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Between Russia and China: Political Reform in Mongolia

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POLITICAL REFORM IN MONGOLIA
Between Russia and China

Tom Ginsburg

Transforming socialist regimes can be broadly characterized in two ways. The Chinese model in which economic liberalization is adopted without political competition has been replicated to varying degrees by other Asian socialist regimes in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In contrast, the Eastern European model is one of political change proceeding apace with economic reform. An interesting case combining elements of these two models of socialist transformation is that of Mongolia, formerly the Mongolian People’s Republic. For 70 years a client state of the Soviet Union, Mongolia was sometimes known as the unofficial “sixteenth republic” of the USSR. Following the radical changes in Eastern Europe in 1990, Mongolia’s Communist Party introduced political pluralism but unlike its counterparts in those countries, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) has retained power since 1990 despite allowing electoral competition and political freedom. It has introduced significant economic reforms, which may soon begin to produce positive growth.

Among former Soviet bloc nations, Mongolia’s economy was the most dependent on outside assistance measured as a percentage of GDP. When the Soviet bloc disintegrated and cut off its aid to poorer socialist countries, Mongolia experienced the most serious peacetime economic collapse any nation has faced during this century.1 Yet Mongolia’s political road has proved remarkably smooth compared to most of the former Soviet republics. There have been no violent attempts to overthrow the government, and although the opposition has been active and vocal, political conflict has by and large been

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resolved through negotiation and compromise. This article traces political reform in Mongolia since the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1990 with an emphasis on understanding how the MPRP was able to maintain its dominant position in a multiparty era. It argues that the MPRP’s short-term resilience has been based on a combination of tactical savvy and residual public support cultivated in the one-party era. Although this support is diminishing as economic problems deepen, the MPRP has shown an ability to adapt to changing conditions and will likely continue to maintain its dominant position for the foreseeable future.

Background
Situated in the grassland steppes between Russia and China, Mongolia has a little over two million people, several hundred thousand of whom are semi-nomadic herders living a largely intact traditional lifestyle. Most of the remainder are concentrated in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar (red hero). Modern Mongolia is best understood in the context of its complex relationship with China. From 1691 until 1911, Mongolia was ruled by the Manchu conquerors of China, but the nomadic Mongol tribes maintained their distinct identity vis-à-vis the agriculturalists to the south. Their desire for independence culminated with the Mongolian nobility’s declaration of an independent state in 1911 in the aftermath of the Chinese revolution. This state was led by the Bogdo Khan, recognized as a reincarnated Buddhist lama who was both the temporal and spiritual leader. There followed a period of turmoil, reflecting internal discord in both the new Republic of China and Tsarist Russia.

In 1921 a group of Mongolian revolutionaries gained control of the country with the help of the Russian Red Army. The Bogdo Khan was re-installed as a constitutional monarch but after his death no reincarnation was identified; the country was renamed the Mongolian People’s Republic under the leadership of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP), which included a coalition of both rightist and leftist elements.

Soviet assistance played an essential role in the re-establishment of Mongolian independence after centuries of Chinese domination. The intimate relationship between Russia and Mongolia for the next seven decades reflected in part the fear among Mongols of renewed Chinese intervention, for Russia was perceived as the lesser of two evils. Mongolian nationhood carried with it the price of nearly total reliance on the Soviet Union, and this was seen as acceptable by the leadership. Among the population, the close

identification of the MPRP with the successful anti-Chinese nationalist movement of the 1920s is critical for understanding its survival today.

The One-Party Period

Political developments in Mongolia after 1924 closely paralleled those of the USSR. Consistent with the rise of Stalin in the Soviet Union, the twenties and thirties saw a series of violent purges and forced collectivizations in Mongolia, which broke the power of the remaining Buddhist lamaseries and traditional nobility. By some estimates, over 100,000 persons, roughly 15% of the population, were killed during that period. Mongolian traditional culture was repressed, and the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced. Mongolia’s dictators even became known as junior versions of their Soviet counterparts: the ruthless Horolyn Choibalsan (1928–52), who eliminated his rivals to power, became “Mongolia’s Stalin”; his successor, Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal (1952–84), became “Mongolia’s Brezhnev” for his stultifying effect on the country.

