Social Divide and the Function of Democracy in Mongolia

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Mongolian Democracy

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Introduction
In spring 1990, Mongolia underwent a peaceful democratic transition whereby the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party renounced its monopoly of power. Two years later, a new Constitution enshrined this new polity, changing the nation's name from the Mongolian People's Republic to Mongolia, thereby inaugurating East Asia's first communist country to embrace democracy. Mongolia is often upheld by the United States as the beacon of democracy in Central Asia, promoting it as an exemplar for the Central Asian states, and to some extent, for North Korea. This is indeed a tall order for a country landlocked between two powerful countries, China and Russia.

What I want to do today is to understand Mongolian democracy in the wider historical and geopolitical context. I want to assess two conflicting dimensions, and see how they may have implications for understanding the nature of Mongolia's democracy: namely, on the one hand, the international democracies, especially the US, encourage Mongolia to play a larger role in the democratization of Central Asia and its neighbouring countries, and on the other hand, Mongolia, being landlocked by two large countries, embraced democracy as much for its value as for political expediency, i.e. to enmesh itself in the international democratic community for self-protection.

The historical origin of Mongolian democracy
First of all, let me put Mongolia's democracy in a deeper historical tradition. Very often, it is assumed that democracy is something new to Mongolia, and it is promoted as a new political civilization. I would like to counter this claim by arguing that in history, Mongols experienced and practiced democracy. To be sure, such a military democracy was violent often times, but without doubt it contained democratic elements, if election is a measure of democracy. I point this out not because I am insisting that the Mongols in the thirteenth century were already democratic, but that Mongols today and indeed some western scholars argue they were, contra all the historical writings written by the conquered people about the Mongols, which tend to demonise the Mongols. My point is that when we discuss Mongolian democracy, we cannot say that it's something entirely alien to the Mongol tradition. Much like Greek democracy, the Mongolian military democracy of the 13th century serves as an
inspiration to the contemporary Mongols in their embrace of democracy. If Chinggis Khan was a democrat, there is no reason why we today cannot become democrats, at it were. The past is a moral exemplar.

To say the least, the political system of the Mongols of the 13th and 14th centuries was distinct from that of the Mongols under the Manchu rule from the mid-17th century, when Chinghisid nobility became hereditary, whose authority was not to be challenged by any Mongols. In other words, pre-Qing Mongols were known for their egalitarian militancy, but the Qing weakened this egalitarianism, and strengthened the internal hierarchy of the Mongols.

Respect of religious diversity may be another marker of democracy. In the early decades of the Mongol Empire, Mongol khans often held debating sessions wherein religious leaders argued about their respective superiority, but Mongols maintained neutrality as long as they did not challenge Munkh Tenger, the Eternal Heaven, the supreme shamanic god of the Mongols. However, this neutrality was lost when Khubilai Khan was converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Some Mongol historians argue that Khubilai Khan’s conversion to Tibetan Buddhism was intended to maintain Mongol identity while ruling China, whose Confucian ideology emphasises conformity to the Chinese language and culture. I would add that it set a precedent for modern Mongols’ strategic adoption of political ideologies such as communism and democracy for nationalist purposes.

**Communist Revolution as National Democratic Revolution**

When we discuss democracy in a post-communist country, we tend to pit democracy and communism against each other, as though they were incompatible. Such vulgar Cold-War understanding of communism must be avoided. In other words, in understanding Mongolian democracy, it is wrong to, a priori, analytically oppose democracy against communism. At the same time, however, we need to acknowledge that such a polarisation exists, which underpins the political process in Mongolia. Let me explain how it plays out there.

Mongolia became a communist country in 1921. The Communist revolution served two purposes for the Mongols: one was to oppose external imperial colonialism, and it was largely an instrument for national liberation, fighting against foreign economic exploitation, and for territorial sovereignty. Briefly, in 1902 the Qing court opened up Mongolia for Chinese settler colonization in order to defend its collapsing empire. As millions of Chinese settled in Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia declared independence in 1911 from the Qing dynasty. In 1919, taking advantage of the Russian civil war in the wake of the October Revolution, the Republican Chinese government sent an army to terminate Mongolia’s autonomy, but the Chinese army was driven out by the White Russian army led by Baron Ungern Sternberg invading from Siberia. In 1921, Mongol partisans invited in the Russian Red Army to drive out the White Army, thereupon setting up a communist government in Mongolia, which was renamed the Mongolian People’s Republic in 1924, the world’s second communist country, and the world’s first People’s Republic.
Communism was thus embraced by the Mongols not primarily for building a new state of proletariats, but to restore national independence. The Communist revolution of the 1920s was known as 'National Democratic Revolution'. To the Mongols, Russians, especially the Soviet Russians, proved to be a strategic ally. I have elsewhere called the Mongol practice collaborative nationalism, a nationalist strategy to make alliance with a friendly force against a hostile enemy. Had it not been for Soviet protection, Mongolia would have been annexed either by China or by Japan. The problem with collaborative nationalism is that once the third party is defeated, there emerges the question of how to draw boundary between the two allies, and it is normally the case that the weaker ally would be punished by the stronger for attempts to draw boundary. Not surprisingly, most of Mongolia's politicians were killed by the Soviets, and the entire Buddhist church was destroyed in the great purge as they were suspected of collaboration with the Japanese. Yet many Mongols today are reluctant to blame either the Soviets or the Mongol collaborators, insisting that such a sacrifice was worth its while, for it saved Mongolia from Japanese occupation.

