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Mongolia in the 2016–17 Electoral Cycle

The Blessings of Patronage

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the full cycle of political power transitions and the dynamics of party competition during the 2016 parliamentary and 2017 presidential elections in Mongolia. It argues that the existence of multiple interlinked patronage networks and factionalism explains the persistence of the electoral democracy in Mongolia. The article focuses on the internal politics of the Democratic Party.

KEYWORDS: democracy, elections, party politics, patronage, clientelism, Mongolia

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT ON THE NIGHT of June 30, 2016. The speaker of the Mongolian parliament, Zandankhuu Enkhbold, stood behind the podium in the brightly lit lobby of the Youth Hotel, which had served as the headquarters for the Democratic Party's (DP's) election campaign. Surrounded by a crowd of journalists, an ashen-faced, visibly broken Enkhbold announced his party's acceptance of the results: "The Mongolian people have made their choice." Down the road, the opposition Mongolian People's Party (MPP) celebrated victory: they had won 65 of the parliament's 76 seats, leaving the Democrats—the ruling party—with only nine. One other seat went the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), and one to an independent.

Within days the DP relinquished its hold on power. The MPP's leader, Miyegombo Enkhbold (no relation to Z. Enkhbold) became the new speaker, while his party colleagues scrambled to take over the cabinet. The only thing that stood in the way of the MPP's complete political control was the fact that the president, Tsakhia Elbegdorj, had been affiliated with the

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DP. But he had only a year left in office. The Democrats, defeated and demoralized, seemed incapable of making a comeback. But a year later, they did. In the acrimoniously fought race in June–July 2017, the DP nominee, Khaltmaa “Genko” Battulga, defeated the MPP supremo, M. Enkhbold, and the DP regained some of the ground it had lost to the MPP a year earlier.

The DP’s 2016 defeat at the polls, followed by the MPP’s unexpected reversal in 2017, are generally in line with Mongolia’s political developments over the last quarter of a century. Indeed, since Mongolia adopted its present constitution, in 1992, the country has successfully held seven parliamentary and seven presidential elections. Several of these entailed a transfer of power between two major parties. All but one (the parliamentary election of 2008) were peaceful, including the last two elections. Democracy appears to be an unalienable and unchallenged element of the country’s political reality.

Yet Mongolia would appear ill-suited for democratic governance. The landlocked country is surrounded by Russia and China, neither of which shows much of a penchant for democratic politics. Scholars of democratization have described Mongolia as an exceptional case.¹ This sentiment has been echoed by policymakers such as former US Secretary of State John Kerry, who called Mongolia, poetically, an “oasis of democracy.”² Mongolia is not an easy fit for any of the existing models of democratization. Its economic development is heavily tilted toward resource exploitation, with all the consequences of the “resource curse.”³ It is one of the poorest countries of the former Soviet bloc, with high income inequality. It does not border on democratic countries, limiting prospects for a democratic “spillover.”⁴ Furthermore, Mongolia is not tied into a Western-led security system such as

1. Steven M. Fish, “The Inner Asian Anomaly: Mongolia’s Democratization in Comparative Perspective,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34:3 (2001): 323–38; Renske Doorenspleet and Petr Kopecký, “Against the Odds: Deviant Cases of Democratization,” *Democratization* 15:4 (2008): 697–713; Michael Seeberg, “Mapping Deviant Democracy,” *Democratization* 21:4 (2014): 634–54.

2. Remarks by John Kerry in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, June 5, 2016.

3. Seymour Martin Lipset, “Social Prerequisites of Democracy Revisited,” *American Sociological Review* (1959): 69–105; Charles Boix and Susan C. Stokes, “Endogenous Democratization,” *World Politics* 55:4 (2003): 517–49; Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Thad Dunning, *Crude Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Michael Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* (2001): 325–61.

4. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

NATO. By all expectations, democratic Mongolia should not be there. And yet, there it is: in one considered opinion, a “miracle.”⁵

To be sure, there are explanations. One of the most convincing points to the existence of a strong parliament (the State Ikh Khural), which constrains the powers of the presidency. There is a correlation between robust democracies and a powerful parliament; Mongolia, on this account, is fortunate to have a constitution that empowers the legislature and provides a series of checks and balances that other countries in the region lack. The difficulty with the institutional argument—as presented by Stephen Fish and others—is the assumption that a strong legislature prevents the subversion of the democratic process.⁶

Coming from a different angle, Verena Fritz argues that the success of Mongolia’s democratization has to do with a mixture of structural factors (including Buddhism, nomadism, weak clan structures, and ethnic homogeneity) and conjunctural factors like political-party dominance (rather than charismatic leadership) and dependence on foreign aid.⁷ However, many of these factors are overstated (for instance, nomadism, ethnic homogeneity, and dependence on foreign aid) or even romanticized (as with regard to traditions of statehood or Buddhist practices). Moreover, it is very difficult to actually document how these various factors contribute to the democratic outcome.

Most recently, Fish and Seeberg have contended that “the key to the success of Mongolia’s democracy lies in its powerful civil society.”⁸ However, one could also argue that civil society and its various attributes (for instance, the proliferation of NGOs and the existence of “independent,” i.e. non-state, media) are a corollary, not a prerequisite, of democratic politics.

5. Jorgen Moller, *Post-Communist Regime Change: a Comparative Study* (London: Routledge, 2009), 137.

6. Steven M. Fish, “The Inner Asian Anomaly: Mongolia’s Democratization in Comparative Perspective,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34 (2001): 323–38; M. Steven Fish, “The Dynamics of Democratic Erosion,” in Richard D. Anderson, ed., *Postcommunism and The Theory of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 54–95; Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism 1990,” *Journal of Democracy* 1:1 (Winter 1990): 51–69; Taeko Hiroi and Sawa Omori, “Perils of Parliamentarism?” *Democratization* 16:3 (2009): 485–507.

7. Verena Fritz, “Mongolia: Dependent Democratization,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 4 (2002): 75–100.

8. Steven M. Fish and Michael Seeberg, “The Secret Supports of Mongolian Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 28:1 (2017): 129.

There is thus a need for an alternative explanation. In this article, we argue that the key feature that helps explain the Mongolian “aberration” is the existence of multiple interlinked patronage networks and rife factionalism, which causes dispersal of political power.⁹ These networks exist quite apart from the weak institutional checks and balances, but they serve as real constraints on claims to power by preventing the emergence of a single leader. We take a close look at the dynamics of party competition during the 2016–17 electoral cycle, which included the June 2016 parliamentary elections and the June 2017 presidential elections, to argue that factionalism hurt the political parties but inadvertently helped Mongolia’s democracy. The article focuses mainly on the internal politics of the DP, because its factionalism is much more pronounced than that of the rival MPP.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Mongolia’s DP has a lengthy experience of defeats at the polls. The party’s origins go back to the 1990 Democratic Revolution, and many of its key players began their political careers as youthful revolutionaries, vying for the overthrow of the communist system. In the 1990s various political forces that would later form the DP aligned and realigned in short-lived coalitions. In 1996 the Democratic Union Coalition allowed the Democrats to capture power for the first time in a landslide election that gave them 51 out of 76 parliamentary seats. But the coalition’s rule proved short-lived. Four prime ministers came and went in as many years, amid economic malaise and deepening controversy over privatization of state assets. The 1998 assassination of a prominent Democratic politician, Sanjaasuren Zorig, highlighted the depth of the political instability and set the stage for the Democrats’ complete rout in the next parliamentary elections. In 2000 the MPRP won 72 seats with slightly over 50% of the popular vote.

