

Mongolia: democracy despite emergency

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The events in Mongolia of 1 July 2008 - when, after an election won by the ruling Mongolia People's Revolutionary Party, demonstrations in Ulaanbaatar escalated into a wider confrontation [1] in which at least five people died and a state of emergency was declared - have cast a shadow on the country's bright prospects. What happened, and how was it possible?

The election scheduled for 29 June 2008 [2] was set to be an exciting and closely fought one. This young democracy has had a colourful if uneven history [3] since Mongolia acquired full independence from Soviet tutelage at the start of the 1990s. In the 1992 elections the former communist Mongolia People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) was rewarded for the smooth transition it had overseen by a victory in the parliamentary elections. But by 1996, people had become disappointed with the actual results of the transition period, and in overwhelming numbers voted for the opposition parties. Their record in power was equally flawed, however, and the pendulum swung back four years (and as many prime ministers) later when a reformed MPRP secured seventy-two of the parliament's seventy-six seats in the 2000 elections.

The pattern of alternating landslides was broken in 2004, when the MPRP and an opposition coalition were almost tied (with the MPRP winning thirty-nine seats). The "draw" heralded problems of a different kind, however. In parliament there was gridlock, with decision-making slow or simply impossible. This caused particular discontent at a time when Mongolia's [4] growing social divide had made many citizens worry about their livelihood and security.

A tough transition

The biggest political issue [5] during the post-2004 years has been mining, and the granting of rights to foreign companies to explore and produce Mongolia's rich deposits of coal, copper and gold. This raised both nationalist discontent and - as essential agreements stalled - frustration among the local and foreign business community. A bill presented to parliament in March 2008 contains the provision that at least 51% of the total capital funds in sectors where foreign companies are involved must be in Mongolian hands. Pete Morrow, departing chairman of the Business Council of Mongolia [6], expresses investors' hope for clarity: "While we are not political, for most foreign investors it is important that one party or the other have a clear mandate to form a government and do the people's business. Everyone has suffered from the deadlock of the last four years."

The introduction of a new voting system added to the absorbing uncertainty surrounding the 29 June election. The shift from single-member constituencies to a selection of three or four favoured candidates in larger constituencies could in principle have benefited smaller parties (as a third-placed candidate could now qualify for a seat). In reality, however, the change helped the larger parties, thanks to their greater resources and the fact that the minor parties had only one candidate.

The reform created a new challenge in the shape of the counting procedure: no more convenient piles of ballots-per-candidate, but more complicated procedures that are more prone to mistakes - and public doubts.

The 2008 campaign was relatively short, but the promotional materials were as lively as ever (one candidate distributed an entire book, accompanied by a \$100 bill - with his own face replacing Benjamin Franklin's - and a roll of toilet-paper with his name printed on every sheet). The main issue was the country's increasing inequality and how the profits from mineral wealth [7] could be distributed to alleviate it. The contract between voting and monetary incentive in the campaign was reflected in the Democratic Party's promise to people of a 1 million *tugrug* (\$850) share in the forthcoming bonanza; the MPRP simply responded by offering 50% more.

This agenda reflects a shift in Mongolians' popular perceptions. The communist years left people with a general distrust of any state-directed system, but part of their inheritance that people valued was a sense of equal opportunities - where, for example, herder [8] boys from remote areas could become leaders of the country. Now, the opportunity for this Mongolian equivalent of the "log-cabin-to-White-House" route seems to have diminished: politicians in their shiny four-wheel-drives are seen to care more about their own wealth than the people's poverty, and have themselves become a symbol of the economic divide [9] rather than a means to narrow it.

The social effects [11] of Mongolia's economic and political transformation are visible in other areas. A collapse of the educational system has resulted in a surge of commercial schools; and the media has become both money-driven and partisan, as newspapers and TV stations become the instruments of political, economical or religious groups.

A dark night

The election process [12] itself came and went in Mongolia's by-now familiar way. The international observers praised its fairness, even though the system-changes meant that the final results were delayed. This is where the problems began. On 30 June, the MPRP starting circulating the notion that it had won an absolute majority; Tsakhia Elbegdorj, the DP leader, reacted angrily, claiming large-scale fraud by the MPRP and encouraging people to demonstrate against the election results.

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Also by Guido Verboom in **openDemocracy**: "Mongolia's democratic puzzle [10]" (18 January 2006).

The following day, 1 July, Elbegdorj and other opposition leaders disappointed by news of the election's apparent outcome and their own performance organised protests in different parts of Ulaanbaatar. The separate groups [13] - which included followers of the Republican Party leader Jargalsaikhan, and the Civil Movement head Magnai - then assembled in the heart of the capital, before dispersing in different directions. The largest group ended up in front of the MPRP headquarters.

There is an echo here of the events [14] of January 2006 when a similar demonstration had led to forced entry into the MPRP building. Then, the same Elbegdorj had just lost his job as prime minister in a reshuffle prompted by the MPRP leadership's desire to form a new cabinet [15] with a range of other political leaders. The MPRP was accused of hijacking democracy, and popular protests led to occupation of and serious damage to its headquarters. Elbegdorj said at the time

that "there was no risk of the situation escalating into unrest" (see "[Mongolia's democratic puzzle](#) [15]", 18 January 2006).

On this occasion, his words were harsher and his motivation stronger. He encouraged people to come from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar and join the protest; the appeal helped to bring the [crowd](#) [16] around the MPRP building to 8,000.

The situation deteriorates as stones are thrown and - in a replay of 2006 - protesters make their way into the building. The police, outnumbered and ineffective, retreat. When flames whoosh out from one of the windows, fire-engines arrive but the huge numbers and their hostile welcome block their advance towards the building. The protesters take full control of the commercial units on the ground floor: an airline-ticketing office, a bank branch and a duty-free liquor store. TV images show protesters creating Molotov cocktails and burning cardboard boxes.

In the end, the fire destroyed the building - and damaged the neighbouring Central Cultural Palace too. By that time the [protests](#) [17] had turned into a violent looting orgy. Young men could be seen stealing or destroying hundreds of paintings in the palace's modern-art gallery, costumes and instruments of several orchestras, and goods in a range of other businesses in the area.

A new reality

As parliament was not in session, the president Nambar Enkhbayar used his authority to call a four-day state of emergency - the first in Mongolia's history. All private TV and radio channels were shutdown, inconveniently reminding people of the totalitarian regime that the MPRP had maintained in a previous lifetime. By 4 o'clock in the morning the crowd and fire were under control. Ulaanbaatar was waking up to a new reality. The atmosphere was tense. Soon, however, the affected area became a bit of a tourist attraction with people taking pictures with the burned-out cars. On the second day a neighbour pointed at two police officers playing badminton. "This is the state of emergency in Ulaanbaatar", he said with a grin.

Mongolia's electoral commission has announced that the MPRP had indeed won the election, but it keeps postponing release of the official results. Elbegdorj, against the odds, continues to criticise the election process, further endangering the democratic stability the country needs so much. At the same time, election worries have already faded with the preparation of Mongolia's National Nadaam Festival which begins on 11 July in Ulaanbaatar's central stadium. The archery, horse-racing, ankle-bone shooting and wrestling competitions will attract more people than any political protest.

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[3] <http://www.routledgeasianstudies.com/books/Truth-History-and-Politics-in-Mongolia-ISBN9780415307987>

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