After the Second World War, Mongolia launched socialist modernisation, collectivising land and livestock, aiming to by-pass capitalism into communism. In this new system, the herding mass, i.e. the people were given power, whereas the feudal lords were physically eliminated. Leaders were no longer hereditary nobles, but were either elected or appointed. The nation achieved 100% literacy rate in the 1960s, and the standard of living increased dramatically. Supported by the Soviet Union and the Comecon, Mongolia's economy improved greatly, transforming its traditional nomadic pastoralism into modern animal husbandry. To facilitate this modernisation, Mongolia changed its script from the classical Mongolian script to the Cyrillic script. Tens of thousands its intellectuals were educated in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. By the beginning of the 1980s, Mongolia had become a moderately modernised country, enjoying a high standard of living. A new nation of Mongolia was born because of the communist revolution. Owen Lattimore, a renowned American Mongolist who had travelled extensively in war-time Inner Mongolia was greatly impressed by the progress made by the Mongols under the Communists when he visited Mongolia in 1961, for the old Mongolia he knew was a dying nation.

The Geopolitics of Mongolian Democracy

Perhaps I have given the impression that I am defending communism in Mongolia. All I am trying to do is to explain that we must acknowledge the democratic and nationalist dimensions within Mongolia's communist revolution, as they laid the positive foundation for the emergence of the democratic movement in the late 1980s. If I may add, one great achievement of Communism for the Mongols was that it had given voice to the Mongols, training Mongols to articulate against feudalism, imperialism, and class domination. This is not to say that the Communism gave people the freedom of speech. But it does mean that Mongols have learned to open their mouths to express their political value.
Unlike in some Eastern European countries, there was no confrontation between the ruling Party and the new democrats in Mongolia in the 1980s. Indeed, the Mongols were proud of a peaceful transition, as they avoided bloodshed. How are we to explain such a peaceful democratic revolution in Mongolia? I argue that credit should be given to the collective effort of the Mongols, and the willingness on the part of the ruling People's Revolutionary Party to renounce its one-party rule and introduce a multi-party system. In fact, the democratic revolution was initiated by young communists within the ruling Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, who were inspired by Gorbachev’s ideas of glasnost and perestroika, but were frustrated by the slow speed of action. Indeed, it was the reformer faction within the Party which organised demonstrations on the Sukhbaatar Square in order to put pressure on the Party’s conservative faction. The momentum was, however, taken over by more radical young people both within and without the Party, who moved on to call for total democratization and de-Sovietization, criticising the Soviet Union for practicing colonialism, military occupation, and economic exploitation.

The collapse of the communist system for Mongolia meant the loss of its traditional protector, the Soviet Union. By 1992, 100,000 Soviet troops had withdrawn from Mongolia, and the newly reconstituted Russian Federation was too busy with its internal crisis to care about Mongolia, thereby exposing a newly democratised Mongolia to its historical nemesis, the People’s Republic of China, which had just brutally crushed its pro-democracy movement.

At this crucial moment, the United States, Japan, European countries, and other democracies came to the help of Mongolia, providing vital assistance. In this light, we may argue that democracy played a similar function as played by communism, that is, like communism, democracy became a mechanism for Mongolia to seek international guarantee not only for saving its collapsing economy, but also for protecting its national sovereignty from a probable irredentism by its southern neighbour. Not surprisingly, Mongolia has subsequently changed its foreign policy, increasing its neighbours from two to three: the two territorial neighbours of China and Russia, keeping them at equal distance, not favouring one over the other, and adding one more neighbour, which is a conglomeration of democracies. Mongolia is a proud member in this club of democracies. In sum, geopolitics played a vital role in Mongolia’s swift embracement of democracy.

Problems with Mongolian democracy

The democratic process in Mongolia was as radical and ideologically motivated as the communist revolution. Like the Communists who confiscated property of noble estates, the new democratic Mongolian state militated against state ownership by dismantling rural collectives. But unlike the Communists who built state farms and collectives on the basis of the noble estates, employing herders, the new regime distributed livestock to individuals, sending them back to traditional nomadic pastoralism, and built practically nothing in its place. Mongolia’s democracy is characterised not by establishing better governance,
but by dis-governance, as the government left almost everything to the market to regulate.

