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The Presidential Election: Safeguarding Mongolia's Democratic Future

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The inauguration on June 18, 2009 of Tsakhia Elbegdorj as Mongolia's next president is an important, if not essential, factor in maintaining the country's two-party democracy. By all accounts, the Democratic Party (DP) leader ran a masterful campaign to defeat incumbent Nambaryn Enkhbayar of the former communist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP). The peaceful presidential election outcome is all the more significant in light of the July 2008 violence following the highly charged parliamentary elections when five persons were killed and over 200 were injured as a result of opposition protests against election irregularities. After this violence—the only such incident in Mongolia's independence history—shocked the nation, Enkhbayar and his party quickly conceded victory to the Democratic challenger in a move to avoid popular disruptions.

DECISIVE VICTORY

Elbegdorj's decisive victory over Enkhbayar by a margin of 51.2 to 47.4 percent surprised some observers, but the result showed the increased sophistication of the electorate in voting not only for change from the MPRP-dominated government, but also for a balance in party politics. Furthermore, Elbegdorj made inroads on the MPRP's traditional rural base by garnering 48.2 percent of the *aimag* (provincial) vote against Enkhbayar's bare majority of 50.31 percent. Elbegdorj also showed the DP's urban strength by outpolling Enkhbayar by almost 12.5 percent. The main factors leading to Elbegdorj's victory, it appears, were his steady but implicit campaign against one-party rule and the government's failure to manage investment and other economic issues that would have mitigated the impact of the global recession. Nevertheless, Mongolia can look forward to approximately four percent economic growth this year.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

This election result will not change the composition of the Great Hural (the Mongolian parliament) or the continuation of the MPRP-dominated coalition government, although there is some speculation that elements of the Revolutionary Party blame Prime Minister Sanjiin Bayar for the president's defeat. However, Elbegdorj's accession to the presidency will have three important effects: It will give the Democratic leader a voice in foreign affairs, defense and judicial matters wherein the president has specific constitutional roles. Elbegdorj will also have a "bully pulpit" from which to influence economic and other policy matters. Second, it will spur the government and parliament to conclude a series of long-stalled and heavily debated mining investment agreements. Elbegdorj had pledged to share more of the country's mineral wealth with the public. Finally, it will rebalance Mongolia's relations with Russia in relation to its southern neighbor, China, and "third neighbors," which include the United States, Japan and Europe.

Alphonse F. La Porta, a retired United States Foreign Service Officer who served as chief of mission in Ulaanbaatar from 1997-2000, explains that "Elbegdorj's accession to the presidency will...rebalance Mongolia's relations with Russia in relation to its southern neighbor, China, and 'third neighbors,' which include the United States, Japan and Europe."



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APPEASING MOSCOW?

Some anxiety was raised inside and outside Mongolia regarding the visit of Prime Minister Putin to Ulaanbaatar only ten days before the presidential vote. Putin’s visit was seen by many, including some in the MPRP, to underscore the mounting pressure by Moscow on Bayar’s government. Just before the election, the Mongolian government forced the cancellation of a U.S.-funded Millennium Challenge Compact project to upgrade the Mongolian Railway, one of several legacy condominiums with Russia. It was perceived that Bayar caved in to Russian pressure and cancelled the railway component, which was worth nearly \$190 million. Preferring appeasement rather than keeping the deal, or, better yet, working out a joint U.S.-Russian development scheme for the creaky and inadequate main trunk railway, Bayar appealed to the Obama administration to reprogram the funds into other projects.

With an eye to Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic states, and elsewhere on the former Soviet rim, Washington did not want to provoke a bilateral spat with either Mongolia or Russia over this new heavy-handed exercise of “Putinism.” Instead, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week told visiting Foreign Minister S. Batbold that the administration would consider other projects. No doubt the election of Elbegdorj led the Obama administration to support democracy rather than seek confrontation.

CHINA

China’s role in political maneuvering over natural resources is problematic, but most Mongolians—inside the government or outside of it—resent evident encroachments in terms of informal migration from the south, Beijing’s proposals to take over large coal deposits in the Gobi desert, and pressure to control Mongolian energy resources that would feed the large Chinese import market. Thus, the Mongolians, whether the MPRP or the Democratic opposition, cock a wary eye toward the south and any implied efforts to establish economic hegemony in the northern half of the Gobi desert as China has done in Inner Mongolia. In this setting, some observers see the MPRP “lean” toward Russia to offset Chinese pressure.

AFGHANISTAN

Additionally, it appears that Mongolia is preparing to make a modest troop contribution to the 46-nation coalition in Afghanistan. Mongolian troops performed admirably in Iraq and other peacekeeping missions, and Mongolian trainers also assisted the Afghan forces in recent years to operate Soviet-era military hardware. Thus, Mongolia’s new commitment fits a pattern of alignment with pro-western interests. Though details remain to be worked out, the Obama administration should be pleased with this demonstration of Mongolian common resolve.

HALLMARKS

Elbegdorj’s elevation to the presidency has positive hallmarks: a restoration of balance in governance, wherein the MPRP can no longer be seen as the “natural party of government,” a stimulus to conclude badly need mining and energy investment agreements that are critical to pull the country out of the global recession, and a commitment to remain oriented toward the West and other Asian democracies. Washington has signaled its approval of the presidential election results by agreeing to the Millennium Compact renegotiation. Now the rest is up to Ulaanbaatar to establish a new governing equilibrium.