

Democracy on the Steppe

A Search for Active Local Citizenship in Rural Mongolia



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Dedication

This study is dedicated to Mongolia's rural citizens: If this work should in some way serve to amplify their voices in the halls of power, that alone will be enough and for that alone I shall be grateful.

A Note on Spelling and Pronunciation

From street signs to UNDP reports, translations of Mongolian Cyrillic into English abound with inconsistencies. The Cyrillic “x,” which sounds like the “ch” in “Bach,” “loch,” “Chanukah,” is rendered as either “kh” or “h.” Since Americans tend to always mispronounce “kh” as “k” anyway, I will use “h” throughout this paper, except in circumstances where the “kh” spelling is predominant such as in “Khan” or “Khural.” Mongolian also differentiates between long and short vowels which is a problem in English spelling where “e” and “ee” often represent very different sounds. Thus, in words such as “Ulaanbaatar” or “Hentii” I have preserved the long vowel, but not in words such as “del” where adding a second ‘e’ would cause it to sound like “deal.” For my interviewees’ names, I have used the English spelling that they specified, if any.

Cover Photo

A bag meeting in Soyo bag, Ulaan Uul, Hovsgol. Courtesy of Emily Terrin.

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List of Acronyms

CSO = Civil society organization (includes registered NGOs, herders groups)
DP = Democratic Party
ISP = Independent Study Project
MPRP = Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party
NGO = Non-governmental organization
UB = Ulaanbaatar

Abstract

This study seeks to understand how engaged Mongolia's nomadic herders and other rural citizens are in local decision-making. To do so, we conducted over sixty interviews with rural citizens, local officials, and political experts. We also carried out two page-long written surveys which were filled out by nearly two hundred rural citizens in four provinces. Though many Mongolian political experts tend to dismiss local government as powerless and treat rural citizens as homogenous entity, our research has uncovered a remarkable diversity of opinion and activism at the local level. Through their participation in bag meetings and conversations with local officials, many rural herders and planters are frequently engaged in politics even if they do not regard it as such. Despite their lack of formal budgetary control, many local governors have taken on a variety of projects with the help of international donors, often taking herder's ideas into account. In order to strengthen Mongolia's democracy, therefore, we recommend that foreign donors focus their support on local governments and rural civil society organizations. In addition, the Mongolian national government and organization concerned with promoting democracy should give more emphasis to citizen education in the countryside and to fostering communication amongst herders groups and local governments nationwide.

Introduction

The Rural and the Local

How do you bring electoral democracy to a population of dispersed nomads? Even before I arrived in Mongolia for my semester abroad with School of International Training (SIT), I was fascinated by the dilemmas of making a nomadic society democratic. Can you even have electoral districts when people are constantly moving around? How can you campaign, conduct elections, and educate voters in what it means to be a citizen? As I learned more about Mongolia, I came to realize that nomadism itself wasn't the main obstacle. Contrary to my initial naiveties, Mongolia's nomadic herders don't just wander at will across the empty steppe. Nearly all the herders I've met camp at the roughly same sites each year and migrate over a limited area, often staying within an administrative district. Furthermore, though a family's nearest neighbors might be anywhere from meters to kilometers away, they are very much part of a community, bound by kinships, friendships, acquaintances, animosities, and a limited set of national resources on which they all depend. The challenge of bringing democracy to Mongolia's nomads, therefore, has more to do with their socialist past, poor infrastructure, lack of education, and dispersion than the fact that they move to a new site every few weeks or months. Thus, while this is a post-socialist, landlocked, sparsely-populated Eurasian country, in many ways it is unique, and many of the lessons learned here can very well be applied elsewhere, albeit on a case-by-case basis.

I decided to focus my month-long study on local and rural politics because I feel that those two aspects have generally been overlooked. Morris Rossabi's 2005 book *Modern Mongolia: From Commissars to Capitalists* provides a detailed account of Mongolia's democratic transition and subsequent economic and corruption woes, but his interviews are almost

entirely the political elite in Ulaanbaatar¹ (UB). Richard Tomlinson's 1998 article "From Genghis Khan to Milton Friedman: Mongolia's Wild Ride to Capitalism" published in *Fortune* magazine, includes a few rural voices but fails to capture the heterogeneity of herders' opinions². During his 2005 study of democracy in Central Asia, Williams College political science major documented Mongolia's fast growing array of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), but his attention to rural civil society is limited to a single grassroots environmental group. What did herders have to say for themselves I wondered? What do they believe and how can they make their voices heard? Are there any active citizens beyond the city limits or are there just passive subjects, caught up in their own affairs and waiting for the government to deliver.

I define the level of active citizenship as the degree to which citizens seek to influence public decision-making. Democracy, in turn, requires formal institutions such as checks and balances, free and fair elections, and a free press, as well as a high degree of active citizenship among all sectors of the population. The goal of this paper is not to judge whether or not Mongolia is democracy, but rather to determine how democratic Mongolia is and discover the ways in which Mongolia's nomads are shaping their own destiny.

An Overview of Mongolia's Parliamentary Democracy

Mongolia is a Parliamentary Democracy with a liberal constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech, press, and religion. Despite the transition from authoritarian socialism to democracy and capitalism at the start of the 1990s, the reigning MPRP (Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party) has continued to dominate the political landscape. A coalition of opposition parties, under the banner of the Democratic Coalition (now the Democratic

¹ The Mongolian capital.

² Tomlinson, Richard.

Party), maintained a majority from 1996 to 2000, but held onto only four seats after an MPRP landslide in 2000. In 2002 the two main opposition parties merged into the Democratic Party (DP) and entered into a coalition government with the MPRP in 2004 when neither party succeeded in winning a majority. The coalition collapsed in 2006 however, and as of the May 2007 the MPRP controlled the Presidency and the Legislature with the help of two smaller parties. Thus, Mongolia has achieved multiple peaceful alterations of power, a common litmus test for what constitutes a stable democracy. It also has the semblance of a two-party system, though the parties remain ideologically ill-defined and the MPRP is far more stable and institutionalized. Journalist _____ describes the Mongolian media as 70% free, in spite of periodic harassment of journalists and corporate and party domination of major media outlets (CITE). The army has remained blissfully out of politics, even during the transition. The judiciary still has strong ties to the MPRP but has begun to assert its independence in recent cases brought by mass movements against government officials (CITE). Civil society is flourishing in terms the number and diversity of organizations, but their impact and grassroots activism so far has been very limited. Corruption is rampant both in the bureaucracy and legislature. Threats from international donor agencies to withhold loans have at times heavily impacted decision-making (Rossabi 2006).