The Democrats’ answer to this defeat was political consolidation. In 2000, five political parties formed a united Democratic Party. The benefits of presenting a united front against the MPRP helped the Democrat-led Motherland-Democratic coalition win 36 seats in 2004, tying the MPRP. As a result, the two main parties agreed to have a coalition government and

9. This article is based on dozens of informal conversations between the authors and various party insiders from the DP, MPP, and MPRP. Due to sensitivity, identities cannot be disclosed. We strove to independently verify all claims through open sources.

rotate prime ministers every two years. The year 2004 was the beginning of a new phase in Mongolian politics that would last until 2015. For just over a decade the two main parties worked together in coalition governments, giving rise to allegations of political collusion that stifled real democracy.

While the hung parliament formed after the 2004 election ostensibly justified the creation of a grand coalition, this was a less obvious choice in 2008, when the MPRP clawed back some of the lost ground, winning 46 seats. Yet instead of establishing a strong majority government checked by a strong opposition, the MPRP offered six government positions to the DP, in part to alleviate tensions following the post-elections riots on July 1, 2008, when five people were killed and the MPRP headquarters was burned down. It was also important to distribute responsibility, for in the run-up to the 2008 parliamentary elections both the MPRP and the DP made a priori unrealizable promises of cash distribution to the electorate. Finally, the “grand coalition” allowed a measure of cooperation in the passing of a major investment agreement for the copper-gold deposit at Oyu Tolgoi and the tender for the coal deposit at Tavan Tolgoi.

In 2010, halfway through the coalition government, the MPRP reinvented itself as the Mongolian People’s Party, shedding the adjective “revolutionary.” As a consequence, the ideological distance between the two main parties narrowed even more. Combining the Mongolian names for the MPP (*man*) and DP (*an*), clever observers called this new equilibrium *manan*, or “fog.” The implication was that the Mongolian democracy was not a democracy at all but a mere oligarchic consensus to rule and share the spoils. The grand coalition fell apart in January 2012 but was briefly revived in 2014–15, when six MPP members joined the cabinet of DP Prime Minister Chimed Saikhanbileg.

Then, in 2012, the DP regained the majority with 34 seats, a few short of the 39 required for the establishment of a one-party cabinet. One significant development that preceded this victory was the election of a long-time DP leader, Elbegdorj, as Mongolian president. Elbegdorj, who was nominated by the DP, relinquished his party affiliation on assuming the presidency, but this formality in no sense eroded the reality of the DP’s political dominance. Harvard-educated, ostensibly liberal Elbegdorj, whose support for the democratic cause went back to his days as a leader of the 1990 revolution, wasted no time in consolidating his power over the Supreme Court, the Prosecutor General’s Office, and law

enforcement agencies such as the Independent Authority against Corruption (IAAC).

Elbegdorj's decision to appoint Tsevegmid Zorig chief justice of the Supreme Court likely influenced the Supreme Court's 2011 decision to allow a new party, led by former President Nambar Enkhbayar, to adopt the name of the recently discarded Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, the political ancestor of the MPP. The decision was naturally and vehemently opposed by the MPP for the obvious reason that the "new" MPRP would split their vote, which is in fact what happened in 2012 and again in the 2017 elections. By the same token, the IAAC decision to arrest Enkhbayar for corruption two months before the elections may be interpreted as politically motivated, as Enkhbayar himself repeatedly claimed. There is no proof that Elbegdorj had a direct say in the decision of the Supreme Court, or that politics played any role in the IAAC decision. But the timing of these moves suggests a pattern implicating the ruling party.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

There is an intricate relationship between political power and political legitimacy.¹⁰ Given the choice, even the meanest of autocrats seek to legitimize their rule by improving the livelihood of the people. As long as the economy continues to grow, even unelected rulers enjoy a degree of political legitimacy, and those who resort to elections happily embrace the electoral cycle, with its promise of inevitable return to power and a new bout of legitimacy. Problems begin when economic growth fizzles out and stagnation or perhaps recession set in. In immature democracies this is the moment when the power-holders must make a choice: either follow through with the electoral process and lose power or keep power by subverting the electoral process. This is the point when a country can go forward toward a more robust democracy or roll back to some form of authoritarian governance. Mongolia reached this point by 2016–17.

Between 2012 and 2016 the country experienced a dramatic economic slowdown. The fastest-growing economy in the world in 2011 (when its GDP

10. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53:1 (1959): 69–105; Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

expanded by a whopping 17.3%), Mongolia saw its growth rate slip to a mere 1% in 2016.¹¹ Foreign direct investment nosedived, from US\$ 4.4 billion in 2012 to US\$ 800 million in 2014.¹² The government resorted to borrowing on the international bond market. US\$ 3.6 billion was raised this way between 2012 and 2016, including the US\$ 1.5 billion raised from the issue of the Chinggis bond in 2012. Domestic debt doubled in 2012–14, and by 2015 Mongolia's debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 70%, shattering the debt ceiling.¹³ The general economic malaise was accompanied by soaring unemployment (11.6% in the first quarter of 2016).¹⁴

In addition to external factors, for example China's economic slowdown and the decline in the world prices of copper and coal (Mongolia's key export commodities), many wounds were self-inflicted. The mining boom encouraged construction, leading to wasteful spending on infrastructure and energy projects. Megaprojects, like the massive industrial center at Sainshand and a multimillion-dollar railroad link between the coal mine of Tavan Tolgoi and the Chinese border, were just the tip of the iceberg. In the space of a few years, the construction frenzy turned the capital city of Ulaanbaatar into a glittering metropolis of empty office and apartment blocks, and covered the entire country with a fine network of paved roads leading from nowhere to nowhere. This record of waste, mismanagement of public funds, and mounting debt contributed to the declining popularity of the DP, making it likely that it would suffer at the polls. But few could have foreseen the extent of its loss.

POLITICAL FACTIONALISM IN THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Before looking at how the DP sought to reverse its political fortunes, it is useful to explore the party's internal dynamics. The DP suffers from intense

11. Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook 2016*, <<http://www.adb.org/countries/mongolia/economy>>, accessed September 15, 2016; World Bank, "Country Overview," <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?end=2015&locations=MN&start=1982&view=chart>> accessed September 1, 2016.

12. World Bank, "Foreign Direct Investment," <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=MN>>, accessed August 16, 2016.

13. William Bikales, "Mongolia Faces a Debt Crisis," *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2016, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/mongolia-faces-a-debt-crisis-1470331031>>, accessed August 10, 2016.

