

Holiday Crackdown Upsets Chechens

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Women participating in a "Beauty of the Chechen Woman" march in Grozny. **S.Dal**

GROZNY — Armed guards barred women without headscarves from festivities in Chechnya marking a new holiday — to honor women.

Chechen women said the holiday, established by President Ramzan Kadyrov a year ago, was tarnished by rules that he had previously imposed, restricting their rights by enforcing traditional Muslim customs in the volatile region.

Dark-haired women in floor-length satin gowns, their faces framed by white hijabs, were given prizes for motherhood and awarded medals for sons lost to war in a concert hall decorated with Chechen flags in Grozny on Sunday.

Outside the building, a group of bareheaded women, prevented by guards from entering, tried to catch a glimpse of the Chechen folk dances inside, while pink fireworks illuminated the Grozny skyline.

"I am furious that on a holiday for us, I can't even get into the hall," said Zoya, 25, who had traveled from the city of Gudermes, the site of Kadyrov's luxurious residence.

"It's just a costume show for the king," she added, referring to an edict issued by Kadyrov in 2007 that — in direct violation of federal law — banned bareheaded women from entering public buildings.

A spate of recent attacks on Chechen women for not wearing headscarves, which rights groups and assailants alike said were orchestrated by authorities, led to accusations that the celebrations were laced with hypocrisy.

"The future of the Chechen people lies in your hands. You are the soul of our nation," Kadyrov, wearing a traditional ram's wool hat, told a mostly female crowd of about 1,000 people.

President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin rely on Kadyrov to maintain order in Chechnya, where separatists were driven from power a decade ago after two devastating wars with government forces.

Analysts say Kadyrov has tried, sometimes contrary to federal law, to impose an increasingly radical vision of Islam in Chechnya, where alcohol sales are highly restricted and authorities encourage polygamy.

"We shout out loud that we live in a secular state and live in a free Russia, but these kind of local laws infringe upon the rights and liberties of citizens," said Lemma, a 39-year-old Grozny resident waiting outside the hall.

Many women said that during the holy month of Ramadan, which ended on Sept. 10, they had been harassed by men for not wearing headscarves, in street raids that some of the assailants said were ordered by religious authorities.

Analysts say that while 90 percent of Chechnya's 1.1 million people are Muslim and the majority identify themselves as believers, applying Islamic rules by force could raise tension.

Kadyrov, a devout Sufi Muslim, had previously praised such activism, telling state television that he was grateful to men who shot women with paintball pellets in June for going bareheaded.

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