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Dagestan: Rents in the Fabric of Government

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The situation in Dagestan over the last few years has been characterized by stagnation, apathy and continuous crisis. The statistics that describe the quality of life in Dagestan draw a fairly dismal picture even in comparison to other parts of the Russian Federation. According to many economic and social indicators, the republic occupies the last place among the subjects of the Russian Federation. Rich in natural and labor resources, it nevertheless derives 90 percent of its budget from Moscow's subsidies. The average income in Dagestan is one-third of the Russian average. In the number of crimes committed, however, Dagestan ranks first among federation subjects.

Out of more than 800,000 persons who are economically active, one in five is unemployed. Moreover, 40 percent of Dagestan's 2 million inhabitants live in villages where, especially in the mountainous areas, traditional agricultural methods are still employed. Consequently, a substantial proportion of the population is employed only in seasonal agricultural work, which further raises the total number of unemployed. For nearly a century, large-scale seasonal migrations of workers to other regions mitigated this problem. Even 10 to 15 years ago, from March to November, about 300,000 Dagestani men would form brigades and travel to different parts of the Soviet Union. In this regard, Dagestan may have suffered more as a result of the collapse of the USSR than other parts of the former Soviet Union.

Dagestan has about 2 million inhabitants and 700,000 Dagestanis are living outside its borders. Currently, due in no small part to discrimination against "persons of Caucasian
nationality" (Moscow's mayor, for instance, has ousted such persons repeatedly), unemployed Dagestanis are constrained to remain in their own republic. Other southern regions of Russia also experience the economic hardships resulting from that discrimination. Not only in Dagestan, but also in Kalmikiya, Stavropol krai, as well as the Volgograd and Rostov oblasts, the shepherds tended to be Dagestanis. Now, because of a rise in crime and tensions among nationalities, many Dagestanis do not risk remaining in those regions and have returned to Dagestan.

Economic dislocation does not always result in a similar degradation in public morals. Unfortunately, the fine traditions of the mountaineers have eroded quickly. The traditional values of the mountaineers--love of freedom, honor, dignity, bravery, hospitality, respect for elders--have proven defenseless against the tide of criminality and immorality. The "new Dagestanis"--partly European, partly Caucasian--are characterized by their luxurious homes, Mercedes, Jeeps, armed guards and social clubs (frequently offshoots of criminal groups). The signs of conspicuous consumption constitute the most sought-after goals for the younger generation and an impossible dream for older persons, most of whom are occupied with the challenges of survival.

To the embarrassment of Dagestani men, the material well-being of the family has come to rest primarily on the women, particularly in the mountains. Eighty-five percent of the consumer goods sold on the Dagestani market is comprised of imports from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Despite Islamic tradition, the women form the majority of the so-called "shop-tourists" who import goods from these countries. The majority of the merchants at various markets and bazaars in the region are also women.

**Political Turmoil**
The former chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, commented on the eve of the war in Chechnya that "every Chechen is his own president." That is an overstatement in the Chechen case and is patently false when applied to Dagestanis, who accept the existence of authority, concentrated in the government's leader; they
also expect that ruler to govern cruelly. Given the historical tradition of creating cults of personalities and the Soviet obsession with leaders, which have continued to be realized in many former Soviet states, it would hardly be surprising if Dagestan created its own "father of the nation."

The entrenched political leadership consists of the chairman of the State Council, Magomedali Magomedov; the chairman of the government, Hizri Shikhsiadov; the chairman of the People's Assembly, Muhu Aliev; the former vice premier of the government and now mayor of the capital, Makhachkala, Said Amirov; the leader of the Avar People's Front (Imam Shamil), head of the joint-stock company Dagneft and vice premier of the government of Dagestan, Gadzhi Makhachev; the leader of the Lak People's Movement (Kazi Kumukh), Magomed Khachilaev; and the chairman of the Union of Muslims of Russia, Nadirshakh Khachilaev. (The vice premier of the Russian Federation, Ramazan Abdulatipov, a potential competitor to Magomedov, recently stated that he would not want to lead the Dagestani State Council unless its chairman was elected by popular vote.)