14. National Statistics Office of Mongolia, <http://www.en.nso.mn/stat_main>, accessed October 5, 2016. The official unemployment rates do not reflect underemployment and hidden unemployment.

factionalism. Its leaders are often more in competition among themselves than with the rival MPP. The DP was established on the basis of an alliance between disparate opposition parties and influential business and political entrepreneurs, who are united by little more than their common opposition to the MPP.¹⁵ The DP lacks an ideology. It is thus a classic example of what Kitschelt would call a clientelistic (rather than programmatic) party.¹⁶ This factionalism destabilized and weakened the ruling party but, interestingly, actually contributed to the peaceful transfer of power.

One of the party's most powerful factions is the Polar Star faction. It unites former members of the Mongolian Social Democratic Party and has included figures like Norov Altankhuyag (prime minister in 2012–14), Chimed Saikhanbileg (prime minister in 2014–16), and the prominent politician Sangajav Bayartsogt. In recent years the Polar Star faction played a key role in forming coalition governments with the MPRP/MPP (in 2004 and 2008). During the DP's years as a ruling party, the Polar Star faction controlled the cabinet and the DP's National Consultative Committee. Observers attribute the fall of Altankhuyag's government in 2014 to a split within the faction between Altankhuyag and his detractors Saikhanbileg and Bayartsogt. Such backstabbing highlights the intensity of rivalries at the top of Mongolia's political Olympus, which play out mostly outside the framework of party-to-party competition.

Another player in the DP is the Mongolian Democratic Union (MDU) faction. Dating back to the democratic movement of the late 1980s, at one time or another it has included all 13 "founding fathers" of the democratic revolution, including, most importantly, former President Elbegdorj (2009–17). But more recently the MDU faction was monopolized by the athlete-turned-businessman-turned-politician "Genko" Battulga. His ample financial means permitted Battulga to underwrite the faction's needs. The MDU faction went from having three members in Altankhuyag's cabinet to five members in the second cabinet of Saikhanbileg. Despite being weakened by a conflict between Elbegdorj and Battulga, the MDU faction became a base from which Battulga later captured power in the DP, getting himself nominated to run for president.

15. On December 6, 2000, the Democratic Party, the Mongolian National Progressive Party, and the Mongolian Social Democratic Party merged under the name of the Democratic Party.

16. Herbert Kitschelt, "Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies," *Party Politics* 1:4 (1995): 447–72.

Another important group in the DP was the Shonkhor (Falcon) faction. The falcon-in-chief was the former speaker (2012–16) Z. Enkhbold, who established the faction in 2012. The faction made its presence felt at the level of the DP's National Consultative Committee, where Enkhbold was able to influence the allocation of places on the party's electoral list. The last DP cabinet (2014–16) included three members of the Shonkhor faction. The faction provided a rallying point for DP members who were opposed to the more powerful factions and wanted to increase their own influence in the party. One example of the faction's growing clout was the appointment of Enkhbold as party chairman. This was a result of an agreement with the Polar Star faction's Altankhuyag, who, in return, got to appoint "his" prime minister (Saikhanbileg), as insurance against investigation of Altankhuyag by the powerful IAAC, which was backed by President Elbegdorj of the rival MDU faction.¹⁷

There are deep links between political and business interests. Business visibly entered Mongolian politics in 1996 (in the DP's case) and 2000 (in the MPP, in its earlier reincarnation as the MPRP). In the 1996 parliamentary campaign the Democrats sought out entrepreneurs both to fund their campaign activities and to attract qualified cadres to fill party offices. The party also promoted businessmen who had already joined its ranks. Lu. Bold, a former banker and a current MP, is a good example. But by 2000 entrepreneurs were increasingly joining both major political parties, the DP and the MPRP. The fact that the MPRP was a successor to the Communist Party, retained the adjective "revolutionary" in its name, and adhered to a comparatively left-leaning ideology did not at all prevent a certain degree of "commercialization" of the party: campaign politics, after all, requires money.

Political parties in Mongolia are seen as a gateway for entrepreneurs to tap the state resources through tenders and loans, to disadvantage their competitors, to oppose higher taxes, and to seek protection from criminal investigation. The availability of cash (in the form of the Chinggis and Samurai bonds) generated unprecedented business involvement in politics. Unsurprisingly, business people rarely invest in the smaller political parties: they back one of the two bigger players, DP or MPP. Ideologies matter very little in this process; business bids on the likely winners. Thus, the businessmen Batsukh Narankhuu and Dashjamts Arvin and the wrestler Agvaansamdan Sukhbat

17. Authors' discussion with DP insiders.

are said to have switched their party affiliations on the basis of the parties' electoral chances. In the few cases when business people are unable to secure positions in either the DP or MPP, they start political parties of their own (e.g., Bazarsad Jargalsaikhan, the founder and long-time leader of the Republican Party; Lamjav Gundalai, the chair of the Love the Motherland Party). Even more curious is the practice of business families' acquiring footing with both the DP and the MPP. For instance, in the 2012–16 parliament, MPs Batsukh Saranchimeg and Batsukh Narankhuu (sister and brother) represented the MPP and the DP, respectively. The Mongolian sumo champion and multimillionaire Asashoryu is affiliated with the DP, whereas his brother, MP Dolgorsuren Sumiyabazar, is with the MPP. The Mongolian business conglomerate MCS supports both parties. This interpenetration of politics and business further blurred the lines between the two main Mongolian parties, contributing to the *manan* narrative.

ELECTORAL MANIPULATION

Among the most significant events in the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary elections was the passage of a new election law, which had been a bone of contention since 1990. The difficulty was in deciding on the nature of the electoral system (majoritarian or proportional), and the numbers of parliamentary seats for the capital city versus the countryside (historically, the capital was underrepresented in the number of seats per capita, and the fact that the MPP performs much better than the DP in the countryside politicized every effort to redress the imbalance). At last, in December 2011, the parliament introduced a mixed system: 28 candidates would be selected from the party lists, and the other 48 through the majoritarian system.¹⁸

Further changes were introduced on December 25, 2015, when the parliament adopted a new election law.¹⁹ Like the 2011 legislation, this latest law provided for a mixed system, favoring smaller parties.²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Mongolian citizens D. Banzragch and Ts. Namsrai (until then unknown to

18. Law on Mongolian State Ikh Khural Election, 2011, <<http://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/351?lawid=351>>, accessed October 2, 2016.

19. Law on Elections, <<http://legalinfo.mn/law/details/11558?lawid=11558>>, accessed January 4, 2017.

20. Address by Speaker Z. Enkhbold, April 4, 2016, <<http://www.parliament.mn/news/open/categories/30/pages/28763>>, accessed February 20, 2017.

the public) petitioned the Constitutional Court, alleging that the mixed electoral system violated the constitution, which calls for “direct” elections of the parliament.²¹ The petitioners argued that the proportional element of the 2015 law—election through “party lists”—did not correspond to the notion of “direct elections.” On April 22, 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled that the proportional element contradicted the constitution. Former President and now Court Justice Punsalmaa Ochirbat indicated that the decision was not politically motivated. One of the petitioners, Banzragch, denied that he had been under pressure or even in contact with any political force (he admitted, though, to being an MPP member). Still, there was plenty of speculation, in particular among the smaller parties, that the Constitutional Court’s decision was far from accidental. The decision blew a huge hole in the edifice of the new law on elections, when the election itself was less than two months away.