Following the Sino-Soviet split, the USSR took a more active role in the development of Mongolia as a buffer state, and stationed its troops throughout Mongolian territory. Traditional animosity toward the Chinese was exacerbated, and in 1980 Chinese residents were expelled. The economy became increasingly integrated into that of the USSR, and by the 1980s, nearly 95% of Mongolia’s trade was with the Soviet Union and most of the rest with its allies on the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Signs of change in the USSR led the MPRP in 1984 to replace Tsedenbal with a younger leader, Jambyn Batmonh, a succession undoubtedly undertaken with approval from Moscow. Behind the scenes, however, two groups struggled for power within the party. Cautious calls for reform began to appear as the economy deteriorated further, and in 1988 a program of “renewal” was initiated, paralleling Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika. Following the Russian example, the initial objective of Mongolia’s reform process was to revitalize the socialist economy rather than replace it.

Governmental authority throughout the communist period resided theoretically in the Great People’s Hural, controlled by its seven-member Presidium, and in the Council of Ministers. In fact, the MPRP monopolized power. Political competition and dissent were not tolerated, and the MPRP established a network of control over the media, the economy, and all aspects of

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public life. The country was divided into 18 provinces reflecting traditional administrative divisions, and these were subdivided into counties, each with its own communist party cell. The political system of the MPR during this period has been described as "totalitarian in intent, but less so in fact and effectiveness." The relatively loose system of control reflected the vastly dispersed and self-sufficient nomadic society in which government provides few of the people’s basic needs. Despite the collectivization of herding in the 1950s, the nomadic lifestyle of herdsmen continued and families lived as individual units in their traditional pastures. There was little threat of grass-roots political organization against communist rule, and therefore little need for repression in the countryside. The same could not be said for urban areas, especially for intellectuals, who experienced tight control and repression.

One of the poorest nations in the communist bloc, Mongolia received significant external assistance. The economy was heavily subsidized by the Soviet Union and its trading regime, the CMEA. Subsidies included blanket grants to cover the chronic budget deficit and were applied to trading arrangements and infrastructure construction projects. Massive inflows of aid and goods meant that the average herdsman enjoyed a far better standard of living than he would have had without them. Public health programs and education were extended even to remote herding families, and luxury items from Eastern Europe were available at low prices. Improved living standards contributed to the legitimacy of the MPRP, which became a relatively popular communist party, especially in the countryside. The party claimed links with the national hero Sukhbaatar, who led the 1921 revolution and is universally perceived as the liberator of the country from the Chinese. These claims were reinforced through the state-controlled media and education systems, which repressed alternative views. All of the above factors were crucial in endowing the party with legitimacy and underpinned the MPRP’s survival into a democratic era.


Following the domino-like fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, a reformist group called the Mongolian Democratic Union was formed in Ulaanbaatar in December 1989. Early the next year, it began to call for the regime to stand down and launched demonstrations on the main square of Ulaanbaatar as well as a hunger strike. The MPRP was divided over how to respond. At the 19th Party Congress in March 1990, it debated whether to

7. Dashpurev and Soni describe this in some detail in Reign of Terror.
respond with force, as its Chinese counterpart had done in Tiananmen Square the previous June, or to launch reforms as in the Eastern European regimes.

The reform group within the party won the day, and Batmonh resigned along with the entire MPRP Central Committee. Batmonh was replaced as chairman of the Great Hural and head-of-state by the 48-year-old minister of foreign economic relations and supply, Punsalmaagiyn Ochirbat. A new, younger Central Committee was appointed, and a new secretary-general of the MPRP named. Two months later, the Parliament announced that it would amend the Constitution to delete the reference to the MPRP’s “leading role” in society and to legalize opposition parties. It would also create new political institutions: a bicameral legislature, and the new posts of president and vice-president. The first multiparty parliamentary elections in Mongolia’s history were called for July 1990.

Thus, the spring of 1990 marked a turning point for the MPRP. Unlike its counterparts in Eastern Europe, the party did not dissolve or hand over power to the protestors; rather, it made a generational change in its leadership, and seeking to maintain power, it called snap elections to give the opposition minimal time to organize. The opposition demonstrations were catalytic, but the reforms that followed also stemmed from the calls for greater openness within the party that had been building since 1988. Despite the magnitude of the political change, it remains unclear just how widespread were the domestic pressures for reform. The first opposition parties were based narrowly on the urban intelligentsia who had been educated in Eastern Europe and had followed closely the dramatic events there in the fall of 1989. These parties formed around loose groupings of academics at the Mongolian State University. Much of the leadership of the Social Democratic Party, for example, was composed of members of the University’s physics and mathematics departments,8 while the National Progress Party leadership was made up of young economists.9 Only the Democratic Party, the largest of the opposition groups, could boast broader membership but that support was still heavily concentrated in Ulaanbaatar. The opposition parties lacked a significant base among the herds people in the countryside.10