The Twisted Structure of Local Government

Mongolian government is divided into four administrative levels: National, Aimag (equivalent to a state or province), Soum (equivalent to a county or parish), and Bag

(consisting of several hundred rural citizens)³. Cities and incorporated villages and governed somewhat differently, but the administrative structure is similar. Lawmaking and budgetary decisions are both heavily concentrated at the national level. As in many other parliamentary democracies, the President directly elected by the nation on paper serves as a symbol, though in practice has been taking an increasingly active role in politics, particularly under the current government. The prime minister is elected by the Great Khural, Aimag Governor by the Aimag Khural, and the Soum Governor by the Soum Khural (Khural means “meeting”, or in this case, “Parliament”). Each governor must be approved by his superior, right down to the popularly-elected bag governor who must be approved by the governor of his soum. In theory, this allows the executive branch the freedom to work in the citizens’ best interests rather than according to voters’ whims, while the legislature ensures the

The Mongolian Electoral Hierarchy

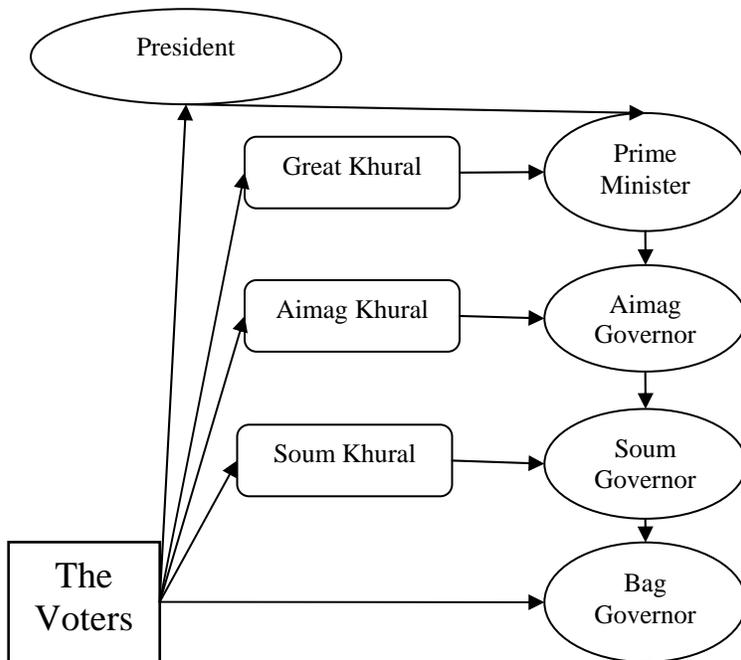


Figure 1

³ Note: The terms “local legislatures” or “local governors” refer to both the Bag and Soum levels collectively unless otherwise specified.

executive remains accountable. On the other hand, it means that people have little control over some of the people who have the greatest impact on their lives. While the Great Khural remains Mongolia’s central political force, the local khurals have fallen into the shadow of soum and

aimag governors, in part because they are largely composed of the governors' bureaucrats. An independent civil service had been slow to emerge in Mongolia, which is not surprising considering it was contingent on MPRP membership for 70 years. Some aimags, such as Bayan-Olgii have witnessed the complete turnover of the civil service from the department heads to the janitors following a change in power (CITE).

The rural citizen, can only select two of his or her leaders: the president, who is elected a year after the other elections, and the bag governor, who is selected by a meeting of the bag's citizens. The bag governor must of course be approved by the soum leader, but this did not appear to be a problem at the any of this sites I visited. Soum governors, likewise, are rarely rejected by their Aimag governors on account of party, though two Aimag governors were recently replaced by the Prime Minister (CITE). In theory, this system of vertical control is supposed to ensure the executive works together as one team at all levels of government, while also providing local leaders oversight. However, it has the potential to become a partisan tool, and what's more, there's little evidence that higher levels of government are any less corrupt or well-managed than the governors they are overseeing. Third parties and independently candidates are severely handicapped, since the party with a legislative majority in the almost always puts their candidate in power.

Lastly, it means that citizens who, as we shall see, are increasingly basing their voting decisions on individual candidates rather than parties, are forced to vote for a legislator belonging to the governor's party rather than the governor him or herself. The parties, already lacking in consistent ideology, and local legislatures, once intended to be the bulwark of local decision-making, are increasingly reduced to mere instruments to put the desired leader in office. Voting for a third party or independent candidate becomes a vote wasted, unless he or she has promised to support one of two bigger parties' candidates for governor.

Thus, while Mongolia's administrative hierarchy has strong justification on paper, it does not appear to be working as intended. Somewhere the law is in need of reform, whether by allowing the governors to be directly elected, or giving the directly-elected legislatures more power.

Methodology

This study is based primarily on surveys and interviews, as well as significant background reading, most of it prior to arrival in Mongolia. My interviews included

- 16 Bag and Soum Officials
- 6 Aimag Party Leaders and Officials
- 6 National Party Leaders and Officials
- 2 Independent Political Experts
- 4 NGO Staffers
- 1 Campaign Manager and Great Khural Candidate
- Over 50 herders, planters, pensioners, and other rural citizens

The survey (see Appendix 1) consists of 12 questions. Questions 1, 4, and 5 are aimed at

understanding the subject's level of political involvement, i.e. do they vote, attend bag meetings, or contact elected officials. Questions 3, 7, and 8 are designed to test the relative importance of platforms, parties, and candidates at the local level, while evaluating and the degree of party loyalty among herders. Question 2 seeks to discover whether the subject thinks local government is important in his/her life, while questions 9 and 10 explore subjects' perceptions of how effective and honest their local



Figure 2: The World's Great Khumii singer (2nd from right) fills out a survey.

government is. The last two questions are demographic, in order to break-down results by gender, age, and party. Subjects were also asked to provide their occupation and say whether they lived in the countryside or center to ensure that we were in fact hitting our target demographic: rural herders. Future studies ought to take education level into account as well, as did the Democratic Governance Indicator (DGI) surveys.

The interviews I conducted tend to fall into three categories: Political experts, local officials, and rural citizens. Much of what I heard at difference levels seemed to conflict, and as result this paper is divided into three sections to expresses the conflicted narratives of the three groups I interviewed. During my initial interviews with political scientists such as Undarya and Gambat, and high-level parties officials such as Gantulga and Bazar I sought to understand the details of the Mongolian political structure as well as the practical barriers to campaigning and voter education. My next phase of interviews took place in the province of Hovsgol where I for 6 days in one bag with the bag governor's family. My classmate Emily and I, our translator, and one of our hosts, would go out everyday on horseback with the aim of conducting two interviews each and as many surveys as possible. The entire community was nomadic, moving four or five times year and living in gers. Each time we approached a ger, we waited for the family to call off the dogs and invite us in. Once inside, we'd spend about 10 minutes dining on the milk teas and borztig they inevitably offered us, introducing ourselves in Mongolian, and attempting to break the ice. One of us would then present our survey and cover letter, or ask our subjects if we could interview them. Generally, there would be 2-5 adults in ger, 1 or

**Always Armed
(for an interview)**

Once while I was traveling through a remote desert in Hovd I allowed my arm to get infected after a nasty fall. When we entered the ger of the soum doctor, I permitted her to diagnose just long enough to tell me I needed to go to the hospital before then handed her a survey. It proved to be a productive interview, despite the throbbing ache in my forearm.

2 of which would dominate the conversation. If there was a couple, usually the man would talk, though occasionally we'd come upon an outspoken women who the men deferred to, especially if she was a grandmother. Young women were the most reluctant to respond to our questions while men age 30 and old tended to be eager. Hardly anyone refused our surveys however, regardless of the demographic.

Getting a random sample of rural Mongolians in nearly impossible, and even getting a decent sample size is expensive and time consuming, especially when one must hire a driver and translator for a combined \$50 a day, plus food and gas. Therefore, I decided to concentrate my suverying efforts on two bags so that I could compare them: Soyo Bag in Ulaan Uul, Hovsgol, a DP-learning soum (45 surveys) and Shoruk Bag in Erdenburen, Hovd, a MPRP-leaning one (41 surveys). I collected an additional 68 surveys elsewhere in Ulaan Uul soum, Hatgal village (Hovgol), Dorgon soum (Hovd), Chandman soum (Hovd), and Hovd soum (Hovd). In all, I collected 154 valid surveys.

