

All Chechen Cafes Ordered Shut During Ramadan

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GROZNY — Chechnya's spiritual leader has ordered that eateries shut down completely for the month of Ramadan, sparking outrage from activists and residents who say it violates federal law.

Against the backdrop of a spreading insurgency, many fear that growing interest in radical Islam could fuel separatism in the North Caucasus, where rebels are fighting to create a pan-Caucasus state governed by Islamic sharia law.

Chechen mufti Sultan Mirzayev said Wednesday that cafes and restaurants must stay closed even after sundown during Ramadan — a radical move compared with other parts of the Muslim world.

"We can't have smells wafting through the streets and teasing the hungry," Mirzayev said by telephone.

The holy month of Ramadan, which started on Aug. 11 in Russia this year, requires Muslims to

abstain from food and drink from sunrise until sunset every day.

Grozny residents said this was the first time a total shutdown had taken place, noting that about half of the cafes were working during last year's Ramadan.

In response to Mirzayev's order, downtown Grozny grew silent as many cafes shut their doors. Only shops and outdoor markets, where many Chechens buy their food, were functioning.

"They could have at least left us a few places where we can get a bite," said Grozny resident Emira Sadulayeva, 32.

The mufti's order has no legal weight, but it is likely to be followed because Mirzayev is a respected spiritual leader. He said cafes refusing to comply "would be encouraged to close."

The cafe blackout highlights tension over efforts by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov to enforce Islamic rules that can violate the Russian Constitution.

Kadyrov's spokesman declined to comment on the shutdown.

Critics say the Kremlin allows Kadyrov to run Chechnya like a personal fiefdom in return for keeping relative calm in a region still recovering from two separatist wars with Moscow since the mid-1990s.

By comparison, in neighboring Dagestan, this year's Ramadan was observed largely in line with traditions accepted in most other parts of the Muslim world, with cafes staying open after nightfall and with no alcohol served.

Dagestan has overtaken Chechnya and nearby Ingushetia as the epicenter of violence as the Islamist insurgency gains momentum.

Minkail Ezhiyev, a rights activist and founder of the Chechen Civil Society Forum, said the Ramadan shutdown showed that Chechnya was functioning as a state separate from Russia, where the Constitution states that religion and state are separate.

"I am totally against the cafes' closure," he said. "Everything needs to be within the confines of the law that dictates in Russia."

Critics say Kadyrov's large personal militia imposes his vision of Islam in Chechnya, where alcohol is banned, women must wear headscarves in state buildings and polygamy is encouraged by authorities.

In July, Kadyrov shocked human rights groups when he praised unidentified assailants for targeting women with paintball pellets for not wearing headscarves. Before Ramadan started, insurgents from the Kabardino-Balkaria republic said on Islamist web sites that alcohol sellers would be "eliminated" during the holy month.

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