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Putin Ousts Dagestan Leader Magomedov

By Alexander Winning

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Ramazan Abdulatipov

President Vladimir Putin on Monday dismissed Magomedsalam Magomedov as leader of turbulent Dagestan, a republic where authorities are fighting a militant Islamist insurgency.

Putin said in a statement that Magomedov had tendered his resignation, but experts told The Moscow Times that the change in leadership likely signified that Magomedov had fallen out of favor in Moscow.

As part of the reshuffle, Magomedov, 49, was appointed presidential deputy chief of staff, a high-ranking role that appeared to be a sweetener to persuade him to vacate his post without a struggle.

Magomedov's tenure as Dagestan leader had been punctuated with a number of prominent

terrorist attacks as well as shootings of judges, journalists and religious leaders. On Jan. 15, a top judge was shot dead as he approached his car in Makhachkala, the republic's capital, in what appeared to be a revenge attack.

Veteran lawmaker Ramazan Abdulatipov, 67, was appointed acting Dagestan leader. He has served as a Federation Council senator, State Duma deputy, deputy prime minister and ambassador to Tajikistan, and in 1991 mediated a conflict between ethnic Chechens and Avars with former State Duma Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov.

Magomedov's ouster comes ahead of gubernatorial elections scheduled for the fall in the North Caucasus republic, although the State Duma on Wednesday tentatively approved a bill that would allow federal subjects to cancel direct elections.

Speculation had circulated for over a week that Magomedov could lose his post after local media reported that Putin had asked him to resign at a meeting in Moscow on Jan. 14. At the time, Magomedov's spokesman confirmed the trip but declined to elaborate.

On Thursday, Vedomosti cited Kremlin sources as saying that Dagestan-born Abdulatipov would be appointed to head the republic in an effort to tackle lingering regional instability.

A string of official denials followed until Abdulatipov said in an interview to the Kavkazskaya Politika news portal on Sunday that Putin had already signed an order appointing him to lead the republic.

Magomedov's press office brushed off Abdulatipov's comments as unfounded early Monday, only for the Kremlin to officially confirm the appointment by mid-afternoon.

Speaking as the news of Magomedov's departure unfolded, Alexei Malashenko, an expert with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said by phone that the Kremlin's policy in Dagestan was "a mess."

“This uncertainty only provokes further instability in a region that is the heart of Russia’s Caucasus,” he said.

Enver Kisriyev, a Caucasus expert with the Russian Academy of Sciences, explained the drawn-out nature of Magomedov’s removal as a struggle between rival factions that lasted until the very end.

“It’s strange that the Kremlin was slow to act, but it’s clear they want to make changes,” he said. “Magomedov worked steadily for just under three years. There were no major failures or scandals during his time in office, and the situation might even have improved slightly.”

Dagestan, which boasts 28 indigenous languages, is one of Russia’s most ethnically diverse regions, and authorities have been battling a resurgent Islamist insurgency in the troubled republic following two separatist wars in neighboring Chechnya.

Attacks on law enforcement officers and officials are an almost-daily occurrence in Dagestan, which is also trying to attract investment as part of plans to develop a network of ski resorts in the North Caucasus. (See related story, Front Page.)

Magomedov, who had led Dagestan since February 2010, is the son of Magomedali Magomedov, who headed the republic between 1987 and 2006.

An ethnic Dargin, he reportedly received the post thanks to the influence of local billionaire Suleiman Kerimov, who promised to invest in social programs in the republic when Magomedov's appointment was being discussed, Vedomosti reported. Abdulatipov is an Avar, the republic's dominant ethnicity.

In an interview with Business FM radio Thursday, Abdulatipov talked up his credentials for the leadership post, saying that "few besides me would be able to bring stability to Dagestan."

But a reporter with the independent local newspaper Chernovik suggested that Abdulatipov was unlikely to keep the post for long. "The Kremlin likely settled on Abdulatipov as a transitional candidate known for being old-fashioned and a statist," the reporter said, requesting anonymity in order to speak freely.

Kisriyev, from the Academy of Sciences, echoed these thoughts, predicting that Abdulatipov would find it hard to garner support and that he would be viewed as an outsider.

"Abdulatipov has never held a political post in Dagestan and never led a large-scale government structure. He has never had to fight for his legitimacy," Kisriyev said.

"What's more, he is detached from the clans that have formed in Dagestan over the past 20 years. Officials in Moscow could have thought that someone from outside the clans would have greater freedom to act, but that's not how it works. These clans determine the politics of the republic."

Beyond internal difficulties, Kisriyev said, Abdulatipov will have to deal with Kremlin incompetency if he were to win popular backing and effect a tangible improvement in regional security.

"Dagestan's greatest problem is the incompetence of the country's leadership in Moscow, which controls the republic with presidential decrees and countless demands," he said.

"There are huge financial interests at stake and complex ethnic boundaries. If Abdulatipov experiences the same incompetent attitude, he won't achieve anything."

Contact the authors at a.winning@imedia.ru and i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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