Though I interviewed a bag governor, doctor, vet, and park ranger in Soyo, plus a Soum Khural Speaker in Hatgal, most of my interview with local officials began when I

Singing in the Rain

Some of my most memorable interviewees included a shaman, a state meteorologist who shoots rockets at cloud to make it rain, and an outspoken herder whom my translator Buyant describes as “The world’s best Khuumii [throat] singer” The later interview involved a brief serenade.

arrived in Hovd. Part of this was due to the abilities of the translator I was working with in each Aimag, but more important was my difference in approach. Whereas in Hovsgol I attempted to study the working of one community in depth, in Hovd I sought to move around, visiting as many places and talking to as many officials as my time and budget allowed. I spoke with party leaders in the Aimag center,

governors and civil servants in the most of the soums centers, and herders, pensioners, and unemployed people wherever I went. Knowing I couldn't get a sample that was

representative per se, I sought out a variety of voices including vegetable planters, members of newly-formed herder's cooperatives, and ethnic minorities such as the Kazakhs.

I have included in this study an earlier version of my survey which I conducted during my class's weeklong homestay in Bayanhongor, earlier in the semester. While the wording of the questions has changed too much for me to combine the data with my more recent sample, the results I believe are still comparable. In both samples, some surveys had to be conducted completely orally with the help of my translator, driver, or accompanying host family member, owing to the subjects' poor eyesight or reading level. We met no one in all our travels who was downright illiterate, but some hadn't gotten past the fourth grade while many of the rural Kazakhs has difficulty reading Mongolian, though they spoke it quite well.

Scholars and Party Leaders: The View from Above

The New Election Law and Its Implications for Rural Participation

In 2006, the Great Khural passed a wide-sweeping piece of electoral reform which will come into effect for the first time during the 2008 cycle. Its most important points and their impacts are summarized below.

1. Multi-Mandate Districts. This is by far the biggest change in the new election law. Rather than dividing an Aimag into three or four districts each with its own MP, each Aimag will receive three or four MPs at-large (based on population). Thus, voters will select three or four candidates rather than one. By turning preexisting Aimag into electoral districts, Mongolia can avoid the partisan gerrymandering that often takes place in the U.S. Whether Ethnic and political minorities can more easily elect a candidate that represents their interests remains to be seen. For instance, the ethnic Buryad residents of northern Hentii have traditionally been strong DP supporters. However, under the old system they

were divided into three districts, each of which included a majority of MPRP voters, and thus their DP candidates usually lost (CITE Ulzii). With the electoral districts merged one might hope that those Buryad might be able to band together elect a DP candidate one of Hentii's 4 seats. Under a proportional representation system, this would be the case. If 49% of Hentii voters support the DP, then 2 of Hentii's 4 seats would automatically go to a DP-candidate. However, under Mongolia's new multi-mandate system, if 51% of Hentii's voters are loyal enough give all four of their votes to the MPRP, then all four MPRP candidate win and the 49% of the population that supports the DP fails to make their voice heard. Thus, the multi-mandate system only helps the minority parties if citizens split their votes.

The 2008 election might serve as good indicator for how much Mongolian voters make their decisions based on party versus how much they consider individual candidates. In Hovd, where the MPRP controls all three Great Khural seats but only two thirds of the Aimag Khural, the DP is hoping to finally pick up a seat (CITE Bazar). But of course when Mongolia last tried this system in 1992 the MPRP came away with all but six seats in the Great Khural. (CITE) “[The MPRP] recruited all the best herders for their activists,” says Hovsgol DP candidate Ts. Oyungerel. “My own relatives are more loyal to the MPRP than to me.” This time she hopes, they will split their four votes, balancing their party loyalty with family ties. “Vote three, but vote me,” she tells them. On a broader scale, if a candidate such as Oyungerel manages to make a really good personal impression during her campaign, she can hope to convince voters who normally support the other party to spare one of their four votes for her. Thus, this section of the new election law allow a little more leeway for voters to take individual candidate into consideration, rather than just parties and the platforms. Of course, having to choose four candidates from a list of 12 or 16 might make this process more difficult.

2. Campaign Time and Finance Limits: Under the new election law, Great Khural candidates will have only 30 days to officially campaign and have a cap on how much they can spend, which the General Election Committee will determine on a case by case basis (CITE Oyungerel). Oyungerel, who lost to a well-known MPRP future-minister in 2000, reports that her opponent spent about \$100,000 on his campaign. Though she is prepared to raise that much if necessary in 2008, she hopes the committee will set a lower cap for her race. The law is clearly a boon to less-wealthy candidates and a slap in the face to the big business interests whose contributions are now tightly limited. On the other hand, bigger districts combined with caps on time and money will mean that fewer citizens will actually get to meet to person they are voting for, especially in the countryside. The result might be a shift away from paid campaign workers toward local volunteer party activists—the law stipulates no more than one paid staffer per 300 families—but that remains to be seen. Such a shift requires a change in the mentalities of party members, and in the mean time, voters could be left less informed than before, with even more candidates to sort through. Parties, it seems are the big winners, since they can still receive donations from international agencies and are granted a set amount of airtime on national television.

To evade this law, candidate may start to push the boundaries of what defines a campaign. Going on book tour or lecture series, well ahead of the official campaign period, may fall outside the jurisdiction of the law. At the very least, incumbant politician who appear frequently on television and those who are well known locally are sure to gain a big advantage. “Name recognition will be essential in the next election,” Oyungerel predicts.

3. Entertainment and Service Restrictions: Candidates are no longer allowed provide live band, karaoke parties, doctors, or other services subsidized or free of charge, and handing out cash in exchange for votes is strictly prohibited (CITE Oyungerel, Bazar). Candidates can get around this law to some extent by charging a small entrance fee to their campaign events, and enforcement may depend largely on the opposing party reporting violations. The herders who benefited from such services will of course lose out in the short term, as will the many musicians and local entertainers for whom political campaign were once a juicy source of contracts. In the long-term, however, it is hoped that this reform will draw attention back to the issues, parties, and candidates themselves, rather than the goodies they provide. As of yet, it is impossibility to judge to what extent these restrictions will be observed, let alone accomplish their aim.

4. No Personal Platforms: By far the number one complaint we heard from herders about the national government was broken promises. Time and again herders, planters, and even local officials would tell us of Great Khural candidates who stopped by on their campaign trail and made lots of promises, the fruits of which herders never saw. The new election law addresses this issue by requiring all Great Khural candidates to follow their party's national platform, and not permitting them to make separate promises of their own. Not only should this change cut down on the empty promises candidates have been giving the constituents, but it should also ensure that even well-intentioned promises have a higher probability of passing. The side-effect of course is that candidates must fight to get regionally-important issues onto their party's national agenda. Parties, in turn, must pay more attention to local issues in their platforms, though this may already be the case. The other main effect of this change, assuming anyone observes it, is to put even more emphasis on the party and less on

the candidates. This part of the law is particular difficult of to enforce since there is no one out there recording what a candidate says to a group of herders in their gers.

5. Parties must field enough candidates to form a government: This legal change will clearly be rough on small parties, such as S. Oyun's Civil Will Party which last year fielded only five candidates. On the plus side, this law effectively excludes parties based around one region or ethnic group. Undoubtedly it will reinforce the emphasis on electoral coalitions, which is healthy to the extent that it solidifies ever shakey MPRP-opposition into an equally cohesive party, but problematic in that it reduces voter choice. Small parties, often blamed shaking up an otherwise stable two-party system, do sometimes bring important issues to the table that the major parties have overlooked. The Progressive "Bull Moose" Party in early 20th century America is one such example, as is the Green Party in various Western European countries. Like the ban on personal platforms, this part of law is also aimed at keeping candidates from making promises that are unlikely to be fulfilled. This is one of the easier parts of the law to regulate.

