

The 2004 parliamentary election in Mongolia: Big surprises and small victories

by **Christian Schafferer**

On 27 June 2004, some one million voters went to the polls in Mongolia to elect 76 members of the Great State Hural, Mongolia's parliament. It was the fourth election held in Mongolia under the 1992 constitution. In the previous election, the former communist MPRP won a landslide, ousting the government of former democracy activists. Under the MPRP, Mongolia's economy performed extraordinary well. Surprisingly, the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) lost its two-thirds majority and half its parliamentarians in the 2004 election. But the Motherland Democracy Coalition (MDC), a coalition of Mongolia's most influential opposition parties, fell short of achieving a majority of its own. After the election, a grand coalition government was formed, paving the way for profound legal, social, and economic reforms.

Introduction

The People's Republic of Mongolia was founded in 1924 and replaced the constitutional monarchy (Siemers, 1995: 691). It had been a satellite of the former USSR. In 1986, President J. Batmönh repeatedly announced the implementation of a 'Mongolian Glasnost,' which appeared to be necessary given the crumbling state of the USSR, Mongolia's most important trading partner at the time. Another reason was the growing dissatisfaction among the people of Mongolia with the government's economic policies. Moreover, the Mongolian communist party conducted surveys on the people's attitude towards members of parliament, which was published in the party organ *Unen* (lit. truth) in 1988. The report said that 62 percent of the interviewees were dissatisfied with the performance of parliament members (Siemers, 1995: 693).

At the same time, Michael Gorbachev made public his intention to withdraw soviet troops from Mongolia. The first troops left the country in 1987, and by 1992 all military installations and personnel had been removed from the country.

In 1989, students and other intellectuals formed several political circles, discussing current social and political problems. These groups did not meet regularly, nor did they have a clear organizational structure (Barkmann, 2005). At the end of the year, the first opposition party was founded, the Mongolian Democratic Union. In early 1990, several other opposition parties, such as the Mongolian Democratic Party (MDP), the Mongolian Green Party (MGP), the Mongolian National Progress Party (MNPP), and the Mongolian Social-Democratic Party (MSDP) were established. The opposition parties organized several large demonstrations with some 40,000 people demanding free elections, referenda on important political issues and the implementation of a market economy. The MPRP leadership finally gave in, allowing political reforms.

The provisional parliament consisted of two-chambers, with 430 members directly elected lower house members, and fifty members indirectly elected members in the upper house. The number of seats allocated to each party in the upper house had to be proportional to the number of seats held by the party in the lower house.

The first free multi-party election was held in July 1990. Even though the opposition won less than twenty percent of seats, the election was a watershed in Mongolia's political development. Competition was fairly tough with more than two thousand candidates from six parties contesting 430 seats (Siemers, 1995: 694). Apart from the fact that the ruling party mobilized the entire state apparatus in support of its candidates, the electoral power of the opposition was also weakened by the disunity within the opposition and the fact that the opposition had difficulties in finding promising candidates in all of the 430 districts. A new electoral system and a more united opposition seemed to be a solution.

In February 1992, Mongolia's new constitution came into force. According to Article 21, the parliament consists of one chamber and has 76 members. Citizens aged 25 or older are eligible to run for office and citizens aged 18 or older may exercise their right to vote. The term of office is four years. Moreover, a new election law was passed. The law stipulated that the 76 members of parliament be elected by plurality vote in 26 electoral districts with a district magnitude ranging from two to four.

The first election under the new law was held in June 1992. The new electoral system seemed promising and the opposition was certain to win more seats this time. Parts of the opposition learned from

their failures in 1990 and formed coalitions. There were two broad coalitions. The first (known as the Democratic Alliance, DA) consisted of the Mongolian Democratic Party, Mongolian Green Party and the Mongolian National Party, and the second comprised the Democratic Party of Mongolian Believers and the Mongolian People's Party (Barkmann, 2005). The opposition camp was, however, still too fragmented as to oust the ruling MPRP, lacked qualified candidates and could not enter strategic alliances. The ruling party nominated one candidate in each of the 76 constituencies, whereas the DA could only nominate 48 hopefuls and the MSDP only 28 candidates. Other opposition parties fielded a total of 141 hopefuls. The applied Block Vote worsened the chances of the opposition, leading to the landslide victory of the MPRP (see [Table 1](#)). The MPRP captured 92.1 percent of the 76 seats at stake with less than 60 percent of the votes cast. The DA gained 4 seats, the MSDP 1 and one independent the remaining seat. The result was widely considered to be not merely unfair but dangerous to the nation-state's political development (Brick, Gastil, and Kimberling, 1992).

