

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Mongolia's Electoral Reform and the State Great Khural (Parliamentary) Elections

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Background of Electoral Reform

Since the transition to a democratic system and market economy in the early 1990s, Mongolia has held its 9th parliamentary election. In a historic first, the election held on June 28 was carried out under the new electoral system. A total of 78 members of parliament (MPs) were elected from 13 majoritarian districts, with an additional 48 MPs elected through proportional representation in a nationwide constituency (General Election Commission of Mongolia 2024). The new parliament consists of 126 seats, in accordance with the amendments to the Constitution introduced in 2023. The election results demonstrated that the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) secured 68 seats, followed by the Democratic Party (DP) with 42 seats, the HUN Party with 8 seats, and both the National Alliance and the Civil Will-Green Party with 4 seats each. It is noteworthy that the MPP won 50 constituency seats and 18 from the party list, thereby ensuring a majority presence in parliament alongside three other parties that surpassed the legal threshold for representation (Oyunchimeg 2024). This distribution of seats underscores the diversity of representation in parliament, reflecting the electorate's support for multiple political entities and ensuring a legislative body that is balanced and representative of the political spectrum.

Over the past 34 years, various electoral systems have been employed, including majoritarian voting systems with single or multiple mandates and mixed systems that combine majoritarian and proportional representation voting elements. Each system has its strengths and weaknesses. However, the criticism from both the public and political parties of the contemporary electoral system has resulted in frequent changes to it. Before the new system was introduced, the Mongolian parliament had maintained 76 seats since 1990.

The number of seats in the parliament was increased by approximately 40 percent, from 76 to 126. Since 1990, Mongolia's population has grown from 2.15 million to 3.5 million, an increase of about 40 percent. As a representative institution of the people, there has been significant debate in recent years regarding the potential expansion of the parliamentary seats. The proposed increase in seats has prompted a considerable number of individuals to seek election. In the first democratic election held after new democratic Constitution in 1992, only 293 individuals representing 10 parties and independents ran for the parliament. The 2024 Election saw the largest number of candidates to date, with the highest number of candidacies. A total of 372 individuals from 22 parties and coalitions contested the election through party lists, while 969 candidates ran in constituencies, resulting in a total of 1,341 candidates, marking a record high.

Assessment of New Electoral System Derived from Election Results

The parliamentary elections in Mongolia marked several significant milestones and challenges in the country's democratic processes. The first notable development is the emergence of smaller parties, which has resulted in the decline of the dominance by the two major parties, namely the MPP and the DP. In addition to the traditional two major parties, a three-party coalition is expected to hold approximately 13 percent of the total seats in the 2024 elections (*iKon* 2024-06-29). The legislation establishes the electoral threshold at 4 percent for a single party, 5 percent for a two-party coalition, and 7 percent for a coalition of three or more parties. As a result, of the 22 parties that participated in the 2024 elections, three parties and two coalitions met the threshold and secured seats in parliament. The right-wing HUN Party, which had only one seat as a result of the 2020 elections, has emerged as a potential third force in Mongolian politics (*Al Jazeera* 2024-06-28), while the long-forgotten Civil Will-Green Party has re-emerged as a significant player.

Second is the increased representation of female MPs in the parliament. The composition of the parliament reflects diversity across age, gender, educational background, profession, and disability status. The election of 32 women as MPs represents a significant milestone in gender representation. This increase can be attributed to the implementation of a new law in 2024 that mandated gender parity on party candidate lists, thereby ensuring an equal distribution of 50% female and 50% male candidates. Consequently, the proportion of female members in parliament rose from 17.1 percent in 2020 to 25.4 percent in 2024. Nevertheless, only eight out of 969 female candidates were elected in multi-member constituencies, highlighting the challenges women encounter under majoritarian voting systems. In contrast, 24 women were elected from the 372 candidates on party lists, resulting in a total of 32 female parliamentarians. Furthermore, for the first time in Mongolian history, a Kazakh woman from the Civil Will-Green Party was elected to parliament, signifying a pivotal advancement in the political representation of ethnic minorities in the country. The increased representation of women in parliament underscores the effectiveness of gender quota-based party lists as the principal instrument for augmenting women's representation in parliament, thereby contributing to Mongolia's progress in global gender parity rankings.