The legality of the law on elections was not the only matter involving the Constitutional Court in the months before the parliamentary elections. There was also the spat between the court’s Chief Justice Jugnee Amarsanaa and the Speaker Z. Enkhbold.²² The power struggle ended with the parliament voting in late February 2016 to dismiss Amarsanaa, leaving the Constitutional Court without a chief justice. There were irregularities in the method of Amarsanaa’s dismissal, but the decision stood. Considering that the Amarsanaa case overlapped with the Constitutional Court’s discussion of the election law, some observers speculated that the two issues were connected. We were unable to establish any explicit connection. Amarsanaa denied that the matter of his dismissal had anything to do with the new law. The real significance of Amarsanaa’s dismissal lies in the fact that it demonstrated just how easily power-holders could subvert an important state institution, the Constitutional Court, in the pre-election period.

The Constitutional Court was not the only important state institution that was usefully sidelined in the run-up to the elections. A similar fate befell the powerful IAAC, whose head, Navaansuren Ganbold, was dismissed by the

21. S. Shiilegtumur, “D. Banzragch: bi khen negnii zakhialgaar Tsetsed khandaagui” [D. Banzragch: I did not turn to the Constitutional Court on anyone’s order], *Ardyn Erkh*, April 18, 2016, <<http://eagle.mn/r/8924>>, accessed October 22, 2017.

22. G. Uyanga, “J. Amarsanaa: Tsets, UIKH-yg Khyanadag . . .” [J. Amarsanaa: the Constitutional Court controls the Parliament . . .], *Olloo.mn*, February 1, 2016, <<http://www.olloo.mn/n/25429.html>>, accessed September 27, 2016.

parliament on April 14, without a replacement being appointed. Unlike Amarsanaa, Ganbold asked to be relieved of his duties. Asked by MPs, he repeatedly denied that he had been pressured to quit and disclaimed any role in the police operation that targeted the powerful DP politician “Genko” Battulga, whose headquarters had been raided on April 11, 2016, in connection with an ongoing anticorruption investigation.²³ That operation prompted a protest by a small crowd of Battulga’s supporters and exposed the deep fissures inside the DP. State law enforcement agencies in Mongolia have a record of investigating prominent politicians. The fact that these politicians hailed from the ruling (rather than opposition) party would on the surface speak to the proper operation of checks and balances, but, given that the DP is riven by factions, it instead suggests how easily state institutions can and are used and misused in factional struggle. The bottom line is that, like Amarsanaa’s case, the Ganbold case was an instance of effective decapitation of a powerful agency weeks before elections, which hints at political meddling and points to the weakness of key institutions.

On May 5, 2016, the parliament voted to amend the law on elections which it had passed only months earlier. Following the Constitutional Court’s recommendation, the proportional element of the election was rendered null, with all 76 seats to be contested in single-seat constituencies. The change led to a chaotic situation, because the parliament now had to distribute the 28 seats that had been freed up by cancellation of the proportional element. The initial task of drawing up constituencies fell to the General Election Commission (GEC), which duly produced a list and passed it to the parliament on May 11. When on the following day the Standing Committee on State Organization, then chaired by the Democratic MP Agipar Bakei, discussed the GEC draft, it quickly identified questionable provisions in the distribution of constituencies. For instance, Khentii *aimag* (province)—with its 46,589 registered voters—was assigned three constituencies, while the neighboring *aimag*, Dornod (with 49,276 registered voters), was given only two. As a result, Khentii ended up with one of lowest average numbers of voters per constituency (16,539, 15,482, and 14,586 for the three constituencies, whereas the national average was 25,169).²⁴

23. Minutes of the State Ikh Khural Session, April 14, 2016, <<http://www.parliament.mn/files/download/157717>>, accessed January 26, 2017.

24. OSCE/ODIHR, “Interim Report on Mongolian Elections,” June 17, 2016, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/mongolia/247446>>, accessed January 10, 2017.

These problems did not go unnoticed by MPs from the opposition, who questioned GEC Chairman Choinzon Sodnomtseren about the distribution, but their objections were brushed off.²⁵ The media speculated that the “real” reason for the GEC’s failure to apply a more equitable distribution was the imperative of creating a constituency for the head of the DP faction in parliament, Batkhoo Garamgaibaatar, who would otherwise face tough competition from the MPP, which had a strong base in Khentii.²⁶ Garamgaibaatar himself justified the distribution, perhaps only half-jokingly, by referring to the fact that Khentii *aimag* was the birthplace of Chinggis Khaan, and so warranted a higher number of constituencies.

The State Committee on State Organization took the GEC draft and, rather than addressing its inequities, made it much worse by introducing arbitrary changes. Thanks to the relative transparency of the Mongolian parliamentary debates, these changes can be easily documented. All of them entailed further rearrangement of constituencies and redrawing of constituency boundaries. Among these was a proposal to move one constituency from Sukhbaatar *aimag* into Uvs *aimag*, leading to deep population discrepancies. Some constituencies were rearranged in ways that defied geography, including one in Uvs, which was divided up into four non-contiguous parts in the east, the west, and the south of the *aimag*. Something similar happened in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, where Baganuur, a district on the eastern outskirts of the city, was sliced up, and each slice connected to a different constituency in the center of Ulaanbaatar.

The reasons for the carving up of constituencies were never openly spelled out, but it’s easy enough to speculate who benefited in each case. So, for instance, in the case of Uvs *aimag*—perhaps the most blatant example—the changes were probably meant to benefit the prominent DP politician N. Altankhuyag, who, having previously been elected from the party list, now had to compete against the MPP in a single-mandate constituency. Similar educated guesses may be made in every other case of changed constituency

25. Minutes of the Standing Committee on the State Organization, May 5, 2016, <<http://www.parliament.mn/sgh/sc/categories/174/pages/29400>>; Minutes of the Parliamentary Session, May 12, 2016, <<http://www.parliament.mn/sgh/p-session/categories/42/pages/29591>>, both accessed August 9, 2016.

26. S. Bujin, “B. Garamgaibaatar: Bi Khentiid mandat nemsэн, tegeed yaakh yum” [B. Garamgaibaatar: I added a mandate in Khentii, so what?], Eagle.mn, May 12, 2016, <<http://eagle.mn/r/10631>>, accessed October 22, 2017.

borders. Each was approved by the committee's vote, and then the general session of the parliament. The MPP consistently voted against this, and was equally consistently outvoted.

