



SECESSIONIST MOVEMENT AND EXTREMISM IN CHECHNYA: ANALYZING THE STATE RESPONSE AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

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Abstract

One of the greatest ironies of the contemporary world and the synchronizing globalization is the incessant impetus towards separatist ideology in its various elements and dimensions. The concept of secessionism can be defined as an advocacy of cultural, ethnic, tribal, religious, racial, governmental and/or linguistic contrast, accompanied by legacy of oppression, exclusion, persecution and discrimination resulting into the demand of a separate state out of rage, anger and humiliation. At present there are several ongoing secessionist (separatist) movements around the world. In this paper, we would focus on the secessionist movement of Chechnya. Chechnya is an Islam-dominated region in southern Russia, which was briefly independent in 1992 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, Russia opposed the secession and went to war with Chechnya in between 1994 to 1996 and then again in 1999. This paper will look into the independence struggle of Chechnya from Russia amidst guerrilla war and the use of armored columns. This paper will also reflect into the low tactics prosecuted by Chechen militants like suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in parts of Russian Federation in order to establish themselves as an independent state.

Keywords: *Chechnya, Russia, Secessionism, Extremism, Militants, and Muslims.*

Introduction

Chechen Republic, also known as Chechnya is a constituent republic of Russia, situated in the eastern part of the North Caucasus, partially in Eastern Europe. The state is surrounded by Russian Federal territory from all the sides. It shares its borders with North Ossetia and Ingushetia in the west, Stavropol Kral in the north, Dagestan in the east and Georgia in the south. Its capital is Grozny. It is spread over 17,300 sq. km. As per the 2010 census, the overall population of Chechen Republic is 1,268,989. The majority of the population is occupied by the Chechen community (95.3%). The other minority groups include: Russians (1.9%), Kumyks (1%), Ingush (0.1%) and other small ethnic groups. Chechnya is a Muslim-dominated country that is; it is practiced by around 95% of the total population. Chechens are ardent disciples of the Shafi' I Madhhab of Sunni Islam.

There is a long narrative of Chechnya opposing Russian power. One of the impetus causes of Chechnya's historic rivalry with Russia according to German is its mono-religious dominancy. It is believed that Islam has been the key conflict-generating factor in Chechnya and has played a marginal role in the ideology of Chechen separatists. Chechnya being a Muslim dominated region with people practising their own ethnic language did not want to be under the domain of Russia whose majority of the population followed Christianity. Another factor that substantiates the long record of acrimony and conflict between Russia and Chechnya is Russia's constant effort to dominate the Caucasus region. Further, Russia even feels threatened by Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, particularly by Georgia as it wants to join NATO and Turkey has already declared the North Caucasus to be foreign policy priority (Melloni Nicola, 2007).



Period of Uncertain Peace

Chechens' battle for independence can be traced back to the times when Soviet Union was disintegrated in the 1990s. Communist leader Doku Zavgayev was overthrown and Dzhokhar Dudayev won the presidential elections. Followed by this, the Chechen separatists declared independence as "*the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria*" in the year 1991. Chechnya adopted a constitution declaring it as an independent, secular state governed by a president and parliament. The period of 1991- 1994 embarks major events of communal violence and discrimination against the non-Chechen population that includes mostly Russians, Ukrainians and Armenians, which eventually compelled almost ten thousand of them to leave the Republic. According to some unrevealed sources, along with displacement of non-Chechen ethnicity, the other key event that took place in Chechnya was its degrading domestic state of affairs as well as hostile and filthy politics under the Chechen President, Dzhokhar Dudayev. Howbeit, their freedom did not survive for so long as in the year of 1994 the Russian troops were commanded into Grozny, the capital of Chechen Republic to quash their independence movement. Almost lakh of innocent civilians were killed within a period of just 20 months. The year of 1996 embarks the assassination of Chechen leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev in Russian missile attack and beginning of the rule of Zemlikhan Yandarbiyev. In the month of August 1996 the Chechen rebels launched a successful attack on the Russian troops in Grozny. During the course of two years of intense war, the Russian Army finally surrendered and withdrew from Chechnya under the Khasavyurt Accord (BBC, 2018).

