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# The Inner Asian anomaly: Mongolia's democratization in comparative perspective

M. Steven Fish \*

*Department of Political Science, University of California, 210 Barrows Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720  
1950, USA*

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## Abstract

Following the demise of Soviet-type regimes most countries of postcommunist Inner Asia either experienced initial political openings followed by reversion to authoritarianism or moved directly from one type of harsh authoritarianism to another. Mongolia is exceptional. The extent of political opening there during the 1990s far exceeded anything seen in any neighboring country and the gains of the early post-Soviet period were maintained instead of reversed. This paper investigates the causes of Mongolia's relative success and argues that the absence of several factors that are often regarded as propitious for democratization has actually facilitated Mongolia's democratization. The experience of postcommunist Inner Asia casts doubt on some arguments current in thinking on regime change. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

**Keywords:** Mongolia; Democracy; Democratization; Authoritarianism; Central Asia; Postcommunist; Elections

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## Introduction

Among the countries of postcommunist Inner Asia, Mongolia's recent political experience poses a remarkable puzzle. In all other countries of the region, even those that initially experienced political openings at the beginning of the 1990s, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, personalistic rule and authoritarianism have become hallmarks of postcommunist politics. Among the five other major countries of postcommunist Inner Asia, significant variation in regime type is evident, ranging from the soft authoritarianism of Kyrgyzstan to the neototalitarianism and surreal person-

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\* Tel.: +1-510-642-6323.

E-mail address: [sfish@uclink4.berkeley.edu](mailto:sfish@uclink4.berkeley.edu) (M.S. Fish).

ality cult found in Turkmenistan. Yet, by the end of the first postcommunist decade, all five had autocratic regimes.

Mongolia not only skirted the trap of autocracy; it actually advanced to democracy and did not slide back toward authoritarianism (Sanders, 1990; Heaton, 1992; Ginsburg, 1998; Chuluunbaatar, 2000; Rossabi, 2000). The gulf between Mongolia and its neighbors is reflected in the ratings issued by Freedom House, the leading agency that measures the extent of political openness on a global scale. Table 1 shows freedom scores for the 1999–2000 survey and mean scores for the past five years' surveys for all of the countries of postcommunist Inner Asia as well as for Russia and China. The scores represent an average of each country's ratings on 'political rights' and 'civil liberties', and the scores range from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). In the 1999–2000 survey, Mongolia was the only postcommunist country outside of East Europe to receive a rating that entitled it to classification as a 'free' polity (a score of 2.5 or better). All of Mongolia's neighbors were designated as 'partly free' (scores of 3–5) or 'not free' (scores of 5.5–7). The table also shows scores from Freedom House's Press Freedom Survey 2000. Scores in the survey cover a one-hundred point range, with lower scores representing greater freedom. Mongolia ranked seventh out of the 28 countries of the postcommunist region. Only the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and the three Baltic states scored as well as or better than Mongolia. None of the other countries of Inner Asia, nor Russia or China, rated anywhere near Mongolia (Freedom House, 2000).

Mongolia's comparative success in democratization is the subject of this paper. In a previous article, the factors that facilitated Mongolia's democratization were explored (Fish, 1998b). The current article offers an argument consistent with the earlier one but approaches the problem from a completely different angle. Here the question is which factors that *inhibit* democratization does Mongolia *lack*? Furthermore, what does Mongolia, placed in a broader comparative framework, reveal about factors that are often considered important for the fate of democratization? The Inner

Table 1  
Political openness in Inner Asia and neighboring countries

	Freedom house freedom score, 1995– 1996 to 1999–2000: five-average average (1=most free, 7=least free)	Freedom score, 1999– 2000 survey (1=most free, 7=least free)	Press freedom score, 1999–2000 survey (1=most free, 100=least free)
Kazakhstan	5.5	5.5	68
Kyrgyzstan	4.4	5	61
Mongolia	2.5	2.5	29
Tajikistan	6.4	6	94
Turkmenistan	7.0	7	86
Uzbekistan	6.6	6.5	83
Russia	3.8	4.5	60
China	6.8	6.5	80

Asian experience casts doubt on some arguments current in both the scholarly literature and in public discourse in the region. Some things that are widely regarded as blessings upon closer, comparative examination are shown to be curses.