Gerrymandering is a common problem, even in much more stable democratic polities than Mongolia. Indeed, the fact that people like Garamgai-baatar and Altankhuyag failed to get elected *despite* blatant gerrymandering would actually support the notion of the resilience of the Mongolian democracy. Still, this gerrymandering represented a real effort to maximize the chances of a political party that had a demonstrable legitimacy deficit. The ease with which the redrawing happened points to institutional weaknesses at multiple levels: the GEC draft was already biased enough, but then more biases were introduced before this draft was passed in the face of parliamentary opposition and without public consultation. There were no checks and balances to prevent it, which shows that the electoral process in Mongolia can easily be subverted by a sufficiently determined political force. The fact that the DP suffered a rout in spite of these manipulations does not mean that there were serious institutional obstacles to such action, only that it was not sufficiently determined or, indeed, united, as a political force.

The strangest part of the 2016 parliamentary elections was the 11th-hour cancellation of the proportional element of the mixed system, which had been in place since 2012. On April 25, days after the Constitutional Court made the controversial decision, the DP's faction in the parliament approved of the changes.²⁷ Although at the time it seemed like the DP was united in this decision, there was in reality a serious debate inside the party, ending in acrimony. At the meeting of the DP parliamentary faction, MP Arvin and former prime minister Altankhuyag argued forcefully that the change would play into the MPP's hands. The MPP, Arvin argued, had always wanted small majoritarian districts, simply because their local party work was on a much better footing than the DP's. Altankhuyag hinted at possible collusion between the Constitutional Court and the MPP. There was a shouting match between Altankhuyag, who opposed the court's decision, and the Democratic mayor of Ulaanbaatar, Erdene Bat-Uul, who supported it. Bat-Uul argued that the DP stood to win from a purely majoritarian system, because in the

27. L. Enkhdelger, "AN: Tssetiin dugneltiig khuleej avakh n' zuitei" [DP: It is correct to accept the Constitutional Court's decision], *Eagle News*, April 25, 2016, <<http://eagle.mn/r/9496>>, accessed October 22, 2017.

elections it was not parties that mattered—each already had a “hard” following that would vote for them no matter what—but the individual leaders of the party. “I am the party leadership,” Bat-Uul replied to Altankhuyag’s protests, telling him repeatedly to “be quiet.”²⁸ When at the end of the meeting a vote was taken, 20 voted for the change and 14 against, while Altankhuyag and MP Radnaasumberel Gonchigdorj just walked out, slamming the door.²⁹ The split in the DP ranks was also evident at the parliamentary session on May 4, 2016, when Democratic MPs Garamgaibaatar and Gonchigdorj criticized the Constitutional Court’s decision, and, in the latter’s case, argued that it was a result of political manipulation, involving the MPP.³⁰ These objections notwithstanding, the parliament passed amendments to the law on elections in a bipartisan vote, setting the stage for the redrawing of border constituencies.

The decision to scrap the proportional part of the law on elections deeply affected smaller parties, which were weakly represented outside the capital city. Thus, the new provisions effectively forced these parties to compete against the big names from the DP and the MPP in Ulaanbaatar while leaving the countryside to the major parties. Representatives of these smaller parties vocally complained about the changes, arguing that they would undermine the equality of political opportunity and reduce the diversity of Mongolia’s political landscape. It was in this connection, too, that the notion of *man-an*—the “fog”—was given a new lease on life. The two main parties, the MPP and the DP, so the argument went, were aware of their disastrous standing in the public opinion polls, and so conspired to rig the system. Using the Constitutional Court as a proxy, they created conditions for keeping themselves in power. Such allegations are hard to prove or disprove.

The aforesaid leads to a number of conclusions. First, it is clearly not the case that Mongolia enjoys stable institutions. The DP’s manipulation of the electoral law, and the blatant gerrymandering, point in the opposite direction. The ruling party did everything in its power (short of outright falsification of the election results) to place itself in an advantageous position.

28. Mongolian Democratic Union, “Bat-Uul Facebook Tape Leak,” <<https://www.facebook.com/MongolianDemocraticUnion/videos/vb.203812716414598/976288882500307/>>, accessed September 15, 2016.

29. Authors’ discussion with a DP insider.

30. Minutes of the State Ikh Khural Session, May 4, 2016, <<http://www.parliament.mn/files/download/158446>>, accessed August 28, 2016.

Second, the fact that it then was defeated on election day does not indicate that the game was fair, only that the DP strategists made a bad miscalculation. Third, even as they tried to gain advantage, the Democrats remained remarkably divided, with each faction aligning and realigning in ways that reduced the opportunity for concerted subversion of the electoral process. In a sense, what was bad for the party turned out to be a blessing for Mongolia's democracy. A party more interested in fighting factional battles than maintaining its hold on power, the DP proved to be much less of a menace than its detractors believed.

THE ENKHBAYAR FACTOR

Before discussing Mongolia's political developments since the parliamentary elections, let us take an in-depth look at the third force in Mongolian politics, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party. The "new" MPRP (to distinguish it from the MPRP of old, which is now the MPP) is led by former President and MPP leader Enkhbayar, one of the most important political personalities in Mongolia since the mid-1990s. At different times Enkhbayar has served as chairman of the old MPRP, prime minister, speaker of the parliament, and, ultimately Mongolia's president, before losing to DP's Elbegdorj in the 2009 presidential election. Enkhbayar was later arrested on charges of corruption and spent time in prison before being amnestied. When in 2010 the old MPRP decided to shed the adjective "revolutionary" from its name, becoming the MPP, Enkhbayar took up the discarded name and founded a new party, the new MPRP, which, like the MPP, traced its genealogy back to socialist Mongolia's ruling Communist Party.

Of course, by 2010 neither the MPP nor the new MPRP adhered to anything remotely approaching communist ideology, though of the two, Enkhbayar's MPRP projected a more leftist image. As the economic situation in Mongolia deteriorated in 2015–16, opinion polls began to show serious gains in the MPRP's standing. The Sant Maral barometer, for instance, listed a 6.9% favorable rating for the party, not too far off the DP's 13.1% and, more relevantly, the MPP's 14.3%.³¹ Meanwhile, Enkhbayar was consistently rated one of the country's most popular politicians. The Social Policy Development

31. Politbarometer No. 15 (49), March 2016, *Sant Maral Foundation*, <[http://www.santmaral.mn/sites/default/files/SMPBE16.Mar%20\(updated\).pdf](http://www.santmaral.mn/sites/default/files/SMPBE16.Mar%20(updated).pdf)>, accessed October 22, 2017.