In January 1996, parliament finally amended the election law, such that all the 76 members of parliament are now elected by plurality vote in single seat constituencies.

On 30 June 1996, the Democratic Alliance (DA) consisting of the Mongolian National Democratic Party (MNDP) and the Mongolian Social Democratic Party (MSDP) ended the seventy-five year parliamentary majority of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP). The alliance captured 65.8 percent of the 76 seats at stake in the Great State Hural, Mongolia's parliament (see [Table 2](#)). The MPRP lost 45 of the 70 seats the party had obtained in the previous election. The election was a watershed event in Mongolia's short history of democracy. The new government under Premier M. Enkhsaikhan carried out a number of highly unpopular measures that, for instance, led to a drastic rise in energy prices. Moreover, service fees and the prices for other daily necessities rose by about 40 percent. Consequently, the DA lost popular support within a short time. The situation worsened when the new government had to admit that it lacked qualified personnel to replace the MPRP-loyal bureaucrats it had sacked at all levels of administration.

At the end of the 1990s, the democratic camp was highly fragmented. Several new parties were formed. In 2000, the DA suffered a further setback, when members of the MNDP left the party to found the Party of Civil Courage, and former MSDP members launched the Mongolian New Social Democratic Party. In the same year, parliamentary elections were held. The MPRP nominated 76 candidates, that is one in each of the 76 constituencies, and ran a highly focused campaign targeting the younger groups of voters. The opposition, on the other hand, was split into twelve parties and three party coalitions that altogether nominated 560 candidates. Unsurprisingly, the MPRP won a landslide victory in the parliamentary election of 2 July 2000 (see [Table 3](#)). The party captured 72 out of the 76 seats at stake, ousting the government of the DA. After the defeat, five of the most influential opposition parties, being aware that they could only win future elections by being united, decided to merge into the Democratic Party.^[i] Academic and political circles in Mongolia referred to the merger as the second wave of democratization in nation's history (Barkmann, 2005). The opposition was optimistic about a victory in the presidential race the following year. Notwithstanding, then incumbent President Natsagiyn Bagabandi of the MPRP won the election with 57.9 percent of the vote. The DP nominated former parliamentary speaker and MSDP chair Radnaasumberelyin Gonchigdorj, who garnered 36.6 percent. The third candidate in the presidential election of 20 May 2001, Luvсандamba Dashnyam of the Party of Civil Courage, obtained 3.6 percent. With this victory, the MPRP assumed control over all the most powerful political institutions in Mongolia. However, the party was restrained in its exercise of the full range of constitutional powers, winning praise from international organizations, such as Freedom House (2004).

Mongolia's transition to a market economy has been smooth compared with that of other former communist countries. GDP growth, in particular, has remained steady, with the country recovering within a few years from the initial recession during the Transition (Cheng, 2003). Growth increased from 1.1 percent in 2000 to over 5 percent in the election year; and inflation has constantly decreased from 11.6 in 2000 to approximately 5 percent four years later. During its term of office, the MPRP government succeeded in lowering the unemployment rate from 4.7 to about 3.5 percent. Most importantly, the MPRP government succeeded in convincing Russia to write off Mongolia's debt of US\$ 11bn. Despite this economic progress, poverty remains a serious social problem. According to recent estimates by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program, 36 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.^[ii] Unsurprisingly, poverty and economic development were the main issues addressed by the opposition and the ruling party during the election campaign.

