

Chechnya Struggles to End Bride Kidnapping

January 13, 2011

The  Moscow Times

GROZNY — Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov has acknowledged that he is struggling to end the age-old practice of bride kidnapping, which conflicts with federal law.

"Local authorities are not fully in charge of this situation. ... Bride kidnapping has no place in Islam, nor in Russian law," Kadyrov told a Chechen government meeting, in comments published this week on the official Chechnya.gov.ru web site.

Insiders and analysts say Kadyrov is facing increased pressure from Moscow to curb local traditions that violate federal laws after spiritual leaders in August ordered armed men to harass women who did not wear headscarves. The incident caused an uproar among many Chechens.

Bride kidnapping, in which a woman is taken by a potential groom's family and held captive until the wedding has taken place, is an ancient tradition across the North Caucasus and existed before Chechnya's adoption of Islam some 250 years ago. But it is now widely associated in Russia with Islam.

Sometimes bride kidnapping serves as part of an arranged marriage, but often the future bride and her family are taken unawares.

Kadyrov referred to the attempted kidnapping of a young woman on Dec. 28 in the village of Geldagen, which sparked a physical fight between the families of the potential bride and groom after the woman put up resistance.

Kadyrov said he had sacked a local imam who had approved of the kidnapping.

Kadyrov has said publicly that he believes that Islamic sharia takes precedence over federal law, but has also repeatedly said he is committed to Russian rule. Such ambiguity has led some to say the region is evolving toward autonomy once again.

Kadyrov first called for an end to bride kidnapping in October, when he set a 1 million ruble (\$33,180) fine, and in November the first criminal case involving the practice opened.

But many in Chechnya, even women see bride kidnapping as a central part of local identity.

"This is an old and beautiful custom, it should not be punishable by law," said Syeda Umayeva, a 41-year-old Grozny resident who was kidnapped by the family of her husband-to-be 17 years ago.

The practice famously featured in a popular 1967 Soviet film comedy, "Prisoner of the Caucasus" in which a young Russian woman is kidnapped by her suitor's assistants.

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