The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Kalmykia to Get Pragmatic Leader, Analysts Say

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September 07, 2010



Ilyumzhinov

Flamboyant Kalmykia leader Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who is stepping down after 17 years in office, will likely be replaced by a pragmatic-minded business manager, analysts said Tuesday.

Ilyumzhinov, 48, said Monday that he would not seek reappointment after his fourth term expires in October. He cited President Dmitry Medvedev's policy of not keeping regional leaders on the job for more than three terms as the reason for the decision.

Analysts said Medvedev's policy made Ilyumzhinov's removal unavoidable.

"If Ilyumzhinov had been left in office for one more term, it would be a clear blow to Medvedev's reputation, meaning that he couldn't find a replacement," said Sergei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute of Regional Politics.

Nikolai Petrov, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said the next leader, in line with the Kremlin's policy for republics, would likely be a native of Kalmykia.

The official list of possible successors, which is to be filed with Medvedev by the ruling United Russia party, was not made public Tuesday.

But Vedomosti, citing party and regional sources, confirmed Petrov's forecasts by naming as possible candidates Kalmykia's incumbent prime minister, Oleg Kichikov; two of his deputies, Sandzhi Khonyayev and Badmu Salayev; and deputy chief of the local administration, Batra Vankayev.

Two other potential candidates hail from the Volgograd region: Mikhail Murzayev, chief of the regional branch of the Investigative Committee, and Deputy Governor Alexander Dorzhdeyev. Both are ethnic Kalmyks.

"There will be a new type of leader who can act like a business manager," Petrov said, adding that Ilyumzhinov's departure signals a positive change for Kalmykia, where political conflicts have intensified in recent years.

But Titkov said it was hard to predict how the new appointee would influence the republic because of the challenges he would face. "For the region, it means adapting to a new leader," Titkov said.

Under Ilyumzhinov, Kalmykia, one of the poorest Russian regions, earned notoriety for human rights abuses. Ilyumzhinov also puzzled the public when he repeatedly said he had made contact with extraterrestrials dressed in yellow space suits during a stay in Moscow in 1997.

Ilyumzhinov said Monday that he would continue living in Kalmykia and would try to organize a visit by the Dalai Lama.

He also said he hoped to keep his job as the leader of the World Chess Federation in elections this month where he faces competition from former chess master Anatoly Karpov.

Ilyumzhinov enjoyed the support of Medvedev's aide Arkady Dvorkovich in his re-election bid. Speculation has swirled that the Kremlin sees the chess post as a consolation prize for the outgoing Kalmykia leader.

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