Research Institute (SPDRI) poll found that 12% favored him as their eventual candidate for president (compared to 4% for the MPP Chair M. Enkhbold and a meager 2% for the DP Chair Z. Enkhbold (not related to M. Enkhbold)).³² Given such statistics, it is not surprising that Enkhbayar thought that the two parties had conspired to keep him and his supporters out of power.³³

That said, Enkhbayar himself was playing an intricate political game. In late April 2016—just days before the Constitutional Court’s decision—he held talks with the MPP on the possibility of forming an MPP/MPRP coalition to contest in the elections. Needless to say, such an outcome would have been fatal for the DP. On the other hand, if the MPRP were to run on its own, it would have split the MPP’s vote, a highly desirable outcome from the perspective of the ruling party. Enkhbayar knew his worth and negotiated relentlessly. By April 18 an agreement was reached between the two parties that the MPRP would nominate 25 of the 76 candidates, and the MPP, the remaining 51.³⁴ They also agreed that the two parties would rotate the positions of speaker and prime minister. On April 19, Enkhbayar and the MPP’s M. Enkhbold held negotiations late into the night, but these ultimately failed, because, according to Enkhbold, the former president was making excessive demands. According to some MPP insiders, Enkhbayar never wanted to be in a coalition as a junior partner. What he supposedly wanted was to make himself more valuable vis-à-vis the DP and extract one key concession: that he himself would be allowed to stand in the elections. Enkhbayar’s amnesty did not erase his criminal record, so, by the terms of the existing criminal code, he was barred from standing, in spite of having been released. Additional action from the DP-controlled parliament was needed. This came in the form of a draft bill that was prepared just as the MPP and the MPRP engaged in negotiations. The draft bill, which was only passed by the Standing Committee, would have allowed Enkhbayar to run.³⁵ In the end, it is quite possible that Enkhbayar, playing for high stakes, was simply outplayed by the DP. He never was allowed to run in the elections,

32. Social Policy Development Research Institute opinion poll, March 2016 (unpublished; obtained by the authors from the International Republican Institute).

33. Authors’ discussion with an MPRP insider.

34. L. Odonchimeg, “Yalbal UIKh-yn darga, Erunkhii saidad MAN, MAKhN-aas solibij ner devshuulne” [If they win, the MPP and the MPRP will, in their turn, appoint the head of the parliament and the prime minister], ITOIM, April 18, 2016, <<http://itoim.mn/index.php/site/news/4339>>, accessed October 22, 2017.

35. “On the Measures to Implement the Law,” draft resolution of the Ikh State Khural (undated).

despite staging a three-day hunger strike next to the General Election Commission offices.

One unanticipated effect of the failure of the MPP and the MPRP to forge a coalition was the remarkable defection of senior MPRP politicians, including established figures like Chultem Ulaan, Dendev Terbishdagva, and the banker Ochirbat Chuluunbat, to the MPP. (Something similar happened to the Civil Will/Green Party, some of whose members defected to the DP.) Such defection suggests, first, that ideological differences along Mongolia's political spectrum are rarely so deep as to outweigh considerations of power. Whether prominent politicians like Ulaan would have been able to get elected on the MPRP ticket is an open question. The fact is that only one MPRP candidate made it—Oktyabri Baasankhuu—and that mainly by a fortuitous alignment of circumstances. None of the other smaller parties had their representatives elected. Second, this means that if the purpose of the last-minute change to the majoritarian system was to deliver a fatal blow to the smaller parties, then it certainly succeeded. But this requires the assumption that the changes were politically motivated.

Finally, it is not unreasonable to argue that the MPRP saga was another example of political factionalism. While it is true that the MPRP was a party, not a faction, it was formed as a split-off from the MPP; at the crucial moment, its key leaders defected to the MPP, and its chairman, Enkhbayar, engaged in discussions with both of the main parties on issues that had nothing to do with policy differences but that aimed at maximizing his own political influence. This all suggests that the MPRP is not so much a party as a political faction, complete with its own patronage network. The Enkhbayar factor played an even more significant role in the presidential election.

THE 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The DP's rout in the June 2016 parliamentary elections prompted soul-searching and restructuring in the party. The "lesson" drawn from the defeat was that the DP needed to become more open and transparent. Financial flows were to be reviewed to ensure that the "oligarchs" did not get to dictate the party's policies. Factions were to be rooted out. Prominent DP personalities Bat-Uul, Bat-Erdene Batbayar (a.k.a. Baabar), and Davaadorj Ganbold argued in a passionate open letter that the party's problem was that it was

being run like a “mafia” or, indeed, a “feudal” clan.³⁶ The responsibility for the DP’s defeat, they argued, lay on the shoulders of the “faction leaders.” This was an ironic admission from people who had themselves played factional politics and, in Bat-Uul’s case specifically, forced the fateful decision to change the election law, thus contributing to the DP’s dramatic defeat. If the purpose of the open letter was to recapture leadership in the DP, then it did not really work: these self-proclaimed founding fathers of the DP were being gradually pushed out to the margins.

The struggle for leadership in the DP unfolded along two parallel tracks. First, there was the race to capture the meager spoils of the parliamentary elections, the post of parliament deputy chair, and the position of leader of the party caucus (the DP won just enough seats to form a caucus). The former went to Yadamsuren Sanjmyatav, of Altankhuyag’s Polar Star faction, and the latter to “Genko” Battulga’s close associate Sodnomzundui Erdene, who boasts ties to both the MDU and Shonkhor factions. So much, then, for the death of factions. Second, on January 29, 2017, the DP conducted an internal election to replace the party chairman. Z. Enkhbold, falling on his sword, stepped aside. The race, which included prominent personalities such as former Prime Minister N. Altankhuyag and younger politicians like Jalbasuren Batzandan, was won by Erdene. The vote followed the party’s move to create an electronic register of its members. The idea here was evidently to democratize the party and facilitate public participation, but it also opened the DP to allegations of manipulation. As there is no external oversight of the “electronic” register, these allegations continue to plague the party.

If Erdene’s election meant anything, it was that the Shonkhor and MDU factions retained their considerable political influence, in spite of the setback of the 2016 parliamentary election and the (almost as dramatic) failure to turn the tide in the October 2016 local elections. And in spite of Z. Enkhbold’s assurances that the influence of the “holders of offshore accounts” and the “oligarchs” on the DP had been “eradicated” in the reform, money continued to play an important role in party politics.³⁷ One of the candidates for the

36. “E. Bat-Uul, Baabar, Da. Ganbold nar AN-yn удирдлагыг бухелд нн залуу уедег шилжүүлэгчиг уриалав” [E. Bat-Uul, Baabar, D. Ganbold asked to transfer DP authority completely to young generation], Sonin.mn, July 7, 2016, <<http://sonin.mn/news/politics-economy/65000>>, accessed August 27, 2017.