Electoral campaign

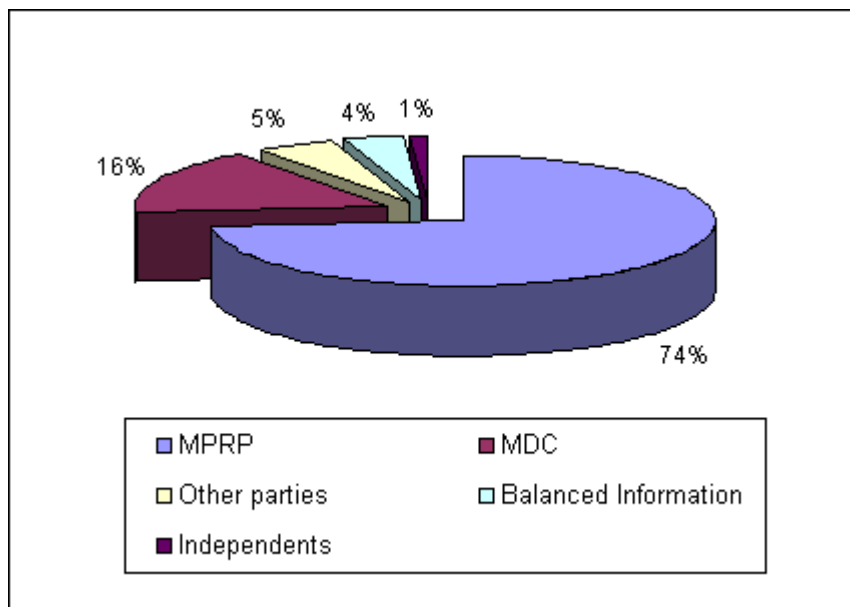
The election law stipulates that the electoral campaign period ends twenty-four hours before polling day and begins with the registration of the candidates. Candidates may register fifteen days after the General Election Commission (GEC) officially announced the election. The registration period lasts for twenty days. According to the election law, the announcement has to be made not less than 65 days before polling day.

On 12 April 2004, the GEC announced that national elections would be held on 27 June. The official election campaign, thus, lasted between 49 and 29 days depending on the day of registration. The election law stipulates that candidates nominated by political parties and party coalitions as well as

independents may register for candidacy. Non-partisan hopefuls have to provide a list of at least 801 signatures from voters in his or her electoral district. Each candidate has to pay a deposit of MNT 10,000 (around US\$ 9) that will be returned to those elected. Half of the deposit is returned to those achieving at least the average vote share of all candidates in the district. In total, 244 candidates registered with the GEC; all but 15 were nominated by the seven political parties taking part in the election. The Party of Civil Courage, the DP and the Motherland-Mongolian Democratic New Socialist Party agreed to form the Motherland-Democracy Coalition (MDC). Apart from the MDC, only the ruling MPRP nominated one candidate in each of the 76 single-seat constituencies. The Republican Party (RP) contested 35 seats, the Mongolian Party of National Unity (MPNU) put up a candidate in 23, while the Mongolian Conservative Unity Party (MCUP), the Mongolian Green Party (MPG), and the Mongolian Liberal Party (MLP) contested just a handful of seats each. The average number of candidates contesting each constituency decreased from nine in 2000 to just three in 2004, significantly increasing the chances of candidates from the main opposition camp. On the average the candidates were 44 years old. Six out of ten hopefuls were in their forties and two out of ten in their fifties. There were a total of 36 women contesting for office.^[iii]