The law has other sections as well, most of which are centered on the General Elections Committee (CITE Gambat). _ Bazar, Head of the Civil Will Party's working group, reports tighter restrictions on advertising which make it difficult for an issue-based party like hers to publicize its platform. D. Ganbat, head of the Academy of Political Education, complains that the law "does very little to defend [the] voter's right to vote." While voting in Mongolian is supposed to be free and secret, Ganbat claims that soum governors sometimes stand outside the door of the polls threatening to find who voted the wrong way. According to Temuujiin, local government workers, who overwhelmingly support the MPRP, have used their positions to get herders to vote their way by denying

social services otherwise. Gantulga, former presidential advisor and leader of the MPRP renewal movement, complains that often the whole civil service gets purged of non-party members when a new party comes to power. He and his movement is demanding that the government require its career employees to have no party affiliation, including doctors and teachers. This could be problematic in countryside, as we shall see, where soum doctors and teachers are among the only educated party activists.

Barriers to Participation and Local Governance

“When we talk about the development of democracy, the focus should be on citizens.”

– D. Gambat, director of the Academy of Political Education

Running for office beyond the local level can be prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthiest of herders. To run for Khural on behalf of the DP, a candidate must be member of the party’s 228-member central committee which charges membership dues of 1 million tugrik (roughly \$900) per year. When the election cycle begins, candidates must pay the party an additional 20 million tugrik (about \$18,000) if they want to run, which supposedly goes to pay for the party advertising they will benefit from. Then on top of that a medium-size campaign can cost upwards of 100 million turgrik (\$90,000). The DP has similar requirements at the aimag level which is probably why most aimag khural members hail from the aimag center. MPRP nomination requirements are less strict, but expensive not the less. Bazar reports that her Civil Will party, like the DP, draws much of its funding from its’ 170 national committee members. For a herder whose primary sources of income are selling milk, meat, and wool from a herd of several hundred animals, these costs are

completely out of reach. There was prominent herder who served in the Great Khural during the 1990s, but today herders are completely absent from national office.

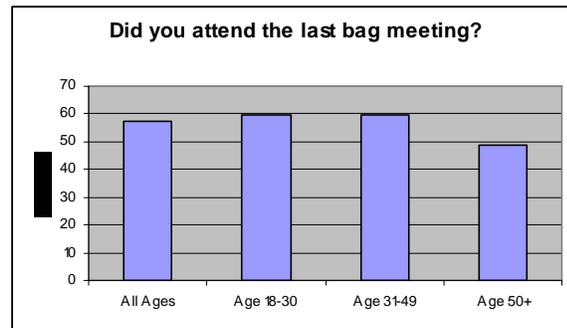
People in countryside tend to sit-back at wait for party bosses to deliver, says T. Undarya, a political scientist and consultant in Ulaanbaatar. Most herders, according to Ganbat, think they have the capacity to be politically involved, but just don't know how to be active. There are rules, he says, that require soum khurals to encourage citizen participation, but khural members tend to think they are smarter than the people they govern and make no effort to integrate them. Local government, he claims, tend look to the central government first and then to their own people. Constitutional expert and DP activist Kh. Temuujan expresses a similar sentiment when he says that lots of governors just wait for orders from their superiors. Local governments, he says, have lots of functions, but not much right to make decisions. Currently, the law on local governments has no clause stating what decision are allowed to be made at the soum level. They actually have a lot latitude, he says, but no budget. According to Bazar, soums have no money and no right to decided how to spend the money the national government give them. Schools and hospitals, for instance, funded directly by their respective ministries.

In rural areas everyone is talking about democracy, but not thinking about it, Bazar says. It's not their fault, she maintains, since there has been little effort to educate them. Ganbat takes this propotion a step further. "People think democracy is good, but can't say why," he insists. "It's not education, its enlightenment." Voter-education efforts by civil society organations have in many cases failed to reach the countryside. Democracy, says the MPRP's Gantulga, consists of freedom, honesty and friendship. In any aimag you can ask a herder what democracy is and they don't know what values to associate with it.

Rural Citizens: The View from

Below

Beyond the Voting Booth: Bag Meetings and Petitions



As expected, voting turnout was high at all locations, though it ranged from 82% in Soyo Bag (Hovsgol) to 96% in Galuut Soum⁴ (Bayanhongor). Mongolia's high rate of voter turnout, however, is partly due to the socialist legacy of enforced voting in meaningless elections, so that alone is not a sufficient indicator of active participation. Bag meeting attendance all ranges from one site to the next, what is more surprising is the lower turnout among women (53% of women, 62% of men) who are generally regarded as more educated and more engaged in civil society by the UB experts. Furthermore, contrary to Ganbat's statement that bag meetings are nothing but a bunch of pensioners, older people actually have a lower turnout than their younger relatives, despite the fact that the bag center are often home to a handful of senior citizens (see Figure 2). Both of these discrepancies can be attributed to logical problems, rather than mere lack of engagement. When my team and I attended a meeting in Soyo bag, we ended up giving a ride to an elderly lady whose health problems prevented her from coming on horseback. Since no children were present at the bag meeting, someone obviously had to come home to take care of them and thus their mothers or grandparents are likely candidates. Several herders we interviewed in Hovd Aimag talked about their bag meetings being too far away, a problem which no doubt is worse for the elderly or a mother who is expected to cook for her family. The high turnout at most sites

⁴ The Galuut survey asked about "last election" while the new survey asked about "last local election," since I discovered that Mongolia's most recent election was the Presidential. The point, however, still stands: voter turnout is high, but it varies significantly by locale.

matches up roughly with what bag leaders have reported. Herders who could not attend their meetings could often tell us what was discussed, so even those who answered “no” may be just as engaged in local issues as the rest.

My first encounter with a bag meeting came well before I had even finalized my ISP topic, during our weeklong homestay in Balj bag, Dadal soum, Hentii, the reputed birthplace of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan. Between 50 and 100 adults crowded into a log cabin out on the steppe, and watched from wooden benches while their elected officials spoke. The ad hoc Bag Citizen’s Khural Speaker, Sh. Sukhbaatar, kicked off the meeting with a summary of the bag or soum’s 2006 accomplishments, followed by the bag and soum governors who spoke of plans to expand bag center, engage in partnership with new NGOs, clean out burn trees from the forest and issues discounted logging permits to newly-married couples. The governors explained to me afterwards that these ideas had come from the people themselves and were refined by the soum governor. The soum governor held a vote on whether to approve the platform, which passed almost unanimously, and on whether to explore forming what sounded like small economic cooperatives. A few herders asked questions.

The second bag meeting I attended, this time in Soyo, was far more participatory. At



Figure 3: Soyo Bag Meeting

the start of the meeting. The unofficial bag Khural speaker asked the 50-60 assembled herders if they had any ideas to share. A man in his 30s rose and talked about the need for salt for the animals, suggesting the government provide one sack of salt for every two families. Next, Batsura, the bag doctor, announced that the soum's head doctor has taken survey of how much medicine the bag doctors were purchasing from the soum pharmacy. He had scored lowest, he explained because he prefers to make his own traditional herbal remedies. An old woman rose and berated the doctor for not using more medicine, complaining the doctor was never around when they called on him. Other bag members rose to the doctors defense and a lively discussion on the merits of traditional versus European medicine ensued. This exchange, however, was a mere primer for the passionate 45-minute debate that followed over the bag's ram herd and whether to bring in other soum's rams to improve their genetic stock. At least a dozen people were on their feet

addressing the assembly and frequently cutting each off, while the more reticent though equally impassioned muttered arguments to their neighbors. A vote was held, but the losing side protested so ardently that Purevdorj resolved to put off the decision to next month. Two more heated discussions followed, over what day the bag citizens should collectively move to their summer camps, and what area to recommend the government preserve as a national park. Thus, not all bags have such lively engaged discussions, bag meeting attendance can often be an important form of involvement in local decision-making.