37. Z. Enkhbold’s speech at the 7th Party Congress, February 12, 2017, <<http://www.demparty.mn/news.php?id=415>>, accessed August 27, 2017.

party chairmanship, Batzandan, claimed at the time that the cost of nomination was 250 million tugrug (US\$ 100,000).³⁸ The party leadership contest played out amid allegations of vote-buying. Even if these are hard to prove, the party's subsequent adoption of a "price list" for political positions—advertised as an example of openness—in effect legitimized an entrenched practice. For instance, the position of a *soum* (county) party head was priced at 200,000 tugrug (US\$ 80), while Ulaanbaatar's party head was required to contribute 90 million tugrug (US\$ 37,000) to party coffers.³⁹

Meanwhile, in May, the DP held a primary to nominate its presidential candidate. The outcome was completely unexpected to most observers. The leader of the MDU faction, "Genko" Battulga, defeated formidable opponents, including N. Altankhuyag (the Polar Star faction), former Justice Minister Damba Dorligjav (who was backed by President Elbegdorj), and the respected but notably factionless Rinchinnyam Amarjargal, another former prime minister. Once again, Battulga's victory was accompanied by allegations of manipulation and vote-buying. What followed was a reluctant endorsement of Battulga's candidacy by some of his rivals, including the disgruntled Altankhuyag. The exceptions were Amarjargal, whose continued neglect of factional politics helped marginalize him, and then-serving President Elbegdorj, who, though originally of the MDU faction, ended up being deeply opposed to Battulga—so much so that the latter openly accused Elbegdorj of subverting the party's interests and conspiring with the rival MPP to keep the Democrats out of politics. This conspiracy theory was widely advertised in the presidential race in May–July 2017.⁴⁰

The 2017 presidential election revealed that, far from being an ailment specific to the DP, factionalism and patronage are deeply rooted across the political spectrum, not excepting the ostensibly more unified MPP. It is true

38. M. Bulgan, "J. Batzandan: AN-yn dargad . . ." [J. Batzandan: To Become the DP Chairman . . .], iToim, December 13, 2016, <<http://itoim.mn/index.php/site/news/7481>>, accessed August 27, 2017.

39. "Ardchilsan Namyn Dotood Songuulyн Tuhai" [About the internal elections of the Democratic Party], Mongolian Democratic Party, March 10, 2017, <<http://www.demparty.mn/news.php?nid=435>>, accessed August 27, 2017.

40. The conspiracy theory was prominently featured in the highly biased documentary, *Children of the Red Vaccine*, that aired in Mongolia shortly before the presidential election. The documentary was produced by Hero Entertainment, a company closely associated with "Genko" Battulga. See *Ulaan Tariany Khuukhduud* (documentary), undated (May 2017), produced by Hero Entertainment, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf-CaiLQxvQ>>, accessed October 22, 2017.

that the MPP did not have the sort of open bickering that characterizes the DP. But there were nevertheless internal power shifts. The MPP-run cabinet set up in the wake of the parliamentary election was headed by Jargaltulga Erdenebat, a protégé of the party chairman, M. Enkhbold, and someone without a political base of his own. The prime minister represented the interests of Enkhbold's powerful "city faction," so named because of Enkhbold's long service as the mayor of Ulaanbaatar. The most obvious reason Enkhbold did not want to become prime minister himself and chose instead to rule via a proxy was the prospect of losing the party chairmanship, and with it, control over his increasingly fractious party.

The man appointed as Prime Minister Erdenebat's deputy was Ukhnaa Khurelsukh, whose support base is the party's youth organization.⁴¹ Khurelsukh, as the representative of the party's "have-nots," aligned himself politically with prominent MPP personality and former speaker Tsend Nyamdorj, who on this occasion settled for serving as M. Enkhbold's deputy. It is not entirely clear why M. Enkhbold decided to seek presidential nomination. But inasmuch as his (potential) election as president would open up vacancies of both the party chair and the parliament speaker, it created opportunities for other MPP have-nots, including Khurelsukh and Nyamdorj. No one was surprised, then, that the MPP selected their party leader as the nominee.

The third force contesting the presidential election was the MPRP, which was eligible to nominate a candidate because it took one seat in the June 2016 elections. The MPP splinter, led by former President and Prime Minister N. Enkhbayar, was never much more than his personal fiefdom. His influence in the party was so considerable, and the party so small (particularly after some of its most prominent personalities defected to the MPP in spring 2016), that the MPRP stands apart from its rivals for its remarkable internal cohesion. There were no contenders for the presidential nomination except for Enkhbayar himself. However, in both the 2016 and the 2017 elections, Enkhbayar's nomination was rejected by the GEC. Unwilling to lose an opportunity to prove his party's viability, Enkhbayar brought in another candidate, one who was not even an MPRP member but whose populist views approximated Enkhbayar's own: Sainkhuu Ganbaatar.

41. Khurelsukh has since become the prime minister (M. Enkhbold, as the loser in the election, lost "his" prime minister).

Ganbaatar, a former trade union leader and MP, was an unexpected nominee—so unexpected that he himself had no idea he'd be running until he was asked by Enkhbayar. The party chair overruled much more prominent candidates, including former Foreign Minister Luvsan Erdenechuluun and the lawyer Sodovsuren Narangerel. Surprised and unsettled by Enkhbayar's choice, the MPRP's sole elected MP, Baasankhuu, reportedly explored the prospect of nominating the marginalized DP heavyweight Amarjargal, but Enkhbayar would have none of it. But the fact that a DP personality was even being considered as a presidential candidate from the supposedly left-leaning MPRP only serves to highlight the obvious irrelevance of ideology to Mongolian politics. Right, left, center—all of that hardly matters. The one thing that does matter is one's patronage network.

This became even clearer during the campaign itself. All three candidates came up with "platforms" (though in Ganbaatar's case, it was just a hastily assembled list of bullet points), but the subsequent campaign featured almost no discussion of economic or foreign policy. Instead, each of the candidates tried to present the other two as deeply corrupt. This worked particularly well for Ganbaatar, who hailed from the margins of Mongolian politics. He successfully rehabilitated the *manan* narrative—the notion that the two main parties were oligarchic structures that conspired to keep themselves in power and to loot the State. As if to emphasize how different his own campaign was from that of his rivals, Ganbaatar pioneered the idea of collecting campaign donations through donation boxes, just a few thousand tugrug at a time. Ganbaatar was certainly right that the two parties were oligarchic structures, but they could never have conspired to do anything because of their bickering and factionalism. But the message won a considerable following, which was largely a reflection of the voters' dissatisfaction with the direction of Mongolian politics. Ganbaatar's standing was only partially undermined by a leaked video that showed him accepting a bribe from a representative of South Korea's Unification Church.

Meanwhile, "Genko" Battulga's campaign message also hijacked the flawed *manan* narrative. It was particularly interesting in his case because, unlike Ganbaatar, he did not hail from the margins: he was himself a prominent DP personality and a faction leader! Moreover, his campaign was endorsed and supported by other prominent politicians, including Z. Enkhbold and Altankhuyag, who had been in power just months prior. One of the influential propaganda films produced by Hero Entertainment, a studio

reportedly linked to Battulga, made the fantastic claim that President Elbegdorj linked up with the MPP and foreign interests to get the MPRP to nominate the populist Ganbaatar, in order to split Battulga's vote. In the Mongolian context, where ideology means so little and personal loyalty so much, these fantastic scenarios were generally well received, as was Battulga's skillful exploitation of the allegation that M. Enkhbold was ethnically half-Chinese.

