

Calls for Top Cop's Head Falls on Deaf Ears

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Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev was grilled by the State Duma on Friday over recent startling allegations of police brutality, but calls for his resignation by A Just Russia party fell short when the ruling United Russia party refused to support them.

Nurgaliyev took a defensive strategy, saying that the much-heralded program of police reform was still in its early stages — although opposition leaders and some experts have deemed it a failure.

“We have only taken the first step,” Nurgaliyev said, acknowledging that the process of cleaning up the police force started in earnest just five months ago. Still, he noted that 44,000 police officers have resigned as a result of re-evaluation, while another 6,500 were recommended for dismissal.

Nurgaliyev, whose address was broadcast live on Rossia-1 state television, defended the state

of the police force, which continues to be a center for allegations of misconduct and abuse three years after President Dmitry Medvedev started pushing for reforms.

The impact of the reforms has come under heavy criticism since a Kazan man died last month while in police custody from injuries, which he suffered after being sodomized with a champagne bottle.

Nurgaliyev said Friday that a police chief in the Kemerovo region was suspended from duty following an investigation into the brutal murder of a man by another police officer. The officer allegedly killed his sister's boyfriend and burned his body after a family fight.

While admitting the cases of police brutality, Nurgaliyev pointed to the United States, where he said cases of abuse also occur widely. "Many countries are filtering such information to stop it from going public," Nurgaliyev said.

Nurgaliyev said police abuse was directly connected to officers operating in a "criminal environment" during their daily work. "But we must and we will become better than the environment that we face," he said.

Nurgaliyev's argument was met by withering criticism from Gennady Gudkov, A Just Russia member and deputy head of the Duma's Security Committee, who said the United States has far fewer police officers and twice the size of population.

"Let's be correct in our estimates," he said.

Gudkov said he would appeal to President-elect Vladimir Putin to demand Nurgaliyev's resignation.

"With all due respect to you, even if you yourself are a good man, you need to take personal responsibility over the failure of the reforms," Gudkov said.

He was echoed by United Russia Deputy Alexander Khinshtein, who called the reforms "chaotic," and said that in many cities, the number of police officers on patrol was drastically cut, which led to an increase in street crime.

Khinshtein is an old foe of Nurgaliyev's and recently attacked him in an article in Moskovsky Komsomolets over his close aide Oleg Sudakov, who was arrested in June over possible ties to the illegal casino business. The deputy suggested in the article that Sudakov might take revenge by trying to point the finger at his former boss.

Not responding to Sudakov's case directly, Nurgaliyev accused the media of publishing paid-for articles against his office.

While some experts have said Nurgaliyev could still keep his post, others have questioned whether any reforms have ever been done.

"No reforms have been carried out. It's a classic re-branding, like when a company changes the name of a product to present it to a customer," said Pavel Salin, an analyst with the Center for Current Politics.

But Salin said that by trying to demand the resignation of Nurgaliyev, the opposition was trying to “simplify” the situation.

“The opposition is working in the favor of the authorities,” he said. “They are trying to show that if he is fired, the situation will change. It is a PR trick.”

Former United Russia Deputy Vladimir Semago agreed, saying, “The Interior Ministry was a corrupt organization long before Nurgaliyev, so this is just a way to find a scapegoat.”

Under the law, the president has the right to appoint and fire not only the interior minister, but also his deputies and heads of regional police branches.

Kommersant reported Saturday, citing its own sources, that Nurgaliyev has proposed a new reform within the ministry’s central apparatus, but the ministry denied the existence of such a plan, saying in a statement Saturday that ongoing reforms would continue.

Nurgaliyev’s address to Duma deputies was the last before the government resigns for Putin’s inauguration. Kommersant reported that Nurgaliyev might not be included in the new government.

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