Figure 4

The survey's key test for local participation, however, is whether a citizen has ever brought an idea or request to a local official. As Figure 3 indicates, the results vary highly by site, and the chart should serve as warning against making broad assumptions about

herder participation nationwide, or even across a single Aimag. Nevertheless, the results are encouraging; nearly 40% of all people surveyed had contacted an elected official. All three bag governors we interviewed reported having herders come talk to them quite frequently and several soum governors we spoke with described that bag's governors' job as bringing herder's ideas to them. Herders who choose bag governor as the most important level of government in their life tended to echo this view, saying that if the bag governor didn't pass along their ideas they would have no way of making their voices heard. While experts in UB bemoan herders' lack of democratic enlightenment, most of the people we talked to seemed

to understand perfectly well that bag governor was there to take their suggestions and not merely espouse the government's ideology and plans.

So what do these herders actually talk to their officials about? Some reported seeking financial assistance to start planting vegetables, pay college tuition, or send a sick relative to Ulaanbaatar for treatment. Several spoke with their soum governor about getting their recently trained relative a job in the social school or hospital, often without success. There is nothing particularly democratic about these first two sorts of inquiries. However, most herders told us they brought ideas or requests that would benefit the whole community such as fixing the irrigation system, improving local pasture management, fighting livestock theft, and improving medical care. An grandfatherly Kazakh planter in Hovd said he suggested to his governor that they create a community fund for emergencies and awards like the one they had during socialism, funded by local citizens' donations. The governor told him it was a good idea and promised to work on it. Making requests by itself, of course, does not make a society inherently democratic. Nevertheless, when you have popularly-elected officials whose job it is to incorporate their constituent's suggestions, activity of the citizens' part is essential to making sure government represents the will of the people.

Parties, Issues, and Candidates

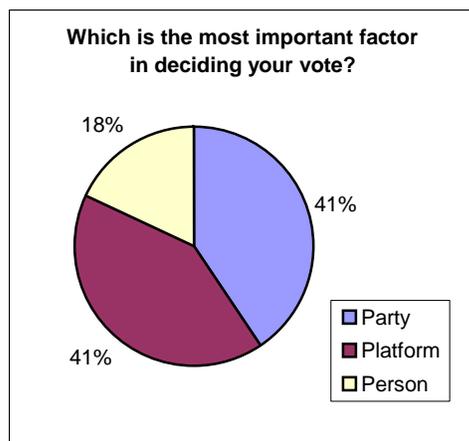


Figure 5

When asked what was the most important factor in determining their vote, herders of all ages and genders tended to name platform or party (see Figure 4). As before, the results vary widely from one soum to the next, but party and platform always won out over candidate. One exception

was in Galuut, Bayanhongor on our pilot survey, where subject were asked specifically about voting for bag and soum officials. There, candidate won out with 46%. Party of the reason may be that people actually know bag candidates personally, whereas it is extremely unlikely for them to know the people running for national office. One man told us he normally bases his MP vote on platform but if the candidate was from his area he would be sure to vote for him because he would be more likely to bring home benefits. When asked what they were looking for in a platform, most respondents said they simply look through the different platforms and decided which would best improve the life of a herder. I witness this first-hand in Bayanhongor when my host parents stayed up late one night reading the platforms in the Democratic Party newspaper and discussing politics with their neighbors.

Trying to find out what issues actually matter was more challenging than we had

expect, in part because “issues” is a difficult word to translate.

Getting informed through yaks

The cost of a small solar panel and television set is roughly equal to the cost of selling four cattle (the families we met that herded cows or yaks often owned at least a couple dozen). In every community we visited a good portion of families had radio and TV.

Asking what hopes people had for the future usually resulted in “I don’t know,” which may in part be cultural issue. These herders for the most part either aren’t used to thinking so far beyond the coming season, or else they were reluctant to state expectations that might not come true. Asking, “What you do if you were governor” tended to produce a productive response if the interviewee disapproved of the current governor. Often, the issues

would just come out over the course of the conversation.

Natural resource management proved to be the most pressing issue wherever we went. In Hovsgol we frequently heard people saying they wanted to preserve natural areas for their timber, fish, medicinal plants, or natural beauty. They also mentioned wanting to attract more tourists to Soyo bag, which is not surprising considering their proximity to Lake

Hovsgol, Mongolia's top tourist destination. For the families we met throughout Hovd Aimag, loss of a pasture and water sources was invariably a chief concern. In Chamdman soum, the world's greatest khuumii singer told us about the dramatic increase in herd size that has resulted in herders migrating to their bag without permission. He maintained that government is needed to manage that pasture since people can't do it on their own but that in his soum it does so according to herders' opinions. If he were soum governor, he said, he'd fight to alleviate poverty but in part by putting the soums unemployed young people to work planting trees (CITE). Tree-planting, which is may strike many Americans as a symbolic gesture for children to do on earth day or means of city beautification is a matter of life and death in Mongolia. Herders in Dorgon soum spoke of an oasis that had been almost completely enveloped by sand dunes once local families used all the brush for firewood. A couple of them are now engaged in planting trees there in the hopes of holding back the desert (CITE). Almost everyone we asked had heard about global climate change on radio and TV and found plenty of evidence for it in their own lives. Herders, it seems, are often far more informed about the forces affecting their lives than UB experts give them credit for. The widespread availability of satellite dishes, solar panels, and televisions had significantly improved rural Mongolians ability to learn about the issues that matter to them.

Wherever we went, party loyalty tended to be rooted in past accomplishments and ideas. "Party here is a vision," my advisor Undarya explained. DP supporters, she added, "vote for the idea of democracy, not necessarily the Democratic Party." I found Undarya's statement to be remarkably accurate. When asked "why do you support the democratic party," almost every herder responded with the word "freedom." Before 1991 people couldn't talk to the Khural, but now people can meet our leaders, a Soyo father named Dorj explained. Before they couldn't go to foreign countries, but now they have their our own

animals and work whenever they wish. Dorj, wasn't sure though, twhat the Democratic party had accomplished since then. For him and many other herders we interviewed, voting for the democratic party was more a way of ensuring the freedoms they had gained continued, rather than a means of promoting a particular agenda or ideology. The government might be corrupt and ineffective, but voting for the MPRP would be like saying the supported a return to authoritarianism. Our life has changed since the democratic revolution," my host grandmother in Bayanhongor, a DP party activist told me, two days after attending a Soum DP meeting. She listed privitation of animals and increased pensions as improvements, as well as freedom of religion which she said was particularly important to people her age. She would practice Buddhism in secret during socialist times, fingering prayer beats while herding the goats and sheep. Batsura, a traditional healer and local party activist in Soyo echoed these views, mentioning how he practiced traditional medicine secretly during socialism, sneaking out in the middle of the night to treat patients. In recent years, Batsura has voluntarily distributed the DP newspaper to his patients and told them they should vote for his party.