Fantasies aside, Battulga played one important card that probably contributed significantly to his rival's ultimate defeat. It entailed an audio recording from a meeting, held in September 2014, at which the MPP's M. Enkhbold spoke about the prospects of selling government positions to raise some 60 billion tugrug (US\$ 25,000,000). The audio was first leaked prior to the 2016 parliamentary elections but obviously did not help the struggling DP; but now that the MPP and M. Enkhbold were actually in power, it suddenly acquired greater significance. Ironically, every knowledgeable Mongolian understands that this is exactly how the patronage system works: money is involved at every stage, no matter whether the DP or the MPP runs the government. But M. Enkhbold's considerable appetites, and the hard evidence in the form of an ostensibly authentic audio file, added credence to the DP's allegations and also supported Ganbaatar's narrative. Unexpectedly, M. Enkhbold nearly lost to Ganbaatar in the first round of voting (on June 26) and lost badly to Battulga in the second round, on July 7. After their tremendous defeat at the polls just a year earlier, the Democrats regained a degree of confidence.

CONCLUSION

The 2016–17 electoral cycle was a political roller coaster for Mongolia. The DP, as the ruling party, was badly defeated in the parliamentary elections, only to make an unexpected comeback in the presidential race. This article has explored how and more importantly why it happened, and with what consequences for Mongolia's democracy. Overall, the consequences are rather more positive than negative. Contrary to the fears voiced in many quarters, Mongolia has not retreated to some form of autocracy. It is, for all intents and purposes, the only stable democracy in a highly autocratic neighborhood. The peaceful transfer of power from the DP to the MPP, and then the election of a DP-backed president, thus provide causes for celebration. Peaceful transfers of power tend to strengthen the democratic system.

In many ways, though, the year witnessed considerable political turbulence. It highlighted how easily—given the political will—Mongolia’s institutions can be manipulated. The last-minute changes in the law on elections, the redrawing of constituencies a few weeks before the parliamentary elections, the failure to ensure the GEC’s independence, the decapitation of the Constitutional Court and the IAAC, the use of administrative resources, widespread instances of vote-buying, populist rhetoric: all these give rise to serious concerns. Plus, Mongolia is going through its worst economic downturn in years. And yet, in spite of all these challenges, the system has demonstrated a surprising degree of robustness. The question is why.

This is the question we asked ourselves, after midnight on June 30, 2016, standing among reporters in the tightly packed hall of the DP headquarters, as Z. Enkhbold conceded his party’s defeat. This is the question we asked a year later, when the MPP’s M. Enkhbold was defeated by a Democratic rival—and readily accepted the result. Did these acceptances reflect that Mongolian leaders were committed to the democratic process? This interpretation was championed by the former mayor of Ulaanbaatar, Bat-Uul. The main political parties, Bat-Uul said, are no longer in conflict about democracy: both are committed to elections.⁴² Accepting results—even extremely unfavorable results—means forgoing the option that must be presumed to be available in institutionally weak regimes: to stall, falsify, or resort to force to keep power. But the Mongolian elites are averse to the use of force; the one time it happened—following the July 2008 parliamentary elections—the ruling party’s legitimacy was badly undermined. The shock of 2008 has not yet worn off.

Yet Bat-Uul’s comments obscure a rather more complicated picture. Leaders of both major parties may believe that they are themselves committed to democracy, but they do not necessarily believe this of their opponents. Before their victory in the 2016 elections, M. Enkhbold and other prominent MPP personalities highlighted the importance of democratic values but pressed the point that the DP was undermining them. The narrative was then adopted by the DP, and its nominee Battulga, who was nearly resigned from the start that the election would be rigged, only to win it. The same was true of Enkhbayar, who was himself perceived at one time as Mongolia’s potential “strongman,” and of his nominee, Ganbaatar. Both claimed that the power-holders—first

42. “Bat-Uul Facebook Tape Leak.”

the Democrats, and then the MPP—conspired to steal their victory at the polls through vote-buying or outright manipulation of the electronic voting equipment. At least Enkhbayar and Ganbaatar are consistent in their claims, but the MPP and the DP forgot about their grievances the moment they scored their wins in the parliamentary and the presidential elections, respectively. Nevertheless, the idea that the ruling party—whichever party it may be—is actively seeking to undermine democratic governance is deeply entrenched in the Mongolian opposition.

In this article we have argued that this scenario has failed to materialize, due to rampant factionalism across the Mongolian political spectrum. Overlapping patronage networks run deep, bridging (largely imaginary) ideological divides. Political power is dispersed among factions, and no one has been in a position to achieve political dominance, neither under the DP, nor even under the ostensibly more unified MPP. Patronage and factionalism—and the diffusion of power they produce—continue to nourish the Mongolian “democratic oasis.”

One could argue that patronage and factionalism are nothing unusual and that they do not necessarily result in democracy. They are pervasive in Central Asia, and yet most Central Asian countries are anything but democratic.⁴³ Still, Kyrgyzstan presents an interesting counterpart case, though Kyrgyz politics are even more intractable because of the influence of clan politics and ethnic differences that are not so important in Mongolia. Like Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan is not known for rock-solid institutions, and the provisional survival of the limping Kyrgyz democracy depends on alternative explanations. Our approach presents an alternative to an oligarchic politics model (the centerpiece of the *manan* narrative), because unlike the latter, it allows for moments of complete rout of one or another political force, as happened during the 2016–17 electoral cycle.

A very interesting Mongolian analogy can help explain how these patronage networks work. The term bruited on many occasions is “horse racing” (*mori uralduulakh*). Politicians were seen as horses, and those who bid on them stood to benefit from the outcome of the race. We have tried to show that such “bidding” was a complex process. Family ties, old-boy networks,

43. Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Eric Max McGlinchey, *Paying for Patronage: Regime Change in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Sally Cummings, ed., *Power and Change in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2004).

and other types of relationships were brought into play, and often the bidders had more than one “horse” in the race, not always from the same party. The existence of these multiple overlapping networks constrains the winners and reassures the losers, making it easier to arrange for peaceful transfers of power. The networks also provide a degree of confidence in the system should the Mongolian Constitution be amended (as is now increasingly likely) to strengthen the presidency or (more probably) the parliament. Even when formal checks and balances fail, informal checks and balances should generally prevent the concentration of power in anyone’s hands.

Yet the system is not foolproof. The danger is that over the long term factional strife cannot prevent a determined political player from outplaying the others. Only strong institutions can. In this sense, the recent electoral cycle undermined democratic governance. Indeed, the significant irregularities and rampant corruption recounted above widened the boundaries of the politically acceptable, eroding public trust. The bar was lowered in 2016–17, and the peaceful transfer of power does not raise it back up. So while the 2016–17 electoral cycle was not necessarily a step back for Mongolian democracy, it was not a step forward either. It was a step sideways. Both the DP and the MPP will have to work hard to strengthen Mongolia’s institutions and demonstrate respect not just for the letter but also for the spirit of the law. Only this—and not the mantra about Mongolia’s long-standing commitment to democracy—can safeguard the country against backsliding toward a political model that is more in line with the preferences of its unfortunate neighborhood.