The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Desperate Chechen Lawyer Offering Kadyrov a Human Swap

By Leyla Latypova

February 01, 2023



Abubakar Yangulbaev. **Courtesy photo**

Human rights lawyer Abubakar Yangulbaev is no novice when it comes to standing up to Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of Russia's republic of Chechnya.

But his recent offer to give himself up to Kadyrov in exchange for the release of his mother — who has been held in a Chechen prison for more than a year — has attracted an unprecedented amount of public attention.

While many commended Yangulbaev's bravery, others voiced fears that, as a longtime Kadyrov critic, he would likely face torture and even execution at the hands of the local security services if he returned to the North Caucasus republic.

"The offer itself was put on the table in April last year, but I made it public now and that's because of the legal powerlessness and legal nihilism that have come into existence since the

war in Ukraine," Yangulbaev, 31, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

While Yangulbaev has continued his human rights work since fleeing Russia in 2021, these days he spends much of his time trying to get his mother released.

"If you, Kadyrov, are a man, if you consider yourself the personification of the ultimate masculinity... you must let her out," Yangulbaev said in his video challenge to Kadyrov that he posted on his social media pages last month.

"If we're living under wartime rules, and the law doesn't work in Russia or in Chechnya — why don't we exchange her for me? Don't touch the women. Take me instead."

Chechnya, which Kadyrov has ruled with an iron fist since 2007, has become notorious for widespread human rights abuses.

Western countries and human rights watchdogs have condemned Kadyrov for allegedly overseeing a system of harassment, arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions of those who criticize his leadership.

Yangulbaev's mother, Zarema Musaeva, was detained by Chechen law enforcement in January 2022, in the family's apartment in the city of Nizhny Novgorod some 420 kilometers east of Moscow.

"She wasn't even allowed to take a shawl or an overcoat when it was about minus 20 or 30 Celsius outside," said Yangulbaev, adding that his mother was subsequently deprived of access to the insulin she needs to manage her diabetes.

Musaeva was arrested in relation to a 2019 fraud case in Chechnya that human rights groups have described as politically motivated.

Chechen security officers also attempted to detain Musaeva's husband, the retired federal judge Saydi Yangulbaev, but he couldn't be arrested due to his judicial immunity.

Musaeva was subsequently transferred to a Chechen prison.

"The goal was to take her as a hostage," said Yangulbaev.

Yangulbaev's brothers, Ibragim and Baysangur, both also vocal critics of Kadyrov, left Russia many months before their mother's arrest, but Yangulbaev chose to stay in the country and continue his human rights work focusing on Chechnya.

In December 2020, he himself was detained.

"I initially resisted and actually fought when they arrested me... you can see in the photos from after the arrest that I have a face injury," said Yangulbaev.

But for reasons he does not understand, Yangulbaev said he was freed after law enforcement searched his apartment, confiscated his electronic devices and questioned him.

He left Russia for the South Caucasus nation of Georgia soon after — and just a month later Chechen law enforcement detained his mother.

“From the very first day we tried to attract a lot of public attention [to Musaeva’s case] through the media, influential people, politicians, human rights activists and even foreign states,” said the lawyer, noting that even a promise by Russia’s Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova to supervise the case had not yielded results.

Meanwhile, top Chechen officials — including Kadyrov — have repeatedly threatened the dissident Yangulbaev family.

"This family’s place is either in prison or six feet under... While even one Chechen is alive, members of this family won’t be able to roam free,” Kadyrov wrote last year on Telegram.

State Duma deputy Adam Delimkhanov, a close ally of Kadyrov, threatened to “cut off the heads” of Yangulbaev and his family. “Day and night — no matter what it takes from our lives, property or offspring — we will chase you,” he posted on Instagram.

Yangulbaev’s father, Saydi, and sister, Aliya, left Russia after Musaeva’s arrest in fear for their lives. Days later, the Chechen authorities stripped the elder Yangulbaev of his formal judicial status, meaning he was no longer protected from arrest by judicial immunity.

Despite Kadyrov’s apparent love for public feuds with opponents — often conducted through his Telegram channel that has over 3 million subscribers — Yangulbaev’s offer to surrender himself for his mother so far remains unanswered.

“In reality, he [Kadyrov] is a coward. He is a weak-willed, spineless creature who talks big but when similar things are directed at him he stays silent,” said Yangulbaev.

“His bravado, his masculinity is a sham. It’s a show. In reality, he is the leading coward of Chechnya and all of the country.”

Still waiting for a response, Yangulbaev continues his human rights work in Chechnya and the wider Caucasus region from a new home in Europe — building a network of informants on the ground, countering propaganda and giving free legal advice to those in need.

“Everything, of course, is only getting worse,” said the lawyer when asked about the state of human rights in Chechnya. “Torture continues as usual.”

But no matter the daily workload, Yangulbaev said he remains preoccupied with considering different strategies for freeing his mother.

“We will continue working on our defense in court and continue to attract public attention,” he said about his next steps.

“The further along we get, the more radical ideas come into my head... I don’t even know if it is appropriate to voice them right now.”

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/01/the-desperate-chechen-lawyer-offering-kadyrov-a-hum

an-swap-a80098