

Mongolian's Attitude to Democracy

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The crisis in the socialist system in the late 1980s had a direct impact on Mongolia. The country was in a strong economic and political dependence on the Soviet Union. When the “Perestroika” started in the USSR, Mongolian leaders also proclaimed a new course towards changes. But they did not go beyond the words. Very soon it became obvious that the leaders of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) were not ready for the real reforms. This caused dissatisfaction on the part of the progressive-minded Mongolian intellectuals. Young Mongolians (teachers, scientists, journalists, artists, etc.) began to form democratic organizations. They initiated rallies and demonstrations, where demanded reforms and a real outcome of the proclaimed changes. The authorities did not respond to the claim. Meanwhile, discontent spread throughout the country. By the beginning of March 1990, the situation worsened: 10 members of the Mongolian Democratic Union began a hunger strike. Thousands of people in the capital city - Ulaanbaatar, as well as the residents of other cities and regions of Mongolia supported them. On March 9, Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the MPRP announced its resignation. It was a victory of the peaceful democratic revolution in Mongolia, which marked the beginning of a new age in the country's history.

Further developments that included the adoption of a new Constitution in 1992, shock therapy, elections, etc. showed that Mongolia embarked on the path of democratization. None of the major parties or coalitions (MPRP, Mongolian People's Party, Democratic Party) advocated a return to the old ideology and the restoration of the old regime. It is a curious fact. Despite all the problems of the transition period (unemployment, poverty, social stratification etc.), the Mongolians demonstrated commitment to democracy. Post-Soviet states of Central Asia eventually developed a variety of authoritarian regimes. Mongolia was able not only to slide into authoritarianism, but on the contrary to move towards democratization. According to research by Freedom House in 1999-2000, Mongolia was the only post-communist country in Asia that fit the criteria of a free polity. ¹⁾

The researchers write that Mongolia is a very atypical case of democratization. Typically, one of the conditions for successful democratization is a high level of economic development. However, in the 1990s Mongolian economy was in a deep crisis. In contrast to the countries of Eastern Europe, Mongolia is quite far from the other democratic states. It eliminates some external influence on the situation in the country. Of course, Western countries and organizations provided humanitarian and financial assistance and demanded adherence to the democratic path from Mongolia. However, they did the same in the other Post-Soviet countries that later still slipped into authoritarianism. Mongolia had no other important condition for successful democratic transit which is a historical tradition of democracy. Therefore, it is hard to explain the phenomenon of the Mongolian democracy.

Argument that is more convincing is that the success of the democratization of Mongolia lies in the scarcity of its population (3 million people). In small societies, elites are also small; people know each other better and are more likely to collaborate than to use force and repression against political opponents. This argument does not explain the phenomenon of Mongolian democracy in general (we need more information and evidence to support this point of view), but it can shed light on the success of the peaceful revolution of 1990. For example, on March 9 (it was a third day of the hunger strike) a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers D. Byambasuren visited hunger-strikers and urged them to negotiate. According to some information D. Byambasuren was a relative of E. Bat-Uul, one of the leaders of the opposition and a hunger.²⁾ Secretary General of MPRP G. Batmukh demanded in any case not to use force against opposition saying “young people in the square is our children.”³⁾ This could be in part a metaphor, but only in part, since most of the elites and their relatives, friends lived in Ulaanbaatar, knew each other, studied and worked together.

Despite the complexity of the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of Mongolian democracy, facts confirm its existence. In spite of the many problems, Mongolians, according to existing data, remain committed to democratic values. The country has held elections, changed parties and presidents. Mongolia in terms of freedoms, including freedom of the press is usually ranked among the free nations.⁴⁾ There are freedom of assembly and multi-party system as well. The existing parties do not show any inclination to change democratic rules and procedures, the government and the president try to follow the Constitution and the

1) Fish S.M. “The Inner Asian anomaly: Mongolia’s democratization in comparative perspective”, Communist and Post-Communist Studies Communist and Post-Communist Studies 34 (2001): 324.

2) Rossabi, Morris. “Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists.” Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. P. 21.

3) Batmunkh J. Huch hereglej herhevch bolohkui. Ulaanbaatar, 2001 (In Mongolian). P.107.

4) Fritz V. “Mongolia: Dependent Democratization,” Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics 4 (2002): 81.

population supports the existing political system.

It is interesting to look at how Mongolians themselves view democracy. In 1998, an American anthropologist Paula Sabloff with her Mongolian colleagues conducted a series of surveys in Mongolia, which involved 855 respondents. Among the most important criteria of democracy Mongolians called personal freedom (of speech, religion, movement); economic freedom, freedom of demonstration, pluralism, rule of law and transparency.⁵⁾

According to the poll, conducted in 2012 by Sant Maral Foundation,⁶⁾ in spite of serious problems (unemployment, low standards of living, inflation) and the government's inability to solve them (63.8% Mongolians believed that the measures taken by the government to address them, failed), the overwhelming majority of respondents (total survey involved 1000 people) supported democratic values.⁷⁾

But in 2012 the economic situation in the country was relatively good due to the high demand on the mineral resources (mainly copper and coal) that Mongolia exported. The country became one of the fastest growing economies in the world with a GDP growth of 17%.⁸⁾ In this situation the positive attitude towards democracy is not surprising. In the subsequent years, with the decline in prices for coal and copper, and the economic recession in China the economic situation in Mongolia also worsened.