The Khasavyurt Accord was a formal ceasefire agreement signed by General Lebed and General Maskhadov in Novye Atagi on 22nd August, 1996, *marking the end of First Chechen War*. Chechnya enjoyed its *de facto independence* for a short while until a series of disastrous event started to take place which brought instability between both the states.

In 1997, following the victory of Aslan Maskhadov in Chechen's presidential elections, a peace treaty was signed between Russia and Chechnya. However, the issue of independence did not seem to resolve soon. Thus, this was followed by the abduction of the Russian presidential representative in Chechnya, Valentin Vlasov. Amid the rising lawlessness, Aslan Maskhadov declared state of emergency on June 1998. In the year 1999, *the Second war* broke out with the primary agenda of creating Chechen Republic an independent Islamic state. The Second war of Chechnya was marked by Guerrilla phase of the war. It was observed by a fierce clash between Russian troops and Chechen rebels on the Chechnya-Dagestan border. In the same year, Moscow accused Chechnya of plotting a series of bomb attacks killing about 300 Russians. Ultimately in the year 2000, the Russian troops captured Grozny and President Putin declared direct rule over Chechnya from Moscow. The Russian administration also appointed Akhmat Kadyrov, a separatist- turned-loyalist as the Head of Administration in Chechnya (BBC, 2018).

Emergence of Extremism

With the beginning of the 21st century, the act of extremism took over another level of dreadfulness. The Chechen rebel fighters continued to stage attacks including the siege at the Moscow theatre. They held about 800 people hostages and about 100 hostages were killed during the siege. The aftermath of the siege was a referendum approving a new constitution demanding Chechnya a part of Russian Federation. President Akhmad Kadyrov and many others were assassinated in the Grozny bomb blast, staged by Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev in 2004 (Aljazeera, 2009).

Shamil Salmanovich Basayev, the face of secessionist movement in Chechnya, commonly tagged as Russia's most wanted man was a prominent Chechen field commander behind some of the most terrorizing and high-profile attacks in the war for Chechens' independence. He was involved in many



infamous operations which includes the siege of a school in Beslen and mass-hostage taking in a Moscow theatre that ultimately compelled the United States to label him as a ‘terrorist’. Basayev tagged his ‘large-scale terrorist acts’ as ‘fighting for Chechens’ freedom from Russian dominance’, attracting many new fighters to join hands with him. He worked closely with other separatist groups in neighbouring areas of the North Caucasus. On one side Basayev’s death was observed as the greatest victory for the Russian president, Vladimir Putin and on the other hand it was seen as a serious impetus to the Chechen separatist movement (BBC, 2018 and Aljazeera, 2009).

As discussed above, Basayev was involved in the siege of on the schools in Beslan in North Ossetia where around 330 people lost their lives, majority of who were children. This act was carried out in order to develop an environment of anxiety, fear and trauma among the Russian civilians. However, in 2005 the separatist leader, Aslan Maskhadov called for ceasefire and urged for peace talks. But the pro-Moscow Chechen leadership dismissed his verset. In the following year, Maskhadov died in clash with Russian troops. Abdul Khalim Saydullayev, the successor of Mashkhadov ended the policy of seeking peace talks with Moscow. Following his footsteps, Basayev launched another act of violence in Nalchik, the capital of North Caucasus Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria that left dozens dead. Finally in July 2006 Shamil Basayev, the alleged mastermind of all the attacks that took place over the past few decades was killed by the Russian special forces in Ingushetia. Along with him, the year of 2006 marks the end of Abdul Khalim by the Russian forces and was later succeeded by Doku Umarov (Ray Michael, 2004 and BBC, 2018).