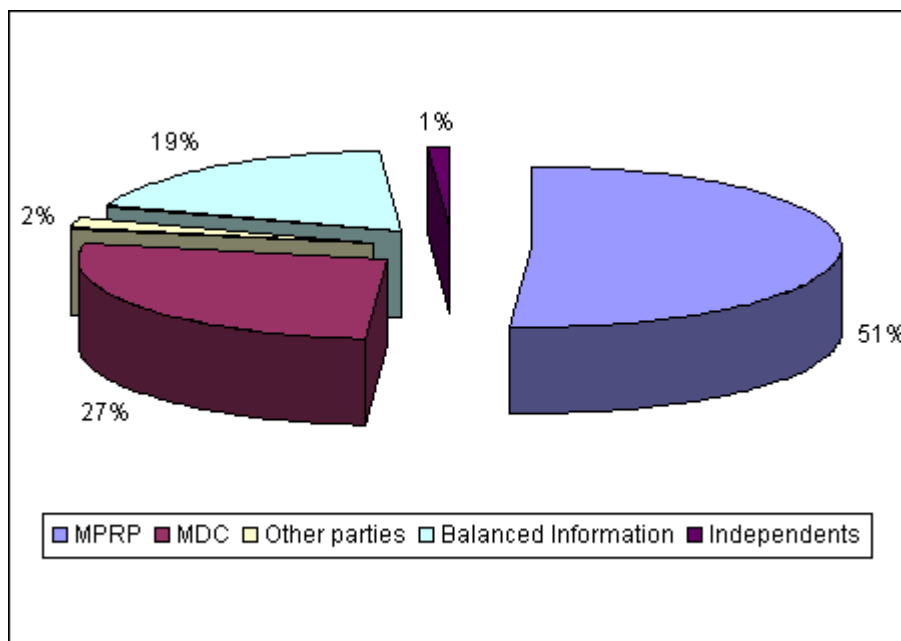
There are minor restrictions on electoral activities. The election law does not specify the maximum amount of money a candidate may spend during the campaign period, but candidates must keep a record of their spending. Posters, flyers and other promotional material may be distributed only at designated public places. The conduct and publication of public opinion polls is illegal during the final week of campaigning. According to the election law, the GEC may arrange for free airtime on public television and radio for airing political advertisements. This time, each party received twice a time frame of 20 minutes per week. Aside from these broadcasts, candidates, political parties, and party coalitions may place advertisements on television and radio at their own expense. There is a large variety of newspapers representing both opposition and government views available to Mongolian voters. About 70 percent of households are equipped with a television set. There is one nationwide television station run by the government, seven independent regional stations, and another local one controlled by the city government of Ulaanbaatar. State-owned radio broadcasts throughout the country and still is a major source of information in the countryside. There is one independent radio station broadcasting almost nationwide and an increasing number of small local FM stations. The government does not censor the Internet, but only about 5.6 percent of the population has access to it. The Internet is of no importance in Mongolian electoral campaigns. Legislation in 1998 bans the censorship of public information and requires the privatization of the media industry. The government has, however, delayed the implementation of this provision. Although the number of independent media outlets has increased significantly over the years, the government indirectly controls these media outlets by filing libel suits and launching tax audits in the wake of critical articles. Journalists, thus, practice self-censorship.^[iv] Moreover, severe financial difficulties make journalists and media outlets susceptible to financial inducements. For instance, it is common practice for media outlets to accept financial assistance from politicians in exchange for news coverage. In this context, it is unsurprising that the broadcast media tended to help the government's cause during the 2004 campaign. Opposition candidates were reportedly less successful in obtaining special media coverage; in particular, there were complaints that state-run television only accepted payments from MPRP candidates.^[v] According to a survey (Mongolian Open Society Foundation, 2004), 74 percent of the observed election television coverage favored MPRP candidates; so did 80 percent of radio broadcasts (see Figure 1). Mongolia's print media was less biased. Two out of ten news stories were impartial, almost every third was supportive of the MDC, but still more than half were in favor of the MPRP (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: TV Appearance of Parties and Balanced Information Mongolian Election 2004



The dominance of the MPRP becomes even more evident by looking at how voters got informed about the election. About 91 percent of the electorate gained information about the election from television programs, more than half from newspapers, 20 percent from radio programs, and 16 percent from other sources, such as flyers, posters, and billboards (Globe International, 2004). In addition, about 80 percent of the total airtime used for ads on radio (220 hours) and television (470 hours), respectively, and 70 percent of the 100 m³ of newspaper ads were claimed by the ruling MPRP. Another issue of concern was the illegal use of state-owned infrastructure and public officials during the electoral campaign period. More than 160 electoral campaign activities were held on state-owned premises. In the majority of these cases, no rent was paid. A total of 1,141 civil servants were actively involved in electoral campaigns working more than 4,761 hours canvassing votes, and 854 state-owned vehicles were counted at election rallies. The MPRP took full advantage of its incumbency.^[vi]

Figure 2: Newspaper Appearances of Parties and Balanced Information Mongolian Election 2004



Source: Mongolian Open Society Foundation, 2004. Report on the 2004 electoral campaign (in Mongolian). Ulan Bator.