### Natural endowment

Mongolia is, by regional standards and for a country of its geographical size, poor in natural resources. Kazakhstan contains enormous oil reserves, while Turkmenistan is the world's third largest producer of natural gas. Mongolia produces some oil, but known reserves are modest and the country does not enjoy a superabundance of currently exploitable natural resources.

Disputes over the custody of territory containing fossil fuels or precious gems, minerals, and metals account for a large proportion of the world's international and interregional conflicts. Everyone wants oil, diamonds, and gold (not to mention gas, emeralds, and aluminum), and possessing them undoubtedly may lighten pressures on foreign exchange reserves and borrowing requirements. Rulers are not the only ones who covet mineral wealth. Ordinary people also regard it as a boon. Public discourse in Russia is saturated with the lament that Russia suffers economic decline and political underdevelopment 'even though we are the richest country in the world' (in terms of natural resources) or 'despite that fact that we have everything' (in terms of natural resources). One never hears that Russia languishes *because* of its natural endowment, only that it suffers *in spite* of it. In purely economic terms, however, a superabundance of natural wealth has well known drawbacks, which may include contributing to an overvalued exchange rate and channeling investment toward extractive industries and away from high valued-added manufacturing and services. Less frequently discussed but even more pernicious are the political effects. Natural superabundance often reduces politics to competition over access to the agencies that control the proceeds of sales of natural resources. This game corrupts the political class and distorts the state apparatus. These pathologies are evident not only in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but also virtually everywhere else in the postcommunist and developing worlds where a superabundance of natural wealth is found, including Russia, Azerbaijan, Congo/Zaire, Nigeria, and Venezuela. Superabundance of natural wealth often undermines both democratization and state-building. Mongolia's relatively modest natural endowment — or at least the modest means that it has to exploit such an endowment as it has — has spared the country an enormous impediment to political development and to democratization in particular.

### Geostrategic significance and external patronage

Postcommunist Mongolia lacks not only a bounty of natural resources, but also an abundance of strategic value for powerful external actors. Correspondingly, major powers have not assigned great significance to the direction of Mongolian politics and the fate of one or another political force or leader in Mongolia. One might

consider such a condition an impediment to progress. External patronage, like a voluptuous endowment of natural resources, is often considered an advantage, especially for poor and isolated countries. But the attention of influential external actors is a mixed blessing at best in terms of democratization.

A noteworthy feature of postcommunist polities that experienced an initial opening but that subsequently slid back toward authoritarianism is the presence of an external patron who categorically supported a particular leader even as that leader engaged in democracy-undermining behavior. The group of postcommunist countries that underwent substantial political liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s but that were downgraded by one full point or more in their freedom scores by the 1999–2000 survey consists of Albania, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Each of these countries' chief executives bore primary responsibility for the subsequent movement toward greater authoritarianism — even where those same leaders initially championed democratization and/or national independence. In each case those same chief executives enjoyed massive external patronage. Albania's former president, Sali Berisha, was a darling of Western aid agencies and the US government by dint of the rapid privatization and liberalization he pursued to revive a prostrate economy. Even when Berisha began to turn to arbitrary methods and style of government, his Western backers stuck with him.

Much the same may be said for Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akaev. Western governments, after treating Kyrgyzstan as a regional showcase and the urbane, charming Akaev as Central Asia's best hope for democracy and a market economy, were reluctant to abandon his government even as it turned autocratic in the mid- and late-1990s. Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has enjoyed the patronage of Russia by virtue of his oft-expressed interests in economic reintegration of the former Soviet sphere and protection of the large ethnic Russian minority in Kazakhstan. For its own part, the US government has never lost sight of Kazakhstan's immense oil reserves, and has refused to allow Nazarbaev's increasingly autocratic behavior to undermine enthusiasm for better US–Kazakh relations. Belarus's president and gravedigger of democratization, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has received unstinting Russian support. Lukashenko's advocacy of 'reunion' with Russia, while disingenuous and motivated by his desire for economic salvation, earned him a special place in the hearts of Russia's communists and nationalists. Supporting Lukashenko unsparingly served as a politically inexpensive way for the government of Boris El'tsin to appease antiliberalists at home. For its own part, El'tsin benefited from strong Western backing. Due largely to perceptions that the alternatives to El'tsin were utterly unpalatable, the US and other Western governments patronized El'tsin unstintingly, even to the extent of conflating El'tsin and 'democracy' itself.