A third factor is the entry of new parliamentarians and the expectation that they will provide reform leadership. A review of the composition of the 126 MPs elected in the 2024 parliamentary elections reveals that a significant majority, 80%, are newcomers to parliamentary service (*Eaglenews* 2024-06-29). This turnover highlights a shift towards new leadership and novel perspectives within Mongolia's political landscape. Meanwhile, the presence of experienced members such as S. Byambatsogt from the Mongolian People's Party provides a balance of continuity and institutional knowledge, which serves to offset the influx of new parliamentarians with a more seasoned expertise. This combination of new and veteran MPs illustrates the dynamic evolution and diversity of representation in Mongolia's parliament.

Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, there are still matters that require improvement. The first issue is the persistently low voter turnout. The voter turnout in Mongolia has exhibited a gradual decline over time, from a peak of 95.6% in 1992 to 69.6% in 2024 (Aliman 2024). While voter turnout consistently exceeded 80% during the initial years of Mongolia's democratic elections, it has declined below this threshold since 2008, reaching a record low of 67.3% in 2012. Despite a

slight recovery in 2016 and 2020, the 2024 turnout indicates a continued downward trend (Statistical Database 2024). Nevertheless, female and younger voters demonstrated greater electoral participation this time. The proportion of female voters who participated in the election was remarkably high at 74.1%, compared to 65.9% of male voters. Among age groups, there was an increase in voter turnout among young adults in their 20s and 30s who were born after the transition to democracy, with approximately 70% participation. Among those in their 30s and 40s, voter turnout exceeded 70%. Overall, while there are challenges in maintaining high overall voter turnout, particularly among older age groups, the active participation of women and young adults in recent elections indicates a promising trajectory for Mongolia's democratic process.

One factor contributing to the decline in voter turnout is the limited participation of Mongolian citizens living abroad in elections. Currently, approximately 200,000 Mongolians of working age are resident in 34 foreign countries, which represents approximately 10% of all registered voters. In the 2024 election, only around 13,000 of them registered to vote, with about 10,000 ultimately casting their ballots. The primary challenge for Mongolians residing abroad is the necessity to cast their votes in person at the Mongolian embassy in the capital city of their host country. This logistical hurdle contributes to lower voter turnout among overseas. Consequently, there has been a growing debate regarding the introduction of online voting from their current places of residence. Such initiatives have the potential to increase voter turnout among expatriates and enhance their engagement in Mongolia's democratic processes. It is of the utmost importance to address the logistical barriers faced by Mongolian citizens living abroad for promoting broader and more inclusive participation in national elections, thereby strengthening Mongolia's democratic governance.

Second issue is the significant discrepancy in constituency size. The disparity in the number of voters per mandate across Mongolia's constituencies has prompted criticism of the current election system. In rural districts, the minimum number of voters per mandate is 19,400, while the maximum is 25,100, averaging around 21,400 voters per mandate. In contrast, despite nearly half of Mongolia's population residing in Ulaanbaatar, the city is divided into 6 constituencies where the number of voters per mandate ranges from 24,700 to 58,500, averaging about 45,500 voters per mandate. This disparity highlights a ratio of nearly 1:2 in the number of voters per mandate between rural areas and the capital city, despite the fact that Ulaanbaatar and rural provinces have approximately equal shares of the population. This discrepancy highlights systemic challenges in ensuring equal representation and the facilitation of effective electoral participation across Mongolia's diverse geographical and demographic landscape. It is imperative that these disparities be rectified to guarantee fairness and equity in the electoral process, thereby reinforcing the democratic institutions of Mongolia and ensuring that the voice of all citizens are adequately represented in parliament.

Third issue is the short campaign period, which presents a disadvantage to newcomers. The 2024 parliamentary election campaign officially commenced on June 10 and concluded 17 days later. Members of parliament exclusively distributed their work reports in printed form to the constituencies, and public opinion polls ranking politicians were not published. The total amount of airtime was restricted to 60 minutes, with each party, coalition, and candidate allotted a maximum of five minutes for coverage. In the 2024 election, there were 13 majority districts, a reduction from the 29 previously in existence. This resulted in significant challenges for newcomers to politics in terms of gaining voter recognition within the limited campaign period. As a result, those with prior political experience, as well as those pursuing careers in journalism and the arts, were able to gain a distinct advantage.

Fourth issue is the continued lack of support for disabled voters to exercise their right to vote. According to the National Human Rights Commission's "Political Participation, Voting, and Electoral Rights Implementation Survey," 14-16% of disabled individuals require assistance to reach polling stations. In its assessment of polling station accessibility, the Commission found that 55 out of 73% were located on the first floor, while 20 out of 26% were on floors two, three, or in basements. The polling booths on these floors frequently had more than three steps, rendering independent access impossible for disabled citizens. The monitoring of 77 polling stations and portable boxes in nine districts of the capital and 19 provinces revealed a number of violations. These included instances of staff lacking communication skills with individuals who are speech-impaired, as well as insufficient information provided to hearing-impaired voters at polling stations.