A survey conducted by Sant Maral in March 2004 revealed that the 49 percent would vote for candidates of the MPRP, 29 percent for the MDC, and 15 percent for other hopefuls. About 7 percent were undecided. Similar results were obtained by the Mongolian Nationwide Voter Survey, which had been carried out a month later.^[vii] These figures, along with knowing that the governing party would mobilize the entire state apparatus (including its media) to secure a victory, left the opposition camp aware that it needed to be united and to find issues that would attract voters. The latter was difficult, given that Mongolia's economy had undeniably performed well under the MPRP. Nonetheless, economic success had not cured Mongolia's endemic poverty. Influential legislator H. Gundalai thus suggested to place welfare benefits at the core of its campaign strategy. Candidates nominated by the MDC coalition used speeches posters, leaflets, and advertisements to publicize their intention to implement far-reaching social welfare programs, such as increasing child benefits, instituting housing development programs for about 40,000 families, providing subsidies for English courses at schools, and more general improvements in educational ([MDC Platform](#)).

The MPRP began its campaign by condemning the MDC's plans as unfeasible, characterizing them as an election gimmick, but later decided to focus its own campaign on social welfare ([MPRP Platform](#)). The party's candidates promised a one-time subsidy of MNT 500,000 to those families living below poverty line; another 100,000 to every family with a newborn child; and the same amount annually to families with three or more children. In addition, the MPRP pledged to set up a pension fund offering subsidies to elderly people in need, and promised a housing program in the capital, Ulan Bator, that would benefit 10,000 families.

After social welfare, the economy was the most important issue, with extravagant promises from both major parties. The MPRP offered a guaranteed annual growth rate of at least 7 percent, and pledged to increase the productivity of the agricultural industry, to double the exports from the mining industry, and to create 145,000 new jobs. MDC candidates spoke of a guaranteed economic growth rate between 6 and 10 percent, and promised a 5-year tax exemption for shepherds, a radical reform of the tax system, and to encourage foreign companies to invest in Mongolia's agriculture. In foreign policy, both major parties emphasized the need for Mongolia to maintain its participation in UN peacekeeping operations. The MPRP stated its aim to sign a free-trade agreement with the USA, while the MDC promised closed political and economic ties with South Korea.^[viii]

During the election campaign, MPRP's candidates sought to represent themselves as responsible and experienced politicians. The party received support from the General Secretary of the Socialist International, who visited Mongolia in early June and participated in the MPRP's campaigning. The leadership also worked especially hard at shrugging off the party's communist past, and, on several occasions, party representatives emphasized that the MPRP would not be a social democratic party modeled on Tony Blair's 'New' Labour. The MDC, on the other hand, tried to run a united and programmatic campaign, although their candidates were not above personal attacks on their rivals. Despite the efforts of the opposition camp, few people doubted an MPRP victory, especially following a rash of opinion polls in mid-June. The MPRP continued to command around 50 percent of the vote, while the MDC was credited with between 32 percent and 36 percent. No poll suggested that the proportion of undecided voters exceeded 10 percent.^[ix]

Election results

The initial election results astonished the public and international observers. The MDC and MPRP captured 36 seats each, the Republican Party one, and independents three. The MPRP lost half of its seats from the previous election, whereas the coalition parties increased its share from three to 36 seats (see Table 4). The ruling party, however, immediately filed a complaint to the election commission about voting irregularities at two polling stations in electoral district 59 (Ulan Bator) and at one polling station in electoral district 24 (Uvurkhangai). The administrative court ruled the election in both constituencies invalid, thus reducing MDC's seat tally to 34. Legal wrangling was still continuing in December 2004, with neither seat yet filled.