In 1990 a new bicameral legislature was elected comprising the Great Hural and the Small Hural. The Great Hural was a national assembly elected

8. These included S. Batbayar, R. Gonchigdorj, B. Lamjav, and P. Ulaankhuu.
9. Prominent economists included the leader of the party, D. Ganbold, and the head of the related National Progress Movement, S. Batsuh. Other well known economists in the opposition included former Central Bank Governor Jargalsaikhan and his brother, Stock Market Director Zoljargal.
10. For an analysis of how herdsmen were affected by the political changes, see Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beale, The Changing World of Mongolia’s Nomads (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994).
by districts, as in the nominal elections of the communist period. It was responsible for deciding major affairs of state, appointing the prime minister and the cabinet, and amending the Constitution. The Small Hural was a standing parliament elected by proportional representation, and was responsible for passing ordinary legislation in between the Great Hural sessions. Over 95% of the eligible voters turned out, and opposition parties won 40% of the seats in the Small Hural. But the Great Hural, the body with the formal power to constitute the government, was more conservative with an overwhelmingly rural MPRP membership. This reflected the party’s established network in the countryside and its significant financial and organizational advantages over the opposition parties that had been legalized only months before. Local communist leaders in the countryside had much more name recognition than opposition figures, who were themselves divided into several parties. The MPRP’s tactic of calling snap elections to defuse the pressure for reform appeared to have been successful.

Although the Great Hural was dominated by the MPRP, the party agreed to form a coalition government with the opposition parties, and four cabinet posts were assigned to them. Punsalmaagiyn Ochirbat, the leader who had presided over the election, was named president and head-of-state. D. Byambasuren was elected prime minister, with National Progress Party leader D. Ganbold as first deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs. Vice-president (ex officio) and chairman of the Small Hural was R. Gonchigdorj, leader of the Social Democratic Party. K. Zardykhon, a Kazakh who had led calls for reform from within the MPRP, was named deputy chairman of the Small Hural. The parliament also appointed a 20-member multiparty constitutional drafting commission, chaired by President Ochirbat with former Minister of Justice Biryaagiyn Chimid serving as secretary.11

There are a number of possible explanations for the Party’s move to bring in the opposition. One is that the younger intellectuals within the party, who had risen to positions of leadership following the resignation of the Central Committee and the generational change in the MPRP, had more in common with the intelligentsia of the opposition than with the staid conservatives of the rural leadership. Another is that most of the country’s economic expertise was concentrated in the ranks of the opposition. Few MPRP apparatchiks knew about market economics, so the pragmatists within the Party may have invited the opposition into government out of genuine concern for the economic reform process. A third possible explanation, preferred by many opposition leaders, is that the MPRP sought to neutralize and even discredit the opposition by forming a coalition government with these parties. By giving

key economic posts to opposition MPs, the MPRP would be able to blame them should the economy collapse. The economy was clearly due for a major shock with the inevitable end of Soviet support, so this explanation of MPRP tactics is a plausible one. At the very least, the coalition strategy was effective at diffusing opposition to the MPRP.

The Small Hural and the new coalition government immediately plunged into the task of reforming the economic and political structures of the country. The number of ministries was reduced and the government administration reorganized. Prices were doubled, subsidies eliminated, and private ownership of herds legalized. An extensive and radical privatization program was formulated, and legislation to establish a market economy was passed. Political reforms were broad-ranging. A commission was set up to examine the purges of the 1930s and to rehabilitate victims of political trials during that period. The secret police were disbanded and controls over media removed. There was a renaissance of interest in traditional Mongolian culture, repressed under Soviet influence during the one-party period. Chinggis Khan, criticized by the Soviets as feudal, was reinstated as a national hero, and the government revived the Mongolian script. The MPRP distanced itself from the events of the past, blaming them on the personal excesses of Choibalsan and Tsendenal rather than the party itself.