The State Response

The Russian Federation finally ended the decade-old operation against Chechen rebels in the year 2009, a month after which President Medvedev declared life in the republic had ‘normalised to a large degree’. However, the peace did not last for long as Natalia Estemirova, Russian Human Rights activist who had been involved in investigating alleged abuses by government-run militants in Chechnya, was abducted and killed. This was followed by acts of deadly suicide attacks on Moscow Metro in March 2010 and detrimental suicide attack on Moscow’s Domodedovo airport in January that left dozens of dead as claimed by Doku Umarov, Chechan separatist leader. Nevertheless, Umarov was later killed by Russian forces in March 2014. He was succeeded by Ali Abu Mohammad, as the leader of the Caucasus Emirates (Russia Matters, 2018).

Later in 2015, five Chechen, one involved in assassination of Kadyrov’s security forces were arrested. Further, Abu Usman Gimrinsky, the Caucasus Emirate leader was killed by the Russian forces- a fate met by his predecessor Kebekov in April.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin directly accused the US for having internal secretive links with Chechen separatist, particularly pointing towards Shamil Basayev, who was involved in dreadful siege in school of Beslen and terrorist attack in Moscow Theatre. Putin went on to criticise United States’ tendency of addressing anti-Russian fighters or Chechen rebels as “freedom fighters”. In 2015, Putin further disclosed a shocking fact which stated that the United States officials were in frequent contact with the militants in Chechnya. Adding to this, Vladimir Putin in an interview with the Rossiya television channel said that, “*Once, our special services noted direct contacts between rebels from the North Caucasus and representatives of the special services of the United States in Azerbaijan*” (Russia Matters, 2018).



Moreover, Putin in Oliver Stone's 2017 documentary "The Putin Interviews" said that "*when those problems in Chechnya and the Caucasus emerged, the Americans, unfortunately, supported those processes. We assumed the Cold War was over, that we had transparent relations, with the rest of the world, with Europe and the U.S. and we certainly counted on [their] support, but instead, we witnessed that the American intelligence services supported [these] terrorists... We had a very confident opinion back then that our American partners in words were talking about support to Russia, the need to cooperate, including fighting terrorism, but in reality, they were using those terrorists to destabilize the internal political situation in Russia*" (Russia Matters, 2018).

However, the post 9/11 event that shook the entire world and questioned the security of the United States quite changed the then cordial relations between US and Chechnya for the pits. Vladimir Putin, on the other hand took every possible opportunity since the 9/11 attack to put forward Russia's conflict with Chechnya as a 'component of the coalition's overall struggle with Islamic insurgents. Eventually, in 2017 the United States had imposed financial sanctions on Kadyrov, accusing him of a systematic campaign of repression (Russia Matters, 2018).

Human Rights Violations

The hardships and brutality encountered by the Chechen civilians were nevertheless justifiable. In accordance with the statistical data estimated by the U.S Department of State, around 80,000 Chechen civilians and rebels lost their lives since 1999. The total numbers of deaths, including those from the first Russo-Chechen war (1994-1996) were estimated to be more than 2, 00,000. The first Russo-Chechen was indeed a war particularly against the civilian population of Chechnya instead of against the militants. This marked the phase of Guerrilla war. Even so, Chechen rebels are the ones to be blamed because of their guilty acts of hostage taking and terrorist acts on several occasions. The Chechen militants extended their low tactics of conflict by using Chechen civilians as shields. Nevertheless, the main offender of human rights violation is the Russian invaders. The violations were witnessed in many forms: the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas and direct human rights violations such as extrajudicial executions, torture, massacres, and the spreading of land mines. On 6th January, 1995 the International Court of Justice publicly stated that 'the Russian army violated the right to life of unarmed civilians on a massive scale' because of the aimless use of force engaged by the Russian troops against the civilians settled in and around Grozny. When Russia captured Grozny in the month of February, Helsinki Watch issued a similar statement, saying that "Russian troops had committed gross abuses in Chechnya and that the civilian population continues to suffer" (Cornell Svante E., 1999).