Implications of New Electoral System to Mongolian Democracy

For over three decades since the transition to democracy, there has been a consistent and peaceful transfer of government power from one incumbent to another. The 2024 9th parliamentary election served to perpetuate this trend. While no significant electoral irregularities were reported, there were instances of the distribution of financial and material incentives with the intention of influencing voter behavior, as well as instances of attempted vote buying.

Western partners of Mongolia, including the United States, expressed satisfaction with the electoral process, emphasizing the country's commitment to democratic principles. The United States extended its congratulations to Mongolia on the successful completion of the electoral process and expressed willingness to collaborate with the newly elected members of the State Great Khural and the incoming government (U.S. Department of State 2024).

Despite the positive outcomes of the electoral process, there are concerns that require attention. The International Election Observation Mission conducted by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the European Parliament reported that while the electoral process was deemed to have been effectively administered, concerns were raised regarding the competitiveness of the electoral contest due to an uneven playing field. While Mongolia's legal framework for democratic elections was deemed adequate, it is recommended that further alignment with international standards on fundamental rights and freedoms be pursued. The extensive media coverage was nevertheless criticized for biases favoring certain ruling party, potentially limiting voters' ability to make informed decisions. On election day, while the polling process was generally conducted in a smooth and transparent manner, with accurate reporting of results, shortcomings in the ballot reconciliation and verification procedures at some polling stations were identified. These shortcomings affected the overall integrity of the process.

Conclusions

In the 35 years since the democratic revolution, Mongolia has held 10 parliamentary elections, 8 presidential elections, and 9 local elections.¹ These elections represent a significant outcome and a major achievement of democracy, confirming the peaceful transfer of power to the opposition party through the electoral process as a norm.

¹ The parliament, formed in 1990 with the first free and multi-party elections, passed the first democratic constitution of 1992.

The 2024 parliamentary elections reflect both progress and challenges in the country's democratic development. They underscore the necessity for sustained reforms to reinforce electoral integrity, inclusivity, and representative governance. Following the institutionalization of democracy in Mongolia through the 1992 Constitution, voter turnout was relatively high in most elections. However, a gradual decline in voter participation has been observed. The higher voter turnout in the 1990s was largely due to the novelty effect. This enthusiasm subsequently diminished over time, a trend observed in other newly established democracies. Nevertheless, voter turnout remains high for parliamentary elections, which serves to underscore the significant role that parliament plays within the political system of Mongolia. The 2024 parliamentary elections demonstrated that the participation of a minimum of two-thirds of the electorate has become the new norm. However, it is imperative to address the issue of legislation amendments that would facilitate greater voter participation and involvement of those residing abroad in the electoral process.

In previous elections based on a majoritarian system, minor parties had a very little chance of securing a seat in parliament. Additionally, the parties expressed opposition to the new electoral laws of 2023, specifically the reduction in the number of electoral districts from 29 to 13 enlarged regional constituencies. Such large electoral districts confirmed their doubts and benefited large parties with extensive resources and networks in rural areas. This resulted in a notable disadvantage for smaller parties and independent candidates in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

The challenges faced by smaller parties, newcomers, and women were primarily due to the increasing relevance of resources in the context of running campaigns, establishing and maintaining rural networks, and covering large electoral districts. In rural areas, the lack of developed infrastructure, vast geographic size, and scattered population required significant financial resources for campaigning. Therefore, with the exception of the two main parties, there was rarely any other political representation beyond the capital city of Ulaanbaatar.

From other side, numerous parties were established as a means of public criticism, only to cease operations shortly thereafter. Researchers have observed that this phenomenon is a consequence of a legislative provision that allows parties to register with minimal obstacles. However, the size of electoral districts and the lack of established rural networks constituted a significant challenge that could not be surmounted. This phenomenon was observed among independent candidates, newcomers, and women who lacked the backing of a major political party.

The previous electoral framework introduced distortions between votes and seats, thereby impeding the development of a balanced and equal-opportunity multi-party political system. The new electoral system of 2024 offers the prospect of progress in terms of the current establishments' capacity or willingness to implement genuine reform with a view to improving democratic governance. To date, the multi-party system has yet to be fully realized. The main problem is that the electoral system has yet to evolve in a manner that ensures transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in the electoral process. ■

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