Meanwhile, the economy came under severe pressure when the CMEA trade regime collapsed on January 1, 1991. There were fuel shortages, and despite the fact that livestock outnumbered the population by more than twelve to one, meat was unavailable in the cities. Within the Small Hural, there was a good deal of cooperation across party lines during this period. Young reform-minded MPRP members often found themselves in agreement with their opposition party colleagues on substantive issues. The primary cleavage was over the pace of reforms, with the opposition demanding rapid liberalization and the MPRP advocating a slower pace. Most of the MPRP leaders in the government, however, were in regular contact with international donor agencies and financial institutions, and understood the severity of the economic crisis. In policy terms, there was little disagreement between the government and the opposition over what steps to take.

This sense of cooperation in the Small Hural did not extend to the rural MPRP members of the Great Hural, who were not involved in day-to-day matters of governance. These local elites faced difficult transitions as the collectives were disbanded and converted into private companies and cooperatives. Tension therefore arose within the party between national policy makers and those representing its rural base. The MPRP of the transition period was a broad umbrella containing both groups, and talk that it might split in two came up in 1991 when the existence of factions within the party was admitted. Late that year, MPRP reformers under the leadership of K.
Zardykhun, deputy chairman of the Small Hural, broke off to form the Mongolian Renewal Party. Although they perceived the party as a centrist alternative to the MPRP, the political base of this group was limited and it did not win any seats in the next parliamentary election in 1992. The unintended result of the split was an MPRP dominated by more conservative forces.

The Constitution and the 1992 Elections
After a long period of expert commentary, public input, and revision by the Small Hural, a draft constitution was forwarded to the plenary session of the Great Hural for ratification in November 1991. The Great Hural had not convened in full membership since shortly after the 1990 election; its members were eager to play a role in the constitutional process and deliberated on the draft for almost two months. The most controversial issues were symbolic ones such as the official name of the country, with the MPRP demanding that the term “People’s Republic” remain in place. But debate also centered on crucial questions such as the structure of government and the wording of human rights provisions, and the Hural revised the draft several times in the course of its session.

After intense deliberations, the Great Hural ratified the Constitution in January 1992. The final version called for a mixed political system loosely modeled on France’s Fifth Republic. The President would be the head of state with power to veto parliamentary legislation, while the Prime Minister would serve as head of the government. The earlier bicameral parliament was to be consolidated into a unicameral body, the State Great Hural. The Constitution called for the formation of new political institutions including a National Security Council, a Constitutional Tribunal (called the Tsets), and a new body called the General Council of the Courts to oversee judicial administration and ensure the constitutionally declared goal of judicial independence.

Legislation passed along with the Constitution called for new parliamentary elections to be held during the coming summer, as the interim bicameral parliament had accomplished its main task. To ensure stability, this implementing legislation called for staggered elections for the State Great Hural and the Presidency so that Ochirbat would remain in office until 1993. The Small Hural, in its last session before the parliamentary elections, passed legislation to form the new Constitutional Court, setting up an independent body

12. Other prominent members of this group included Minister of Justice J. Amarsanaa and L. Tsog, chair of the Legal Affairs Committee of the Small Hural.
13. The veto can be overturned by a two-thirds majority of the State Great Hural. Constitution of Mongolia, Article 33(1).
to safeguard constitutional rights and prerogatives as provided by the Constitution. The basic institutions of Mongolian democracy had now been created.

The elections. If the 1990 elections marked the beginning of Mongolia’s democratic era, the summer 1992 parliamentary polls saw a conservative backlash similar to those observed in other reforming socialist countries. In the campaign, the conservative elements of the Communist Party attempted to blame the economic collapse on the new democratic process and the opposition, and exploited popular outrage at a banking scandal in which central banking traders with ties to opposition figures had squandered the country’s entire gold reserves (some $80 million) through speculation. Despite the fact that both the painful reforms and the banking scandal had occurred under an MPRP government, this strategy was effective and led to a massive electoral victory in June 1992 when the MPRP won 71 out of 76 seats.

The MPRP’s success also stemmed from the electoral system. Under the election law, the country was divided into 26 multimember districts, each of which elected two to four members of Parliament. Voters had to vote for exactly as many candidates as there were seats available or their ballots would be void. Because the opposition remained divided and had failed since 1990 to expand significantly outside of urban areas, the MPRP was the only party able to field a candidate for every seat in the country. With the opposition vote split among a broad number of parties and coalitions, the MPRP won 93% of the parliamentary seats with only 56% of the popular vote. The opposition’s weak base in rural areas was confirmed in the October 1992 elections for local government, when the MPRP captured all 18 of the country’s governorships.

