

The Kremlin's New Way of Ruling Dagestan

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A Hollywood-style sting operation using special forces and a military helicopter was used to arrest Makhachkala Mayor Said Amirov, the most powerful person in Dagestan.

Amirov's might and influence dates back to the tenure of former Dagestan leader Magomedali Magomedov, who apparently entrusted Amirov with all decisions involving the use of force. This is in a republic where everything is decided with force and where it is difficult to find a powerful figure who has never ordered the murder of at least one person.

By the time Dagestan Governor Magomedislam Magomedov was dismissed this year, Amirov had already survived 15 assassination attempts. One attempt in 1993 left him paralyzed below the waist. His was carried around town with the same precautions used for transporting a nuclear warhead: the roads were closed, snipers stood on the rooftops, and dummy motorcades were used to confuse potential assassins.

Among the most famous attempts on his life, two stand out above the others. One involved the head of the security guards who worked for murdered Dagestani Finance Minister Hamid Hamidov. These would-be assassins shot two anti-tank grenades at the mayor's window. One blew up just outside the window and the other actually landed just above the mayor's head. But it turned out to be a dud and did not explode.

In another attempt, hired killers parked a truck packed with a half-ton of explosives on the street where the mayor lived. The explosion destroyed half a city block and killed 17 people, including some who had been quietly drinking tea in their homes. The mayor, who lived in a bunker then, survived the attack.

Preparations for Amirov's arrest began at least 18 months in advance, at the same time a gradual but deliberate campaign was launched to replace local officers from the Federal Security Service with Chekists from Moscow.

According to my sources, FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov reported to President Vladimir Putin that Ramazan Abdulatipov, who was named as acting leader of the Dagestan republic, would only be able to govern the republic and his appointment would only have meaning if Amirov were arrested.

In other words, Amirov's arrest marks a radical shift in the model of governance for Dagestan. Moscow concluded that the lawlessness of local Dagestani elites was the main cause of instability and the growing support for the Salafi, and that the only solution would be to put the local elites under direct control not even of the Kremlin, but of Lubyanka.

If the siloviki are calling the shots in Dagestan directly from the Lubyanka, it will mark a turning point in Moscow's policy for the North Caucasus and will serve as a serious warning to neighboring Chechnya. But this approach will probably be no more successful than the previous model in which Amirov, who was once honored as Russia's best mayor, lobbied on behalf of United Russia in calling everyone to vote for Putin.

In that case, the Salafis will emerge as the biggest beneficiaries of Amirov's arrest. After all, in a republic where everything is decided by money, guns and high-stakes risks, the Salafis are the only force growing stronger every year that Moscow has been unable to control.

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