The People's Assembly of 19 March 1998 decided to repeal Article 93 of the republic's constitution, which had prohibited persons of the same nationality from occupying the position of State Council chairman for two consecutive terms. This move primarily benefits Magomedali Magomedov, allowing him to put forward his candidacy for another term. It is virtually assured that he will be able to convince the Constitutional Assembly, scheduled to convene in June, to allow him to remain in power for another four years.

The preliminary work to ensure this outcome is nearing completion. The constitution was adopted in 1994 amid high tensions among the nationalities. It provided for a governing council elected for two years. Article 93 was meant to ensure that the presidency of the republic would rotate among the different nationalities of Dagestan. However, in 1996, when the terms of the governing council and its chairman were due to expire, the Constitutional Assembly extended their appointments for an additional two years. This action was explained in reference to the difficult sociopolitical situation in
Dagestan, which was created by the economic, transport and information blockade imposed on the republic in connection with the war in Chechnya; two years was believed to be an insufficient amount of time to accomplish any substantial improvements.

The additional two-year term granted to the governing council and its chairman is due to expire in June 1998. Life for most Dagestanis has not improved. The budget of the republic remains heavily subsidized. Living standards have fallen to a critical low, where one-third of the population lives below the poverty level. Corruption has reached new heights, extending even into such areas as higher education, while crimes committed in the republic have given Dagestan international notoriety for terrorist acts, bombings, political and business-linked assassinations, and kidnappings. The population lives in persistent fear of crime, new terrorist attacks and the possibility of a Russian offensive of the sort staged in neighboring Chechnya.

In view of this social context, the lack of public protest in response to the action of the People's Assembly is hardly surprising. The deputies who initiated the action collected the requisite number of their colleagues' signatures even before the 19 March session. Most of the population was engaged in the difficult business of making a living, others were busy organizing pilgrimages to Mecca, and the remainder paid some attention to the political developments at the center. Hardly anyone seemed concerned with the regional political scene.

Although a vocal opposition to secular government in Central Asia, little reaction to the assembly action was heard in Dagestan from the Wahhabis, who have gone underground. While they constitute a mainstream movement in other parts of the Muslim world (e.g., in Saudi Arabia), the Wahhabis are considered a radical Islamic sect in Dagestan. The Wahhabis were outlawed as religious extremists earlier this year after a group of them attacked a Russian base in Dagestan in December 1997. The representatives of Dagestan's official Sunni faith welcomed the parliament's action on that occasion and have also failed to protest the revision of the constitution.
While some criticism appeared in the media, the articles failed to resonate with the public. The Avar paper Khakikat compared the Dagestani constitution to a sword in its 2 April 1998 (No. 62) issue. Nurul Islam--a publication of the All-Russian Muslim Social Movement (Nur)--wrote that the "Constitution is not a sacred text like the Koran, one can rewrite it to suit himself."

The Committee to Protect the Constitution of the Patriotic Forces of Dagestan held a rather hysterical rally in Makhachkala on 18 March 1998, and called on the current leadership to resign when its term expires in June. The committee declared that the "illegal" assembly decision was "presented to the people of Dagestan as a means of preserving stability under the 'wise leadership of the irreplaceable Magomedali Magomedov' who has already been at the pinnacle of power in the republic for the last eight years, and prior to that, for at least ten years held the leadership position in the ruling party-nomenklatura elite. The results of his 'wise policies' are well known: Dagestan continues to be last in socioeconomic development." (1)

The committee suggested that Dagestanis should "eliminate the Constitutional Assembly and elect the chairman of the State Council by popular vote and the members of the State Council by the particular nationalities throughout the republic." It concluded with the finding that "in view of Dagestan's multinational population it is best governed by a parliamentary system." The committee published an appeal to President Boris Yel'tsin which noted that "Dagestan is going through another explosive period" and "requires renewal, a reassessment of its values and a chance to catch its breath." (2) Needless to say, no renewal, reassessment or "chance to catch its breath" was forthcoming: There was no official reaction from the Kremlin.