The MPRP itself may have been surprised by the magnitude of its victories in 1992. Perhaps thinking it unseemly for a party to win so overwhelmingly in free elections, it again invited the opposition to join the government. But the opposition parties, believing they had made a mistake by joining the 1990 government, were reluctant to do so again and threatened not to take their few seats in the Hural. A new government was formed under the leadership of P. Jasrai, a former deputy prime minister known as the architect of the cautious economic reforms of the mid-1980s. Although a liberal economist by MPRP standards, Jasrai was considered to be an acceptable candidate by conservatives as a representative of the “old” (predemocracy) MPRP. His government maintained the basic policy orientation toward economic reform.

The 1993 Presidential Elections
Having tasted bitter defeat at the parliamentary and local levels in 1992, the opposition began to concentrate efforts on the first presidential elections in Mongolian history, set for June 1993. The main opposition parties this time
agreed to form a coalition and field a single candidate. Meanwhile, tensions arose between the conservative-dominated Hural and President Ochirbat, who began to use his new constitutional veto power. Conflicts between the president and the Hural emerged on several occasions, and the disputes had to be resolved by the new Constitutional Tsets. Ochirbat had maintained close ties with liberals he had worked with during the Small Hural period, and as a leading member of the government during the transition, understood the necessity of economic reform. The Hural, by contrast, resisted further reforms.

One of the conflicts concerned an international pan-Mongolist conference to be hosted by the president in 1993, which was challenged, perhaps in fear of Chinese government reaction should Inner Mongolians be allowed to attend. After an appeal to the Constitutional Tsets, the president’s right to call the conference was upheld. Another conflict arose over tax laws passed in the fall of 1992. Ochirbat was unhappy with certain provisions in the law that he perceived to be illiberal, and vetoed them. The Hural overturned the veto with a two-thirds majority vote, and the president then appealed to the Constitutional Tsets, arguing that the tax law was unconstitutional. The Tsets agreed and sent the law back to the Hural. Thus, although the Hural has taken a conservative turn, the constitutional balancing of powers has prevented a reversal of the basic reform orientation. The Tsets and the Presidency have acted as the primary constitutional checks on the conservative unicameral parliament. In this sense, the young institutions of Mongolia’s democracy are functioning healthily.

In early 1993, upset at the President’s failure to conform to what it perceived as the MPRP line, the conservative wing of the party launched an internal fight to reject Ochirbat as the presidential candidate, even though he was still willing to run on the MPRP ticket. The conservatives succeeded in nominating L. Tudev, long-time editor of the party newspaper, Unen (Truth), as their candidate. To retain the Presidency, Ochirbat would have to make a final break with the party that had brought him the Presidency.

Sensing a tactical error on the part of the MPRP, the coalition of opposition parties quickly moved to secure Ochirbat as their own candidate. Only the Social Democrats had decided to go it alone, and they too eventually

14. China continues to suppress nationalist movements in Inner Mongolia, and the Mongolian government has been careful not to antagonize its neighbor in this regard.

15. Interview with G. Nyamdoo, member of the Constitutional Tsets, June 8, 1993. Due to a quirk in the law on the Constitutional Tsets, the parliament was able to reinstate the controversial provisions over the objections of the majority of the Tsets members. Despite the ambiguous outcome, the underlying point that the Tsets has emerged as an important institutional player remains valid.

16. Tudev had been an associate of the dictator Tsedenbal, and had been used as a weapon in Tsedenbal’s campaigns against dissident intellectuals. See Dashpurev and Soni, Reign of Terror, p. 58.
threw their support behind Ochirbat. Despite complaints of media manipulation by the MPRP and polls on the eve of the June election that showed the race to be a dead heat, Ochirbat won 14 of 18 provinces. The opposition celebrated its first electoral victory in the multiparty period, and a new era of divided government was introduced. Despite the victory, however, it would be a mistake to consider Ochirbat’s triumph as an overwhelming vindication of the opposition. As president for nearly three years prior to the election, Ochirbat had a great deal of personal appeal among voters. Name recognition appears to be more important than ideological factors in Mongolian politics, consistent with the tendency of rural voters to elect local party elites whom they know. This suggests that it will take some time for the opposition to make deep inroads into rural areas dominated by conservative local elites.