Very soon, individuals with better connections have assembled wealth, leading to radical social divide. With almost all state institutions and facilities outside the capital city abandoned or dismantled, individualised herdsmen have been left alone to fight natural disasters, often ineffectively. Those who have lost livestock in disasters, have moved to the suburbs of Ulaanbaatar in large numbers. Now about 60% of Mongolia’s 3 million population live in the capital city, and about half of them live in slums of what’s called ger horoolol – yurt district.

At the turn of the 21st century, propelled by the high international demand for mineral resources, the Mongolian government turned its attention to mining industry. Through the sale of mining licenses to international miners, politicians of good connections became oligarchs, amassing huge wealth, while tens of thousands of herdsmen have become what are called ninjas, that is, roaming artisans, in the nation’s gold rush, causing huge ecological destruction. Foreign companies, including international corporations lobbied the government and bribed individual politicians for favourable deals.

From 2003 or 4, a civil rights movement began to gain momentum, with numerous NGOs joining forces against the government policies towards mining. For several years, they demonstrated on the Sukhbaatar Square, but unfortunately, the movement was destroyed as its leaders were co-opted into either of the two large political parties. A small contingent of the movement staged a demonstration on 1 July 2008 after the parliamentary election, protesting vote rigging on the part of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party. The protesters stormed the headquarters of the Party, inviting the President to declare a state of emergency. The Prime Minister, who was concurrently the leader of the MPRP used special troops who killed 5 people and arrested over 800 people. It is surprising that the Mongolian Democratic Party, which lost the election, did not stand out on the side of the protestors, but remained largely quiet.

The implication of the 2008 riot for Mongolia’s democracy is enormous. First of all, it destroyed the carefully crafted image of a peaceful Mongolian democracy, for it was a democratically elected government that shot and killed 5 unarmed people. Since 2008, there has been no large political gathering or protest, because people are afraid of the government. More recently, however, we have seen some people beginning to use weapons, shooting on the Sukhbaatar Square. There is no reason to believe that in the future, people will not carry weapons in their confrontation with the government.

Second, the failure of the Mongolian Democratic Party to stand on the side of the protestors convinced people that there is no difference between the two ruling political parties. This conviction is strengthened by the fact that the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party which won the election opted to form a coalition government with the Mongolian Democratic Party in the name of national unity. What this means is that with the demise of the civil rights movement, there is no
longer genuine political opposition in Mongolia. This encouraged top Mongol politicians to accumulate more wealth with impunity, for members of parliament enjoy many privileges, including freedom from arrest in civil action. Most of Mongolia’s top businessmen are aspiring to become MPs to enjoy the parliamentary privilege. It is known that the majority of Mongolian MPs are super-rich.

Third, I suggest that the multi-party politics has increasingly become an arena autonomous of the voters. In other words, since there is no perceived difference between the political parties, people vote not for candidates who may have interesting and constructive ideas, but for people whom they know. This is because few of the electoral promises have been delivered. There is thus a Mongolian saying: *a known devil is better than an unknown Buddha*. As a result, we have seen older politicians and more well-known public figures, such as wrestlers are being elected members of parliament time and again. The current parliament has amassed the largest number of most powerful and most experienced politicians in Mongolia, but it may also be the most ineffective parliament.

At the same time, politicians engage in constant feuds, making deals with each other, regardless of party affiliations. This is popular known as ‘*baga haadiin jodoon*’, or ‘feuds of the lesser lords’, reminiscent of the feudal warfare in the 15-17th centuries after the collapse of the Mongol empire. One such case of feuds was between the current president Elbegdorj and the former president Enkhbayar. Three years ago, in order to prevent Engkhabayar from running for seat in the parliament, Elbegdorj used the state’s anti-corruption agency to arrest Engkhabayar and sentenced him to four years in prison, only to release and exile him to South Korea after the Mongolian Democratic Party had to form a coalition government with the newly vamped Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party. Enkhbayar was and remains the leader of this new party. There seems to be no principle in such coalition other than convenience and political expediency.

**Conclusion: The failure of Mongolia’s democracy – and its regional implication**

Finally, let’s come back to the American characterisation of Mongolia as a beacon of democracy. The metaphor reminds me of the role played by Taiwan for mainland China in the 1980s and 90s when Taiwan’s democracy was upheld as an exemplar for the mainland. What has Mongolia’s democracy accomplished internationally? Has it been promoting democracy in Central Asia? Hardly so, not least because Mongolia refuses to identify with Central Asian countries which are Islamic. Then, how about promoting democracy among its kinsmen in Russia’s Buryatia and China’s Inner Mongolia? I have heard of no case of Mongol democrats working in Inner Mongolia, but I do know that many Inner Mongolian dissidents who have escaped into Mongolia have been repatriated to China. We know Mongolian soldiers have been serving in the UN’s peace-keeping forces, but this is not so much promoting democracy as an enmeshment strategy for international protection.
When Mongolia's democracy has become a strategy of self-defence, for distinguishing itself from a communist China or autocratic stan states, its expansive capacity is lost.