Party activism exists among less-educated herders as well. My host grandmother was one of 15 bag members to attending the 100 person Galuut soum DP meeting, where they selected a new soum party leader from among six nominees. A herding couple in Erdenburen Hovd distribute DP fliers together before a candidate visits. Most people we asked said a candidate had come and spoken to them, and many said that he or she asked herders' opinions in addition to articulating their own platform.

Support for capitalism, democracy, and the democratic party are all closely intertwined in the places we visited. Several herders we interviewed said they supported AH

because they were hardworking. Thus, support for distribute In addition to practicing traditional medicine was pretty typical of the DP party activists I met.

“All of the parties say so many nice things, but none of them every come true,” my translator Buyant explained, on behalf of a young Kazakh family combing goats for cashmere in front of their ger. “That’s why it’s better to look at the person than the platform or party.” While most people selected party or platform as the most important influence on their vote, it is important not to overlook the 20% of respondents who choose person, many of them opinionated and outspoken. Many of these herders and planters spoke of broken promises, though they rarely went into specifics.

Perceptions of Local Government

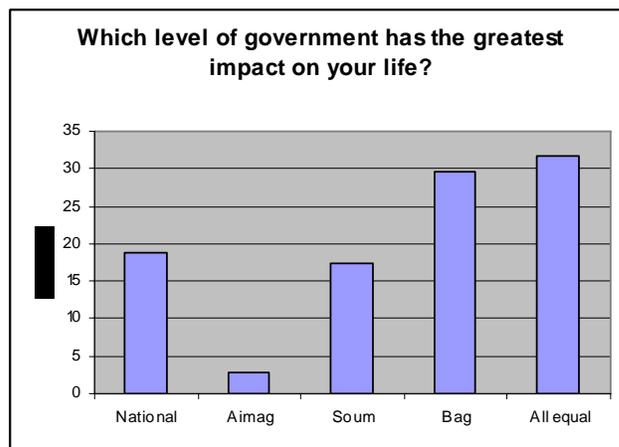


Figure 6

Contrary to the comments about local government I heard in UB, the rural people I met often regarded the bag and soum governors as quite important. A group of card-playing herders in a ger in Erdenburen praised their soum governor for training poor

families in vegetable planting and giving them livestock. An old Kazakh planter in Hovd soum talked about his soum governor giving families solar panels and working with international organizations. Two thirds of survey respondants gave their soum governor neutral or positive ratings, while tending to disparage the national government in interviews, though results of course vary by soum. As Figure 5 indicates, about as many choose soum government as important as they did national. Bag government outstrips them both

considerably however. The bag governor is closer and easier to pass ideas and complaints to, members of a herding cooperative in Dorgon told us. Many others echoes their views when asked why they had ranked that bag governor as most important. If the bag governor doesn't pass along herders ideas, they have no way of getting support from the government, the Erdenburen card players explained. Our responses indicate that herders most commonly view the bag governor's role as an intermediary between herders the herders a higher levels of government, while the soum governor's jobs is to carry out projects for their benefit. Sometimes herders would simply praise their governors for working hard, even if they weren't seeing any specific improvements in their lives.

Few people in our sample thought the Aimag government was important. One older couple in Erdenburen told me that if they got sick and went to the Aimag center for help they would die in the street because they wouldn't be able to afford the bribe. Conversely, a grandmother up the road told us that when her family lost three gers in a fire the Aimag governor personally donated a

replacement. Otherwise, no herders mentioned the Aimag government or governor in all of our interviews. Unlike the national government, which they see on television, and the soum

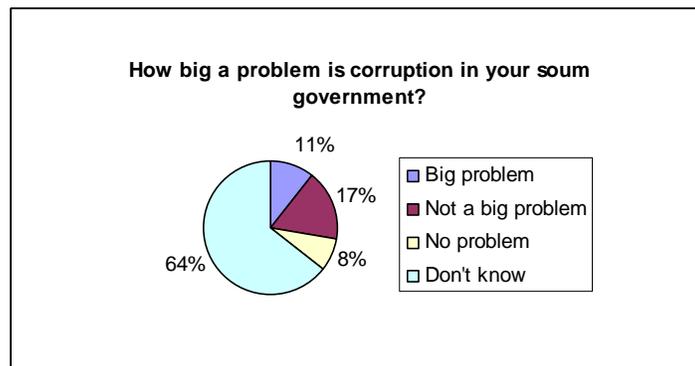


Figure 7

and bag governments, which they can observe with their own eyes, the Aimag government is pretty well removed from herders, especially since Aimag Khural members tend to live far away in the Aimag center. One should bear in mind, of course, that herders are not always aware of where a project originates and whether the services their governors are bringing to

them are part of a broader national program. Often, the person who the herders interact with is the one gets the credit, regardless of whether he had any control of how the money was allocated.

Respondents generally did not perceive corruption as big problem as the soum level, though most felt they didn't know enough to answer (see Figure 6). Nearly all people who talked to us about national government described it as corrupt or referred to Great Khural members fighting amongst themselves and working only in their own interests. Corruption on the soum level, however, cannot be seen to television and there is generally no one to investigate and expose it when it happens. Whereas herders can hear about their governor's accomplishment through the bag meetings and judge their performance (perhaps unfairly) by how often they visit, they have scant means to judging how corrupt he or she is. Also, since local corruption involves smaller amounts of money, it might not ever be viewed as such. One family we stayed with in Erdernburn got into an debate over whether having to give the bank official a bottle of vodka to your loan promptly constituted corruption or not. As we shall see, unseen local corruption is one of the key risks to keep in mind when considering decentralizing the power of the Mongolian government.

Kazakh Contradictions

In his 2003 ISP, Rutherford Hubbard spent several weeks studying Bayan-Olgii politics and found it no more democratic than it had been during socialism. Voting decisions, in part, were tied to the Kazakh kinship system, whereby entire families and even entire bags would support the same candidate. The marked difference between what he saw in Bayan-Olgii and what I found in Hovd are good indicator widely rural political participation can vary, even within a small, close-knit ethnic minority.

Local Officials: The View from In Between

Upon arriving in Hovd soum, an ethnic Kazakh community of 4600 an hour from Hovd Aimag center, we walked into the first office in the government building and were

greeted a pair of casually dressed college graduates. Erbolot and Aibol, who look to be in their 20s, offered up their chairs and stood talking with us for over an hour, pausing only to help an old woman in a del fill out a loan application. Not many people here are literate in Mongolian so we try to help them, they explained. Like many local officials in Mongolia, Erbolot wears the three hats of Soum Khural member, party official, and civil servant simultaneously. Aibol meanwhile is both head of the local MPRP Social Democratic Youth Group and state environmental inspector. When asked why The MPRP dominates the local Khural (15 out of 20 seats), Elbolot states that his opinion MPRP members are the educated people in the soum. The party is really working to develop the soum, he explains, so even young college graduates want to be part of it.

Erbolot and Aibol are notable exceptions to Mongolia's rural braindrain that is particularly pronounced in the predominantly-Kazakh Aimag of Bayan-Olgii, an hour's drive to the west (CITE). Natives of Hovd soum, they returned after college in Ulaanbaatar to be with their relatives and applied for jobs in the local government after completing the civil service exam. Eleven out of 20 khural members are herders in this soum, who the two young men say also got an education and returned to the countryside like they did. When not enforcing and publicizing state environmental regulations, Aibol is looking for ways to get other rural young people involved. The members of his Social Democratic Youth Division rebuild wells, roads, and irrigation ditches, protect nature, organize entertainment, and run a sports camp. His party's projects, he says, are very useful to the local people and motivate them to join. Their party work is entirely voluntary, of course, and even Erbolot, the soum's deputy MPRP chairman, is unpaid.