Furthermore, the UN General Assembly resolution 2444 of 1969 distinctly states that, "*among other things, that in all armed conflicts (implying that the principle is equally valid for internal conflicts) it is prohibited to launch attacks against the civilian population as such; distinction must be made at all times between persons taking part in the hostilities and members of the civilian population to the effect that the latter be spared as much as possible.*"²⁴ Protocol 1 (1977) to the Geneva conventions applying to internal armed conflicts provides clear guidance in interpreting the international legal provisions. (Cornell Svante E., 1999).

Response of International Community

Situation took a new turn after the unforgettable event of 9/11 terrorist attack at World Trade Centre. The relationship between Russia and Chechnya changed radically. U.S President Bush initiated and entered into a new friendly relationship with Russian President, Putin, indicating a drift away from U.S-Chechnya close ties. Furthermore, Putin took this opportunity to successfully claim that the rebels from



Chechnya were receiving considerable funding and support from Islamic fundamentalist groups in the Middle East, specifically from Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda forces. As a result of this, Putin gained tremendous amount of support from the globe and particularly from the U.S for his rigid stance against international terrorism. The aids from the U.S to Chechnya were suspended after the abduction of a Russian aid worker (Hawkes Steven, 2011).

Since the end of extensive conflicting decades of war, cases of violence and attacks have reduced to a large extent and Chechnya no longer stand as a epitome for hostility in that region. However, breathe of terror could be sensed again after a period of relative calm and stability. At present, Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Chechen Republic is in his process of establishing an Islamist state within the secular Russian Federation. He has carried out extensive official programmes of supporting Islam which includes state funds for building mosques and Madrassas, integration of Sharia into the existing legal system promotion of Islamic dress codes, particularly for women and implementing dietary norms in the public sphere (Hawkes Steven, 2011).

Conclusion

The conflict between Chechnya and Russia is not a contemporary tale but an age-old clash. It is believed that the clash began when Georgia, Chechnya's neighbouring state agreed for a union with Moscow in 1783. The north Caucasus region which was predominately a Muslim dominated region was encircled and a holy war developed. The Caucasus War stretched out for over 47 years and finally came to an end in 1864. Many scholars believed that the Chechen war was a result of political instability in Russia during the disintegration of Soviet Union and the transformation of Soviet Communism to democracy. It was accompanied by the mismanagement by both Chechen and Russian leaders and the lack of a proper institutional and legal framework in Russia to deal constructively with centre-periphery issues.

Gradually Chechnya became an embodiment of separatism in post-soviet Russia during 1990's. During the course of First and Second War; Chechen rebels used low tactics of suicide bombings, terrorist attacks and mass hostage. There was rumour of allegiance of Chechen militants with Al Qaeda terrorist organisation. Ibn al-Khattab, an influential Mujahideen have had framed Chechnya as a part of a global jihadist struggle. Moreover, frequent Islamist raids into Dagestan, staged by Basayev and Khattab were also prime factor in the launch of the Second Chechen War by Russia.

Findings and Recommendations

- **Reaching the root causes of the conflict:** Behind every conflict there remain few strong agendas which instigate the mass to fight over their rights. The leaders of both the states should have initially come to a peaceful conclusion by arriving at a mutual understanding to solve their differences rather than opting for war in the preliminary stage. As Benjamin Disraeli once quoted, "*War is never a solution, it is an aggravation.*" Disputes can hence be solved through mutual compromise and adjustments.
- **Focus on development:** It has been observed that the rivalry and conflict for power between Russia and the US have been more pronounced after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The US took advantage of Russia's weakening grip over Chechen Republic by supporting their militant activities. This continued till the attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11 that gave a sharp blow to US ties with Chechnya. Instead of being exploited by the US in this critical stage, Russian Federation and Chechnya should have cooperatively come together and should have



focussed their resources on the development of their region rather than squandering their financial resources on war against each other.

- **Respecting each other's identities:** Russia should have looked into the interest of its minority population and should have given equal opportunities to flourish and practice their own rights and beliefs. Focus should be given more on the under-developed parts of the states so as to control the agitations of the masses.

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