Among Inner Asian countries that merely drifted from one form of hard authoritarianism to another after the Soviet collapse without experiencing a political opening, one also finds a pattern of external support for specific leaders that was inimical to democratization. Internal factors undoubtedly were paramount in Uzbekistan's movement from Soviet rule to personalist dictatorship under President Islam Karimov. But it is noteworthy that Karimov, despite his rhetoric touting full national autonomy, has consistently enjoyed Russian support. Russia sent observers to Uzbek-

istan to laud the fairness of the charade of a presidential election in Uzbekistan in late 1999. In that election, Karimov's sole opponent, an unknown philosophy professor who never campaigned and who received four percent of the vote, was so afraid of appearing disloyal that he announced after the election that he had voted for Karimov. Karimov received a fresh show of support from Russia in mid-2000, when Vladimir Putin, in one of his first forays abroad as president, traveled to Tashkent to discuss deepening Russian-Uzbek contacts, particularly in the security realm. Tajikistan, after a dramatic initial opening in 1991–1992, fell into a state of civil war thereafter. The Russian government, which treated Tajikistan as a crucial line of defense against the northward spread of Taliban-style political Islam, sent large contingents of military personnel and hardware to Tajikistan to defend the side that ultimately came out on top in the civil war. Tajikistan subsequently became de facto a Russian protectorate. Turkmenistan's president, Saparmurad Niyazov, unlike his counterparts in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, has not enjoyed the patronage of Russia or the United States. Niyazov, a psychotic who has turned Turkmenistan into a shrine to himself, managed to isolate his country and has not attached his fortunes to either Russia or the United States. He has nevertheless enjoyed an extremely clement international environment. Both the Russian and Western governments have shown exquisite aversion to alienating the man who controls the world's third largest reserves of natural gas.

A remarkable contrast is found between these countries, which moved away from democracy after initial openings or simply slid from one form of harsh authoritarianism to another, and the countries that, while not advancing to full-blown democracy, nevertheless did not subsequently suffer dramatic erosion of democratic gains. This group consists of Mongolia, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania. None of these countries scored better (lower) than 2 in the 1999–2000 Freedom House survey, indicating that they had not attained the level of openness found in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Baltic states, all of which received a freedom score of 1.5. But all of the countries in the category with Mongolia finished the 1990s with freedom scores of 3.5 or better and none showed a dominant regressive trend during the first postcommunist decade. In none of the countries in this group did rulers enjoy the backing of external patrons who stood ready to support them unconditionally. None of these countries or their governments was considered by either the United States or Russia to be of supreme strategic importance. Georgia's president, Eduard Shevardnadze, has been the object of more hostility and sabotage than patronage from Russia. Shevardnadze enjoys good relations with Western leaders, but none has ever treated him as an indispensable client or Georgia as an important ally. No post-Soviet Macedonian leader has ever had especially good relations with Russia. Nor have Western governments paid much attention to Macedonia — even at times when they clearly should have done so, such as during the early stages of the NATO raids on Serbia. Much the same may be said about Moldova. Its first president, Mircea Snegur, antagonized Russia with his attempts to recover Moldova's Transdniester region from separatists supported by Moscow. At the same time, he failed to secure patrons among Western governments, which for the most part treated Moldova with indifference, a situation that continued under his

successor, Petru Lucinschi. Romania's first postcommunist president, Ion Iliescu, found himself in circumstances that largely resembled those of Snegur. In order to boost his revolutionary credentials he held Russia at arm's length. Yet neither the United States nor any major European government held him in high esteem or regarded him as an important ally. While Western governments welcomed the victory of Emil Constantinescu in the presidential elections of 1996, they did not back him unconditionally or even shown a great deal of interest in his political fate.

