

Mongolia's Democratic Steppes

By Sichan Siv

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Every July, Mongolians celebrate *Naadam*, holding competitions in wrestling, horsemanship and archery. These were the foundations of Mongolia's power 800 years ago. Genghis Khan, having united all rival clans, built an awesome army and conquered the largest land empire in history. On July 2, over 80% of modern Mongolia's voters chose their representatives among 604 candidates, including 64 women, from 16 parties. It was the third parliamentary election since this nation, the second to establish communism, in 1990 became the first former communist nation to take the democratic road. Ironically then, the formerly communist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party captured 72 seats in the 76-seat parliament, with winning tallies varying from 34% to 80% of the ballots.

The routing of the Democratic coalition is an ironic reversal of fortune, and must now set it thinking of strategies for other elections ahead. Significantly, local elections are due next month. The presidential election is scheduled for next year.

In 1996, the Democrats—the Mongolian National Democratic Party and the Mongolian Social Democratic Party—were united and ran a focused campaign. They gained 51 seats against the MPRP's 25. But once in power, the Democrats

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began to squabble. They had four prime ministers in four years and were also victims of bad luck. The worst winter in 30 years killed two million head of livestock and affected almost half of the population. It did not help their cause.

This year, the MPRP made use of its opponents' 1996 strategy. In a better-managed and well-funded campaign, it used the electorate's displeasure to attack the Democrats on corruption and ineffective governance, while promising social benefits. On the other hand, the Democrats were unable to communicate some of their successes from the previous years, including privatization and economic reforms, which had tamed inflation and produced modest growth of 3%-4%.

Indeed, the MPRP's landslide is more a vote against divisiveness among the Democrats than a vote for the ex-communists. A closer look at the result indicates that the Democrats'

division seems to be wider than one would have thought: The MPRP managed to take 95% of the seats with only 51% of the vote. However, over 85% of Mongolians still favour the existing democratic and free-market trends. Moreover, the MPRP's chairman and the new prime minister, N. Enkhbayar, even promised to maintain the process. Still, this must be proven. Donors will want to work closely with Enkhbayar and House Speaker L. Enebish to prevent a return to a statist orientation, and will hold the new government to its commitment to economic reforms.

But all isn't lost for the Democrats. While their defeat was unequivocal, they at least managed to prevent a complete sweep by the MPRP. Dornod is Mongolia's northeastern-most province at the Sino-Russian border, the former home of a large Soviet military base and a place where cattle, carpets, oil and uranium ore are abundant. Here, the Democrats lost former Prime Minister Ts. Elbegdorj's seat, but managed to retain another seat. S. Oyun, a Cambridge-trained geologist and the sister of prime minister-designate S. Zorig, who was slain in 1998, was re-elected. Among the other three non-MPRP candidates elected was former Prime Minister J. Narantsatsralt.

Unfortunately, the Democrats have yet to learn from their defeat. They haven't come up with a common strategy to become more involved at the grassroots level ahead of the October 1 local election. But if the Democrats were to unite among themselves, the way Genghis Khan united the disparate clans eight centuries ago, they would stand a good chance of returning to political relevance. They must put away personality differences and overcome old rivalries and thin loyalties. Only then can they remain an integral part of the politics of the Steppes.

This will require enormous political will among the party's leaders. But if successful, the Democrats will be able to create a viable alternative to the MPRP. This will allow them to build a solid democratic front by rallying behind a strong candidate in next year's presidential election. Without a doubt, Mongolians want in place a means to check and balance power. A clean and competent leader from one of the numbers of the Democrats could give Mongolians a worthy candidate for the presidency to serve as a counterweight against the MPRP-led legislature. However, the Democrats must act quickly. They have little time left for more petty squabbling. ■