However the study by Sant Maral Foundation conducted in March 2014, which involved 1,200 respondents from different regions of Mongolia, showed the persistence of the democratic ideals. Most supported the Democratic Party (31.3% would vote for it in the elections).⁹⁾ It is necessary to mention that there is no crucial difference in programs of Democratic and other major parties. Support for the Democrats can be a sign that the Mongolians wanted changes, that they were tired of the MPP. However, other survey results showed their commitment to democratic values. Among the socio-economic and political problems in the first place respondents called unemployment (31.1%), the rise in prices and inflation (20.8%), low living standards and poverty (17.6%).¹⁰⁾ Among the top ten of democratic values, which the Mongolians called important were: equality before the law (91.3%); social justice in market conditions (88.8%); reducing social inequalities (88.3%); equality between men and women (85.4%); the right to work in the profession that person

⁵⁾ Sabloff, Paula L. W. "Genghis Khan and Modern Mongolian Identity: The Democracy Connection," *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 8-9 (2002): 42.

⁶⁾ Mongolian non-profit and non-government organization.

⁷⁾ Politbarometer 11 (44). Sant Maral Foundation, June 2012.

URL: http://santmaral.mn/sites/default/files/SMPBE12.Jun__0.pdf.

⁸⁾ Zotin, Alexander. "VVP Potomkov Chingiskhana." *Kommersant Den'gi*, November 17, 2014, 47. (in Russian).

⁹⁾ Politbarometer 13 (47). Sant Maral Foundation, March 2014.

<http://www.santmaral.org/sites/default/files/SMPBE14%20Apr.pdf>

¹⁰⁾ Ibid

has chosen (84.5%); reducing income inequality (83.8%); free, democratic market (83.7%); an equal chance to receive education (81.8%); freedom of expression (81.3%).¹¹⁾ It is noteworthy that these answers indicate the desire of the Mongolians to have a greater social justice from the state. It means that they do not want an extreme form of liberal democracy. The majority of respondents were satisfied (22.4%) or rather satisfied (36.7%) with the state of democracy in the country and the political system.¹²⁾ At the same time we can see a wish for a strong leader among the Mongolians. According to the survey, more than a half of the respondents (61.7%) preferred a strong leader, not related to parliament and elections. And 41.2% of the respondents were in favor of the presidential form of government (now according to the Constitution of 1992 Mongolia is a parliamentary republic).¹³⁾

The results of the recent survey carried out from March 27 to April 12, 2015 did not show any serious changes. The representative sample of 1200 respondents was collected in the capital Ulan Bator and Arhangay, Uvurhangay, Hentii, Uvs, Tuv, Dundgovi aimags. Almost half of the respondents gave a negative assessment of the Mongolian economy: it is bad (46.7%), stagnating (42.8%), in decline (45.7%).¹⁴⁾ However, the commitment to democratic values still exists. Most of the respondents believe that all people must be equally treated by the law; everybody should have the freedom to decide about his/her property; there should be a free, democratic market; everybody can express his/her opinion freely; everybody can believe in what he/she wants; media and research must be uncensored in Mongolia.

Almost a half of the respondents are satisfied by the democracy and present political system: satisfied (18.8%) and rather satisfied (32.2%).¹⁵⁾ At the same time the Mongolians are not satisfied with the activities of political parties and the state of society. 70.3% of respondents think that political parties in Mongolia do not represent public opinion and there is more injustice in society (74.2%).¹⁶⁾ And a little more than half of respondents (50.8%) are for the presidential form of government.¹⁷⁾ This can be explained by the fact that frequent controversies and scandals between the different parties destabilize political situation in the country. After gaining majority in the parliament a party or a coalition usually begins changing laws, and it often disappoints foreign investors. Perhaps the stronger positions of the president would help to get rid of these shortcomings. In addition, historically at the head of the Mongolian state was a strong ruler, Khan or Emperor.

¹¹⁾ Ibid

¹²⁾ Ibid

¹³⁾ Ibid

¹⁴⁾ Politbarometer 14 (48). Sant Maral Foundation, March-April 2015.

<http://www.santmaral.mn/sites/default/files/SMPBE15%20Apr.pdf>

¹⁵⁾ Ibid

¹⁶⁾ Ibid

¹⁷⁾ Ibid

Thus, the above data indicate that the Mongolians remain committed to democratic values. Interestingly, the American researcher M. Fish among the five factors harmful to democratization, puts in the first place the existence of natural resources. According to him, the excess in mineral resources often brings politics to a struggle for control over the production and distribution of these resources, increases the level of corruption and the negative impact on the state apparatus¹⁸⁾ Currently, the fall in demand for mineral resources does not allow Mongolians rely on this sector of the economy too much. At the same time without money received from the export of mineral resources it will be impossible to solve such problems as poverty, lack of social welfare programs, and etc. and to reach a higher level of economy. Persistence of these problems also is a danger to democracy. It seems that commitment of the Mongolians to democracy and their dependence on the support from the western and eastern democratic countries are two key factors that guarantee the future of democracy in Mongolia today.

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¹⁸⁾ Fish S.M. "The Inner Asian anomaly: Mongolia's democratization in comparative perspective", Communist and Post-Communist Studies Communist and Post-Communist Studies 34 (2001)