Erbolot and Aibol's case is an important illustration of how much work happens at the soum level, beyond the scope of what the law strictly mandates. Not only are Erbolot

Figure 8: Erbolot, Aibol and the author



and Aibol themselves are examples of politically-engaged rural people, but their party activities encourage people to get involved in projects from which the community will benefit. By making party membership fun and productive, they are

bringing more rural people into the power structure of the party that dominates their soum and encouraging them to become active in politics. A similar thing is going on at the Aimag level, thanks to the efforts of Altanhoyig, state environmental officer, and Oyurdzan, meteorologist and soum khural member, who allowed us to interview them while supervising a community tree planting. The two of them and their team bring trees to soums whose pastures are most threatened by desertification, where herders eagerly volunteer to help plant them. The project therefore, not only addresses the herders' most urgent economic/environmental problem, but gets them involved in a project to help their community, rather than waiting for their government to do it for them. This sort of active citizenship is crucial to a democracy.

When asked why Hovd is overwhelmingly MPRP-leaning (the party controls 70% of aimag khural), the tree-planters suggested it was in part due to Hovd's plethora of ethnic groups. Gonchigsuren, the Hovd MPRP's second-in-command, echoed this view a week later. Yet when we arrived in Dorgon, a dry rugged soum on the other side of the aimag, the

governor Delgernasan told us that his soum supports the Democratic Party in part because they are ethnically Dorwood. The Dorwood people tend to be very sensitive and suffered a lot under the socialism repression for staying faithful to Buddhism. Buryad BOX As a result, the people of Dorgon greeted the democratic revolution with great enthusiasm. This matches up of course with the herders who vote DP out of their love for the democratic revolution. His constituents, he believes, select their soum khural members based mostly on person rather than party, looking for people who initiative, a trait said to be characteristic of the Dorwood. Nevertheless, the it is no coincidence that the DP controls 15 out of the 20 seats. The khural includes three herders, as well as three local businessmen, three teachers, two accountants, three vets, and several state officials. As the Ganbat predicted, civil servants dominate the khural, but nevertheless there are herders too.

An electronics engineer by training, Delgernasan was back visiting his old soum when the khural decided to make him governor. He was chosen, he says, in anticipation of the large hydroelectric plant being constructed in his soum to power Mongolia's western aimags. The khural members were elected by citizens, he explains, and a result he feels like he was chosen by the people. The aimag governor of course has right to reject the soum

khural's nominee, but that never happens he claims. The Soum khural meets only twice a



Figure 9: Nasenjerhal, Soum Khural Leader; Delgernasan, Governor; Buyant, translator; the author year, confirming what most of the UB expert stated, but their 7-member presidium meets

often. In their first meeting, they vote to approve the governor's platform. Delgernasan reports that he has already accomplished 70% of the goals set out in his platform, including acquiring new ambulances, extending the secondary school dormitory, and refurbishing the soum's cultural center. He is also working to improve the effectiveness of state officials through workshops on how to provide services to people in a polite and accessible manner.

In addition to getting herders' suggestion and complaints through bag meetings, Delgernasan visits every single herders family in his soum annually. Interviews with herders confirm this assertion, though one family complains that Delgernasan merely asks them how their preparations for the winter are coming and doesn't provide any useful information about the government's policies and new laws. Still, his effort to stay in touch with local

opinion are commendable especially, in a soum of over 600 families, more than half of them in the country spread over a wide area. Most other governors we spoke to also seemed to be making a similar effort, either through personal visits or requiring the bag governor to stop by every month or season. This does not directly translate into a higher approval rating however, since judging from some of our interviews the bag governor's frequently visits can make the soum governor look inactive by comparison. One pair of herders in Erdenburen told us he sees no point in the visits since the bag and soum governors are powerless to do act on his suggestions. Herders, it appears don't always see or benefit from the projects being carried out in the soum center, even if they are told of them at the bag meetings.

Hatgal BOX

Bag governors are sometime active too, often working in partnership with their soum governor. Gereltad, governor of Balj bag in Dadal, Hentii is working with his soum governor to provide newly married couples with wood salvaged from a forest fire to build a house with. Together they have organized courses in vegetable planting, livestock quality, and greenhouses for their citizens. At the Balj bag meeting we also spoke to man whose job it is to organized the bag wolf hunts to protect their livestock. Unegt Bag governor in Galuut, Bayanhongor says she settles disputes between herders over the bag's diminishing pasture. Soyo bag governor Purevdorj makes sure all his bag members move at the same time to avoid such conflicts, and issues fines to people who move early and give their animals a head start on the new pastures. In addition, Puredorj is fighting a proposed gold mine in his bag after the citizens at the bag meeting resovled to stop it.

Many local officials we interviewed spoke of working directly with international donor agencies. Dargerhan, the Hovd soum governor, is digging wells with funding from the Asian Development Bank, and receiving Dzud relief from the Swiss Development

Agency, books from the embassy of Kazakhstan, livestock restocking from the UNDP, English teachers from the Peace Corp, and a mobile library from the German Development Agency. Rather than going through the aimag governor, Dargerhan travels to UB annually to meet with these organizations in person, and stays in contact with them throughout the year by phone. Four hours to the west, Nasanjeral is working with MercyCorp, UNICEF, and the WWF on training workshops in craftmaking, agriculture, public service, and local business. In Soyo, Purevdorj and his soum governor are working with an NGO called Altai Soeni to renovate the bag center and sponsor and inter-bag competition. In Bayanhongor, Bag Governor Altantuya says her most important work is writing project proposals to NGOs. Two years ago an Italian NGO called AIFO sponsored a \$1000 project in her bag to provide training for parents of sick or disabled children. Before leaving, she asked us if we knew of any NGOs that could help. If only we could have put her in touch with those other governors, this woman's initiative could do wonders for her bag. Internet access, when it finally reaches the soum and bag centers in the next 10-20 years, could prove a real catalyst for development, allowing governors to exchange strategies and information.

Alternate Methods of Empowerment

Herders' Groups, NGOs, and Self-Reliance

Beyond the sphere of local government, Mongolia's rural citizens are finding creative ways to take control of their lives. One of the best examples is in Dorgon soum where six families came together last winter to form herders' cooperative. The group's name, "Hamtin Hoo" means roughly "the power of people working together. Everyone is trying to learn new things and volunteer, Erdenhishig, a young mother told us. Erdenhishig, for example, recently completed a class on making camel wool and will soon be teaching others as well.

She says she took the class because as a cooperative member she feels a responsibility to improve her family's income. Some cooperative members herd the families' livestock, while others plant vegetables or collect camel dung for sale (in place of firewood). In addition to dividing the labor, each family is asked to contribute 100,000 tugrik (\$90) a year to the cooperative to building up the community's funds. When asked how her cooperative is different from a *negdel*, the huge forced collectives of the socialist era, Erdenhishig replied that everything is under their own control rather than being ordered around by the state. She said she feels like she has more control over her life now, especially since she is a camel wool making trainer and has more responsibilities.

