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As Police Dismissals Mount, Hope Grows

By Alexandra Odynova

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Six senior regional police officers lost their jobs Tuesday in the latest round of Kremlin-ordered sackings at the Interior Ministry, giving some observers hope that reform was really taking shape within the police force.

President Dmitry Medvedev has fired dozens of senior provincial police officials since his reform of the notoriously corrupt and ineffective police force started in March. But the real test of his mettle will be with the ministry's top brass, which he has allowed to keep their seats for now.

Five police generals and one colonel got the boot Tuesday, the first day back at work after an extended Victory Day holiday weekend, the Kremlin said on its web site, without providing a reason for the firings. Three officials served in the Kemerovo region, while the others worked in the Krasnodar and Saratov regions and the Tatarstan republic.

"These are substantial surgical strikes because the Interior Ministry is closely connected with the authorities and businesses, especially in the regions," said Kirill Kabanov, head of the

nongovernmental National Anti-Corruption Committee.

Medvedev has been firing and downgrading senior police officers on a more or less weekly basis over the last few months, usually in batches of up to two dozen officials at a time. Eighty-seven of the Interior Ministry's 427 generals are expected to lose their jobs as part of the plan to shave 200,000 officers off the 1.2 million-member national police force.

Kremlin insiders have explained some of the dismissals to national news agencies, often saying the officials had reached retirement age. None has been accused of corruption or abuse of office, and several were later appointed to lower-ranking jobs.

All police officers have to take re-evaluation tests as part of the reform. The program was set to wind up by next month, but an official close to the reform told Interfax on Tuesday that the deadline may be pushed to December because examiners have failed to test all officers in time due to the tests being too complicated and time-consuming.

But while lower-level heads roll, senior officials at the ministry's central office, including Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev, have not faced any challenges to their positions. It remains unclear whether Nurgaliyev — who has presided over the country's police force for seven years — has taken his own re-evaluation tests.

Medvedev's policy amounts to "a soft rotation without serious anti-corruption measures, but the need for it is clear," said Mikhail Grishankov, a United Russia member and deputy head of the State Duma's Security Committee.

"Now a lot depends on whether the newly appointed heads will build good reputations," Grishankov said.

Meanwhile, the ministry's top officials are likely waging a behind-the-scenes battle to keep their jobs, said Kabanov, of the National Anti-Corruption Committee. "Judging by our committee's experience, these officials are very good lobbyists," he said by telephone.

The extent of anti-corruption purges, including the fate of Nurgaliyev and his circle of associates, will depend on whether Medvedev or Putin runs for the presidency in 2012, Kabanov said. Medvedev and Putin have not indicated which of them might run.

Law enforcement agencies are considered the core power base of Putin, himself a former security service officer. When Medvedev began his dismissals at the Interior Ministry, some analysts speculated that be might be taking on Putin, but the president has not touched any of the prime minister's close associates.

Kabanov said the fate of the Interior Ministry's leadership was "a serious political agreement that will be made when the situation with 2012 comes clear."

The reshuffling "is not over yet," Grishankov said.

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