Mongolian authorities’ response to popular protests - a sign of a democratic crisis?

The recent protests in Mongolia very quickly attracted international attention, provoking lively discussions in the media and among commentators. During the large-scale demonstrations participants called for reform of the land rent system, greater transparency in economics statistics, and stricter measures against corruption, including the punishment of corrupt officials, in particular MPs and government ministers.

On the evening of December 5 the demonstrations “took on the characteristics of a riot” and the government decided to resort to force in an attempt to suppress the protests.

Most readers, unaware of the very similar protests which occurred in Mongolia back in 2008, would find it hard to imagine the country as a place where aggressive crowds would need to be dispersed by force. Nevertheless, this regional “democratic stronghold” is increasingly showing signs of a crisis in the development of its specific model of democracy. And the main sign of the problems is not the major protests themselves, nor the authorities’ actions in suppressing them, but rather the systems and approaches underlying the reactions of the state authorities and key political figures.

Reaction of the State Great Khural (Mongolian Parliament)

Mongolia’s legislature was the main object of the protesters’ complaints. And they had some justification for this - the 76 members of the Khural account for up to 8% of the national GDP. That is, the deputies hold controlling shareholdings in the country’s main businesses. However, the deputies did make some concessions to the demonstrators’ demands - in particular, in the first days of the protests the State Great Khural issued a law tightening up official oversight of the mining industry. The Mongolian legislators also announced that public hearings on the theft of coal reserves would be held in the near future. The two main parliamentary factions also held emergency sittings, during which they called for official investigations into the thefts, and the prosecution of the persons responsible.

As the list of measures taken by the deputies makes clear, they made full use of their powers and treated the situation as one requiring the utmost urgency. However, the measures fail to address the root of the matter, focusing on local government corruption while ignoring wrongdoing at higher levels. Most importantly, no measures to reform the political system to enable specific branches of government to better respond to crises of this type were adopted or announced. Thus, while the state recognized the existence of systemic failings, it made no attempt to remedy these, instead requiring society as a whole to put its house in order. The reaction of the Prime Minister and government

Like the legislature, the executive power has been reluctant to take any steps to reform the political system, instead showing full support for the Khural.

In a recent address, the prime minister, Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene, claimed that the protests are largely a response to the economic difficulties that Mongolia is experiencing as a result of the sanctions against its neighbor, Russia, and the “unstable situation” in Russia. He also blames the low electoral threshold which has led to a large number of small parties being represented in the Khural. He also categorically dismissed the idea that his government might stand down or that parliament might be dissolved. He also insisted that he would not launch any personal initiatives. Specifically, he pointed out that no decision can be made without the approval of the Khural, which he sees as the main representative of public opinion in the country.

However, the main problem is that the protesters are convinced that many of the members of the Khural are personally implicated in the corruption scandal. The prime minister also refused to name any of the civil servants or...
deputies involved in the theft of coal, adding that court proceedings would soon be launched against the persons in question. In order to prevent the use of such criminal schemes in the future, the government has drafted laws requiring extracted mineral resources to be sold via special exchanges, and introducing transparent accounting systems for revenues from the mining industry.

To summarize, it is safe to say that, as long as the Khural insists on blocking any measures to reform the country’s corrupt political system, the prime minister will not take any personal initiatives to address this issue. And it is not just a matter of dealing with loopholes in the constitution - another main problem is that political and business elites consist of the same people, and they all have strong links with the state. When discussing relations between the government and the Khural it is important to bear in mind the close ties that exist between the two bodies. Under Mongolia’s Constitution, politicians may serve as prime minister and as a deputy in the Khural at the same time. The Khural also plays a key role in the formation of the government. As a result, if any given political measure is not in the interests of the Khural, then it will not be in the government’s interests either.

**Reaction of the President**

Mongolia’s president, Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, is also in no position to initiate reforms. “The public have a right to know about cases of corruption. The persons responsible should be named and punished,” was one of the key messages in his speech on December 6. Statements of this kind from the president can be seen as an attempt to pacify the protestors. But they can also be seen as a way of avoiding the issue of reforming the corrupt political system. And there are good reasons for this - any personal initiative of the president will meet with opposition from the Khural and the government. Mongolians are concerned about additional power being concentrated in the hands of the president, a development which they fear could pave the way for a totalitarian political regime. Those who are opposed to radical reform are able to play on these fears.

At the end of the day, the president has no real leverage over the Khural, as any veto by the president could be overturned by a two-thirds vote by the deputies. In fact, with a sufficiently large majority the Khural can even force the president to resign.

**Conclusions**

To sum up, the author can say that Mongolia’s political elite favors a policy of consolidation - it seeks to pacify the angry mass with promises and legal hearings, but is unwilling to take any measures to combat the systemic corruption prevalent in the country. Neither the president, nor the government, nor the Khural have made any serious attempt to assess the nature of the political crisis afflicting the country.

This corruption scandal which reached the headlines in December 2022 has thus laid bare the current state of democracy in Mongolia: the financial and political elite, each lacking any real leverage over the other, have entered into a compromise, which allows them to resolve most conflicts through unofficial channels. The current system of checks and balances, in which none of the organs of state are able to impose their will on the others, serves to perpetuate the situation described above and prevent any change in the relations between the state and big business. The maintenance of the status quo is seen as more important than allowing any party to improve its situation by gaining political leverage over the others.

The Mongolian political elite, which in more “normal” times tends to be driven by internecine party conflict, has shown that it is capable of closing ranks solidarity when faced with mass protests from an angry public. It is very possible that the Mongolian elite will continue to behave in a similar way over the next few years. Consequently, Mongolia’s democratic political institutions will continue to observe the “consensus of the elites” rather than looking after the political and economic needs of the public.

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