Table 4: Number of candidates, vote share and seat distribution in the Great Hural election 2004^a

Affiliation	Candidates ^b		Votes	%	Seats ^c		%	
MPRP	74	(76)	505,670	48.8	36	(36)	48.6	(47.4)
MDC	74	(76)	464,478	44.9	34	(36)	45.9	(47.4)
MRP	34	(35)	14,404	1.4	1	(1)	1.4	(1.3)
MGP	6	(6)	2,421	0.2	-	-	-	-
MCUP	9	(9)	6,097	0.6	-	-	-	-
MLP	3	(4)	1,329	0.1	-	-	-	-
MPNU	22	(23)	4,895	0.5	-	-	-	-
Independents	13	(15)	36,237	3.5	3	(3)	4.1	(3.9)
Total	235	(244)	1,035,531	100.0	74	(76)	100.0	(100.0)

^a Source: Table compiled by the author based on data provided by the General Election Commission, Mongolia

^b Figures in brackets include candidates contesting in the two disputed constituencies

^c Figures in brackets include the two disputed seats

There were a total of 1,279,516 eligible voters in the remaining 74 constituencies. Voter turnout averaged 82.2 percent, more or less unchanged from 2000. There were 15,234 invalid votes. The MPRP won 49 percent of the vote, down around 8 percentage points on the last election; the parties of the MDC gained 7 percentage points, winning 44 percent of the vote. Despite losing the disputed seats, and therefore dropping slightly below seat parity with the MPRP, the MDC was the real winner of this election. It benefited hugely from the unity it had lacked in previous elections, and which had long been the hallmark of the MPRP and its campaign. The MDC coalition also gained by its welfare plans, which proved popular. Public opinion turned further against the MPRP in reaction to the party's fairly blatant abuse of its advantageous media position during the campaign (Globe International, 2004).

Given the capriciousness of MPs, and continuing uncertainty over the disputed seats, there was little optimism that either the MDC or the MPRP could govern alone, or in a slender majority coalition with the four other MPs, for four years. The major parties therefore decided in September 2004 to form a grand coalition government. The coalition government stipulates that the posts of Speaker and Prime Minister be held for 2 years on rotation, and that cabinet posts be shared equally among the two camps. A 4-year Action Plan was approved by the new cabinet, which promises far-reaching changes in Mongolia's economy, environmental, and political system. The economic measures focus on encouraging small businesses, through deregulation and an expanded micro-credit system. Environmental plans include the creation of a liability system for environmental damage, and the promotion of environmentally friendly fuels. Most notably, at least in this context, the Action Plan includes measures to limit electoral corruption.

National TV and radio stations are to be transformed into independent public media outlets. And civil servants will be prohibited from participating in campaigns, and from misusing budget resources, state property or vehicles for campaign purposes. If the Action Plan is enacted, the next Mongolian election should take place in a freer and fairer political environment.

Notes

[i] Mongolian National Democratic Party (MNDP), Mongolian Religious Democratic Party (MRDP), Mongolian Socialist Democratic Party (MSDP), Mongolian Democratic Renaissance Party (MDRP), and the Mongolian Democratic Party (MDP).

[ii] <http://www.un-mongolia.mn/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=309>

[iii] General Election Commission

[iv] According to Freedom of the Press 2004, a global survey of media independence carried out by Freedom House, Mongolia's media is only partly free.

[v] *Mongolian Medee*, 3 June 2004.

[vi] Data provided by the Voter Education Centre, Ulaanbaatar (June 2004).

[vii] The survey was conducted by Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates, Western Wats Center and the Alternative Center for Contemporary Political Research. MPRP: 50%, MDC: 38 %, other: 2%, undecided: 10%

[viii] The party platforms were published in their entirety in newspapers: MPRP's in *Unen* on 17 May 2004; MDC's in *Mongolian Medee*, issue 100-102.

[ix] These opinion polls were conducted by Sant Maral, Prognose, and Universal.

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