, after Kadyrov pushed the bicameral parliament – elected in late 2005 – to dissolve itself in favor of a new unicameral legislature. Putin's United Russia party took 88.4 percent of the vote, while the equally pro-Putin Just Russia took 9.2 percent, with more than 95 percent of the electorate reportedly participating.

Even as it used violence to prevent separatism in Chechnya, Moscow in August 2008 offered diplomatic recognition to secessionist governments in the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some analysts warned that the move, which came after a brief war between Russia and Georgia that month, could strengthen separatist sentiments in the Russian North Caucasus.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The resumption of war in 1999 led to the total evisceration of Chechens' political rights. Russian gubernatorial elections were eliminated in 2004; under the new system, the Russian president names a candidate for the Chechen presidency, who then must be approved by the Chechen parliament. Although he effectively serves at the pleasure of the Russian president, the Chechen president is appointed for a five-year term, and there are no term limits. A December 2007 referendum approved the replacement of the bicameral legislature with a unicameral body of 41 members, all of whom serve five-year terms. Elections for the new parliament were held in October 2008; much like the old body, it was filled with members loyal to Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, who took office in early 2007.

The so-called Kadyrovtsy, members of Kadyrov's security service, have reportedly been involved in abductions, disappearances, extortion, trading in contraband, and the maintenance of unsanctioned prisons and torture chambers. This group represents the chief political power in the republic and has been able to bring most of the territory under its control.

Corruption is rampant in Chechnya. Kadyrov's critics claim that his accomplishments in rebuilding parts of Grozny have been accompanied by a system of kickbacks. The restored apartments are not always distributed fairly, and many of the reconstruction workers have not been paid. It is also not clear how much of the revenue from Chechen oil production has been misappropriated. Chechnya is not listed separately on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

Information in the republic is tightly managed. Kadyrov's financial resources allow him to control all local broadcast and most print media, which provide extensive coverage of his activities. There are three licensed television broadcasters, whose content is progovernment. Russian state-run television and radio outlets continue to broadcast in Chechnya. The rebel movement operates websites with reports from its perspective, but internet usage is negligible.

The Russian security services impose severe restrictions on journalists' access to the widening Caucasus conflict area, issuing accreditation primarily to those of proven loyalty to the Russian government. Few foreign reporters are allowed into Chechnya, and when they are granted entry, they must be accompanied at all times by military officials. The October 2006 Moscow murder of Anna Politkovskaya, a correspondent for Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta*, silenced one of the few remaining journalists who traveled in Chechnya without official escorts and collected evidence of abuses by Russian troops and the pro-Moscow Chechen government. In 2008, the authorities still had not conclusively identified who ordered her assassination. *Novaya Gazeta* Editor-in-Chief Dmitry Muratov has asserted that the assassination was connected to Chechnya and accused Kadyrov of withholding information relevant to the investigation.

Most Chechens practice Sufism, a mystical form of Islam. Kadyrov openly advocates giving the faith a central role in Chechen public life. The fundamentalist Wahhabi

(Salafi) sect of Sunni Islam, which has roots in Saudi Arabia and was introduced in Chechnya by Arab emissaries at the end of the first Chechen war in 1996, has been banned by Russia.

Since the start of the fighting in 1994, many of the republic's schools have been damaged or destroyed, and education in Chechnya has been sporadic. Most schools have not been renovated and continue to lack basic amenities.

Most international nongovernmental organizations working in Chechnya have moved their headquarters outside of the republic because of security concerns. However, the deteriorating situation in Ingushetia forced the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to close its facilities there in 2007. Currently, international groups are providing humanitarian aid in Chechnya, and Memorial is conducting human rights research there. In addition to pressure from the Chechen government, the groups face increasing demands from the Russian government, which introduced extensive reporting requirements in 2006. Freedom of assembly is not respected, and labor union activity is almost nonexistent due to economic devastation and widespread unemployment.

The rule of law is extremely weak, with Kadyrov often acting as a law unto himself. Extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and other serious crimes are rarely investigated and even more rarely prosecuted. Human rights groups accuse members of the local police of involvement in kidnappings, though Amnesty International reported in 2008 that the number of disappearances was down considerably compared with the previous year.

The European Court of Human Rights has provided Chechens with an alternative source of justice. The court has repeatedly ruled against Russia's conduct of the war in Chechnya, finding that it indiscriminately killed civilians. Memorial estimates that as many as 5,000 people have vanished during the second Chechen war. In October 2007, the human rights court sought to speed up the litigation process by allowing residents of the North Caucasus to file complaints without first exhausting all legal options in Russia. The Russian authorities have attempted to prevent such filings and redirect them to Russian courts.

Widespread corruption and the economic devastation caused by the war severely limit equality of opportunity. Unemployment is 65.3 percent, according to Rosstat, the Russian federal statistics service. Residents who have found work are employed mostly by the local police, the administration, the oil and construction sectors, or small enterprises. Despite numerous problems, the Kadyrov government's rebuilding efforts have improved the overall economic situation, and local business activity has picked up. Most of the ethnic Chechens who fled the republic have now returned home, though many live in sub-standard housing conditions.

With Kadyrov's emphasis on traditional Islam, women face increased discrimination in this male-dominated culture. In September 2007, Kadyrov ordered female civil servants to wear headscarves; he expanded the order in November to include female university students. At the same time, the war has resulted in many women becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Children accounted for up to 40 percent of casualties during the war, and they continue to suffer from psychological trauma and poor living conditions, including lack of access to education and health care.

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