Frustration with the MPRP government and the conservative Hural continued to build after the presidential election. The opposition parties were particularly upset about alleged manipulation of the media by the MPRP, arguing that the Hural’s newspaper was not producing accurate reports of parliamentary proceedings, but rather was serving as an MPRP propaganda organ. The issue of the media is a crucial one for the opposition if it is ever to expand beyond the urban centers. Although censorship and formal restrictions on newspaper ownership had been withdrawn in 1990, newsprint rationing prevented many new publications from emerging and becoming economically viable. In addition, the government’s continued control over TV and radio was of vital importance in a country where most of the vastly dispersed population does not receive newspapers. Broadcast media are the only practical means of reaching the remote rural areas.

In April 1994, twenty people launched a hunger strike in the main square of Ulaanbaatar to protest against the government; their numbers soon grew to 36, and large crowds of supporters gathered around. Opposition MPs were among the strikers, including former Vice-President R. Gonchigdorj of the Social Democratic Party, who had been a prominent leader during the rapid liberalization of 1990–92. The government newspaper reported that protests were spreading to other cities. Initial reports suggested that the demonstrators focused on parliamentary and governmental corruption, but they also called on the MPRP government to nullify a pre-constitutional resolution concerning demonstrations and submit to the Hural a bill guaranteeing the right to demonstrate as well as one on press freedom. After meeting with the protestors, President Ochirbat began to mediate. Intense negotiations ensued between the MPRP and the opposition. Ultimately, the government agreed to

17. The head of Mongol TV and Radio was mysteriously replaced by a more conservative figure shortly before the election.

propose a press freedom law and to allow public demonstrations, and the crisis was resolved by April 25 without the government resigning.

The crisis was significant for a number of reasons. As in 1990, the MPRP was forced to adopt more liberal policies through opposition pressure, but again the crisis was resolved peacefully. Ochirbat’s status was further enhanced. The peaceful resolution reinforced the legitimacy of the Constitution by showing that conflicts could be defused despite the existence of divided government, in this sense a vindication of Mongolian democratic institutions and another sign of policy retreat by the MPRP regime.

Conclusion

What explains the continuity of the MPRP in a multiparty era despite economic crisis? First, the Communist Party had a good deal of public support and legitimacy at the outset of the reform period, especially in the countryside. This was due in part to its association with Sukhbaatar, whom it deified as the father of the nation. Unlike their counterparts in the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia’s communists have historically been seen as preserving Mongol independence vis-à-vis China, and with its Leninist roots, the MPRP also has strong credentials as the only party able to maintain stability vis-à-vis the Chinese with whom relations have continually improved since the final Soviet troops were withdrawn from Mongolia in 1992. Finally, the MPRP could point to improved living standards over the long term of its rule, even though the economy had suffered in the years immediately prior to 1990.

Against these assets, the party had a number of liabilities, namely, a history of brutal repression under Choibalsan and Tsedenbal. The post-1990 MPRP has blamed the repression on the two rulers themselves rather than the party, and pointed to the continued independence of the nation as a sign of its successful leadership. Generational change within the party has left no top-level leaders from the Tsedenbal period, and has put at least some reform-minded members into important positions. All in all, the balance sheet shows a revitalized MPRP after spring 1990. The MPRP translated this into electoral success in the multiparty era, particularly in the countryside where local elites were exclusively identified with the party and where the parliamentary election law in part enabled it to over-represent rural areas. The importance of personal contacts combined with the party’s extensive network in the countryside meant that herdsmen would be unlikely to reject the MPRP immediately after liberalization.

This popularity would have diminished rapidly had the party not been pragmatic on policy. Throughout the transition, the MPRP has not launched a serious challenge to an economic reform agenda largely dictated by international donors and the political opposition. The MPRP leadership has been
able to adopt opposition policies when necessary, and the politics of accommodation were apparent in its peaceful response during the 1990 transition to multiparty democracy and again when faced with the April 1994 hunger strike. The party has shown an ability to back down when faced with serious challenge and still maintain its overall position of dominance. It has also served as a kind of umbrella for a wide spectrum of political views; if it can continue to do so, it may develop along the lines of the classical ruling parties elsewhere in democratic Asia.

Mongolia’s reform path has been remarkably peaceful when compared with its former patron to the north or the ethnically diverse nations of Central Asia. Although the MPRP has had to retreat on policy continuously since 1989, it still maintains a degree of popularity four years after the first democratic elections. The development of a serious challenge to MPRP power is likely to be incremental, and will depend in large part upon opposition parties’ ability to gather local elites into their ranks. Reform of the electoral system is critical if the opposition is to gain ground in the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for 1996.