As a very influential Dagestani politician, the mayor of Makhachkala, Said Amirov, told Dagestan's Youth, "Magomedali Magomedov's considerable experience, his personal and professional characteristics, his connections with the center, and Boris Yel'tsin's favorable attitude all played a part. In addition, we, the law-abiding citizens must respect the decisions of the elected representatives. I do not think that if M. Magomedov puts
forward his candidacy for a second term (sic), that anyone will be able to compete with him." (3)

The State Council was intended to serve as a "collective presidency," tailored for the peculiar conditions of Dagestan. In particular, it is meant to prevent any one nationality from dominating the politics of the republic. In view of recent events, however, the State Council has been aptly compared to the obkom of the CPSU.

The State Council and its chairman have unique capabilities for political maneuver in the republic because they are elected not by a national vote but by the Constitutional Assembly. The latter consists of 120 deputies from within the People's Assembly and 120 deputies from the rayon administrations, many of them heads of cities or rayon administrations, who are subordinate to the State Council and its chairman.

Whenever official personalities emphasize the multinational character of Dagestan, they refer to the 32 "indigenous" (korennyh) nationalities. The State Council consists of one representative from each of the "constitutional" or "main" nationalities (narod): Avars, Aguls, Azeris, Chechens, Dargins, Kumiys, Laks, Lezgins, Mountain Jews (Tats), Nogai, Russians, Rutuls, Tabarasans, Tsakhurs. Other nationalities, such as: Andiis, Archins, Akhvakhhs, Bagulals, Bezhtins, Botlikhs, Ginukhs, Godoberins, Gunzibs, Didoi, Karatins, Tindals, Chamalals, and Khvarshin, are counted as Avars. Kubachins and Kaitags are considered Dargin. (4) The size of these groups ranges from 1,000 persons (Archins) to 50,000 (Andiis). According to the constitution they are not represented on the State Council.

"Won't you agree that to prohibit a person from occupying a position on the basis of his nationality is unfair, undemocratic, not to speak of the fact that it constitutes a most brutal offense against human rights?" Said Amirov asked in the Dagestan's Youth interview in defense of the assembly action. Surely that sentiment ought to apply to the above-mentioned members of "non-constitutional" or "non-basic" nationalities and not only to the personalities who have been in power for over a decade.
The People's Assembly consists of 120 deputies; almost every third person has a criminal past. A little over one-quarter of the deputies were apparatchiki or nomenklatura workers in the Soviet times. If classified according to current occupation, the deputies include 42 merchants or directors of collective farms; 11 bankers; 10 directors of ministries or departments; and 24 directors of city or rayon administrations. Clearly a substantial number of the deputies hold positions in which they are directly or indirectly subordinate to the State Council. Many of them have for one reason or another petitioned the State Council chairman and have received his support. For this reason the real powers of the State Council chairman are by far greater than his powers under the constitution.

In Dagestan the reality of government does not correspond to the socioethnic makeup of the population. In countries with long democratic traditions, the question of ethnicity can be left to the private, non-governmental sphere. In Dagestan--which has spent 140 years in Russia's sphere of influence--laws, including constitutions, continue to seem artificial or foreign. The electoral system, the government, the judicial system and other state institutions were formed without due consideration of the potentially destructive influences of the clan system and ethnocentrism. At the same time, the political orientation of the Dagestanis is not defined by membership in party and social organizations. The degree of Dagestan's sovereignty vis-a-vis the center remains unclear. Similarly it remains to be seen if the republic will become a parliamentary or presidential republic. The daily questions of survival in Dagestan are by far more acute than these questions of political theory. If the Dagestanis were able to adapt (and corrupt) the Communist regime to local circumstances, they can surely use the democratic methods of the 1994 Constitution to realize clan and nationality interests.

NOTES:
1 Program read at rally held in Lenin Square, Makhachkala, 18 February 1998, by the Committee to Protect the Constitution of the Patriotic Forces of Dagestan.
2 Ibid.
4 The groups listed above add up to 30 not 32 because the ethnic group Terekments, who are of part-Turkmen and part-Azeri derivation, speak a dialect of the Azeri language and assimilate into the Azeri population, are mistakenly represented as a separate ethnos. Moreover, a single North Caucasian people with one language, Tatskyi, derived from northern Persia, and one religion, Judaism, are sometimes called Tats and other times called Mountain Jews. Many persons who are not aware of this fact believe that the Tats and the Mountain Jews constitute separate nationalities. This is akin to listing Magyars and Hungarians as separate people.