Although cooperatives such as Hamtin Hoo do not necessarily see themselves as political entities, they do engage in the sort of collective decision-making previously reserved for *bag* and *soum* governments. Two kilometers down the road, members of the Yolun Ondrag cooperative are speaking of attending tree-planting workshops sponsored by the WWF. The cooperative used its pooled resources to buy 300 buckthorn bushes from another *soum* in order to hold back the desert. Here we have a cooperative that is literally taking on the same role as *aimag* government, planting trees and preserving the pasture, yet the decisions are all made by the local citizens themselves. Furthermore, the sense of empowerment gained in these cooperatives can easily be carried over into local government. At a recent *bag* meeting, herders voted to each sell one animal and put the money toward a *bag* foundation which would provide money for buying more trees as well as communal yarn and felt-making equipment to improve their incomes. These herders too told us they felt like they had more control over their lives. It is worth noting that at for the first time in our three weeks of fieldwork, we saw women dominating an interview in a room of eight people, half of them men.

Another way for herders to work together is by forming NGOs. In October 2001, herders in eight soums in Orhangay, Dornogobi, and Omnogobi came together to form to save the river on which their livelihoods depended. The 437 kilometer Ongi River has dried up four years earlier when gold mines diverted the water for their operations, forcing herders to move hundreds of miles to find water for their livestock. The Ongi River Movement, which today boasts 1600 members, has succeed in stopping 35 of the 37 companies that were mining the river and temporarily blocked to others for one month, during which time the river again began to flow. Although they have since partnered with international organzintions including the Konrad Adeneur Foundation, the members of the Ongi River Movement organized the movement themselves, without outside assistance. Unlike most Mongolian NGOs, the Ongi River Movement is grassroots run, with chapters in every soum that meet once a month and annual general meeting to set the agenda for the coming year. Their organzation's three paid staffers in UB are bringing in other NGOs to conduct civic education workshops for their members, teaching them about controlling the local budget and citizen participation. Like the aforementioned herders' cooperatives, they also are teaching their members new skill such as shoe-making to broaden their sources of income and lesson their dependence on the parched landscape. Although the organization is well known in UB, it is unclear how many herders know that groups like this exist. In total, at least 11 grassroots environmental movements exist across 14 aimags today, and the have come toether to form a coalition. Such lateral intergration is essential for strengthening Mognolian civil society, but it is also crucial that these organizations reach out to contact herders in other areas who don't feel they know how to lead and organized their community.

Conclusion

Mongolia's rural citizens are far more diverse in their opinions and levels of involvement than the way political experts tend to portray them. Rather than sitting back and waiting for the government to help them, many herders and planters are taking on an active role as citizens, participating vocally in bag meetings, talking to their local officials, and getting involved in civil society. They may not see these activities as political per se, but even a discussion about rams can be considered politics if it affects a entire community's economic future. Herders and planters base their voting decisions mostly on party and platform, rather than individual candidates, though the emphasis varies widely by soum. Many citizens, however, are fed up with parties and false promises. They value the personal freedom that democracy and capitalism have brought them, but they are often disappointed with the choices of parties it has offered. Local governments, often neglected by political scientists in Ulaanbaatar, can play an active role in development. Rather than looking to their superiors for funding, many governors are going straight to foreign donors to support their proposals. Herders' views on their local governments are mixed: some view them as powerless or inept, while others really value the work their governors have undertaken. Projects in the soum centers don't always reach the countryside, however, not all governors as active as the ones highlighted in this paper. Nevertheless, herders by and large see their local government as playing an important role in their lives, at least as important and the Great Khural, and we are inclined to agree.

As political scientist D. Gambat suggested, efforts to deepen Mongolia's democracy should focus on its citizens. To that, we would like to conclude this paper with three recommendations for how active citizenship and responsive local government can be encouraged. First, foreign donor agencies and organizations should focus their support on local governments and rural CSOs. Since a large percentage of the Mongolian state budgt

comes from foreign aid, donors could use that aid more effectively if they gave it directly to local governors with a good track record of effective project management. The money could also go to support herders groups, individuals, and rural NGOs in the form of small grants and micro-loans. Secondly, Mongolian democracy promotion NGOs should invest more in rural empowerment. Such training should go beyond the basics of voter-education and constitutional rights to include how to write grant proposals, form herder's groups, and seek financial support outside their soum. These work shops could be most effective if offered in bag centers or even herders gers as well as soum centers. They should also help publicize the existence of herders groups and local environmental movements, put these group in contact with one another. Lastly, the Mongolian government and NGOs should invest in improving communication infrastructure throughout the country. Just as television and radio has helped improve herders' political awareness, providing soum and even bag centers with telephone and internet access could do wonder to improve rural citizens access to information. Not only would this make it easier for bag and soum governors to share information on projects and funding, but it give rural citizens, particularly youth, the opportunity to learn from each other how to empower themselves. Mongolia abounds with great examples of rural active citizens. The time has come for the rest of Mongolia to hear their stories.

Glossary

aimag – province. Mongolia has 21 aimags, including the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Aimags are generally divided into or more soums.

aimag center – a large town or small city with populations ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands. Most have consistent electricity, a hospital, a large outdoor market, direct access to Ulaanbaatar by van, and often some form of industry. Aimag Centers are increasingly gaining internet access, and most have small airports with regular flights to Ulaanbaatar.

bag – the smallest administrative unit, consisting of roughly 600 citizens, less than half of them of voting age.

bag center – Ranges from a one-room log cabin used in community gatherings to a cluster of buildings with several dozen residents.

Bayanhongor – A semi-arid, mildly rugged province in central Mongolia.

Civil Will Party – A small opposition party, headed by Dr. S. Oyun, the only female party leader and a well known figure in Mongolian politics. Their platform is centered around combating corruption and guaranteeing a minimum standard of living.

CSO – Civil Society Organization – includes trade unions, herders groups, NGOs, and political parties

del – a traditional Mongolian robe

dzud – a harsh Mongolian winter, usually following a dry spring and summer, that involves heavy snow cover and massive loss of livestock due to starvation

ger – Round white tent, known in former Soviet republics as a “yurt.” The vast majority of Mongolia’s rural inhabitants live in gers, which are easily dismantled and transported and often made of local materials. They are commonly found in cities as well.

Democratic Party (DP) – Mongolia’s largest opposition party, which has undergone numerous splits, mergers, and slight changes in name over the past 17 years. It was sometimes referred to as the Democratic Union during the 1990s.

Great Khural – National Parliament

Hentii – A partially-forested, partially-open province in Northeastern Mongolia, home to the likely birthplace of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan.

Hovd – A dry, partially mountainous province in southwest Mongolia with an Aimag Center and Soum Center by the same name. Known for its variety of ethnic groups.

Hovsgol – Mongolia's northernmost province, largely steppe, lake, and forest. Famous for a lake by the same name.

khural – parliament or meeting

Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) – After ruling Mongolia for 70 years under socialism, this party has been attempting to reinvent itself as pro-market and pro-democracy, while maintaining part of socialism's social safety net. The currently control the Great Khural and the Presidency.

MP – Member of Parliament (i.e. the Great Khural)

multi-mandate district – an electoral district with several at-large seats where voters select multiple candidates for parliament.

proportional representation – a system of government in which there are no electoral districts and citizens vote for parties rather than candidates. Parties are then allocated seats in the parliament according to the percentage of the vote they received.

soum – equivalent to a county, parish, or borough. A soum generally has 4 or 5 bags.

soum center – akin to a county seat, usually based around the primary and secondary schools, a clinic, a few businesses, and the local government. Population ranges from hundreds to a few thousand. Some Soum Centers are well-established towns with a steady source of revenue while others empty out almost entirely in the summer months.

Tugrik – the Mongolian currency. 1162 tugrik = \$1 at the time this paper was written

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