Like Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania, Mongolia has not had intimate relationships with one or several powerful external patrons. The Russian government never looked upon any Mongolian leader as worthy of munificent patronage. In fact, the El'tsin government welcomed the fall of the conservative communist-successor government of Puntsagiyn Jasray in mid-1996 and its replacement by the Democratic Coalition, made up of the Mongolian National Democracy Party (MNDP) and the Mongolian Social Democratic Party (MSDP). The liberals' victory in Mongolia came just days before Russia's 1996 presidential election, and pro-El'tsin forces crowed superciliously that 'even the Mongolians' had chosen democracy, suggesting that for Russians to do otherwise by supporting El'tsin's communist opponent would place Russia even lower on the civilizational scale than Mongolia. Jasray, who was perhaps the closest thing postcommunist Mongolia had to a would-be autocrat, therefore received no external support from the most powerful force in the region at the time when he possibly could have been tempted to engage in an extraconstitutional power grab.

In short, the lack of a perception on the part of major powers that Mongolia represented a crucial ally or that a particular leader or political force merited unconditional backing has abetted democratization in Mongolia. The phenomenon evident in American support for Berisha, Akaev, and El'tsin and Russian backing for Nazarbaev and Lukashenko, in which a major external actor actively cultivated a client and provided him with cover for self-aggrandizing and anti-democratic actions, did not obtain in Mongolia. Mongolia did not draw a great deal of attention from the major powers. Such neglect might seem inauspicious, but it has proven a blessing in disguise for democratization.

### **Regional power pretensions**

Postcommunist Mongolia, given its location and the small size of its population, cannot harbor and has not harbored any pretensions to becoming a great power or a regional power. Maintaining the integrity of its own borders has been and must be as far as its geopolitical aspirations reach. While some Mongolians may regret that their country cannot realistically strive for prominence on the international stage, such a state of affairs by no means represents an unequivocal malison. It may provide distinct advantages for democratization. International power pretension or status may divert resources from economic restructuring and productive investment, strengthen the political clout of the agencies of coercion, and be used to justify censorship and political closure.

In the postcommunist region, regional power pretensions certainly have not aided democratization. As many observers have noted, nostalgia for great power status and

the effort to recover it have scarcely promoted either democratization or economic recovery in Russia. Within Inner Asia, two countries — Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan — aspire to attain the status as regional powers. While the influence of regional power aspirations on democratization cannot be assessed precisely, it seems safe to say that the former has not advanced the latter. The absence of external power pretensions by no means guarantees democratization. Turkmenistan, which like Mongolia is far too sparsely populated to compete with Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan for a dominant role in Inner Asia, is the postcommunist region's most thoroughly undemocratic polity. Still, it is noteworthy that some of the most remarkable cases of democratization have occurred in small countries that are unburdened by regional power aspirations. Slovenia and the Baltic states, along with Mongolia, may be included in this group. The one large or medium-sized country in the postcommunist region that serves as an unambiguous exemplar of successful democratization, Poland, has eschewed external power pretensions entirely. Rather than laboring to bring its smaller neighbors under its own sway, it has focused its foreign policy on overcoming a legacy of mutual antagonism with Germany and on upgrading ties with the West in general.

### **A national father figure**

It is sometimes assumed that having a dominant leader who enjoys great popularity and authority and who can rally the people helps smooth political transformation. The postcommunist region is indeed replete with such figures. In practice, however, they have helped sustain democratization only where they took jobs that did not entitle them to wide and unchecked prerogative. Where national father figures assumed posts invested with great power, even individuals widely regarded as democratizers subsequently halted and reversed democratization.

Among countries that did have fathers of freedom and national sovereignty, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia stand out as the cases in which the founding fathers played a stabilizing and, on balance, positive role. Crucially, in each of these countries the hero came to occupy an office that was not invested with vast prerogative. Poland's Lech Walesa won the presidency in a semipresidential system that had a strong parliament endowed with the institutional resources needed to check the president's potentially autocratic ambitions. The Czech Republic's Vaclav Havel and Slovenia's Milan Kucan assumed the presidencies in parliamentary systems, enabling them to deploy their formidable moral authority at important moments but preventing them from using that authority in a manner that could have derailed democratization.

Other countries with founding fathers were not so fortunate. Russia's El'tsin, Albania's Berisha, and Armenia's Levon Ter Petrosian initially enjoyed status as the heroes of their countries' independence and as democratizers as well. All assumed positions of great power. Berisha became president in a system that was parliamentary in form but whose president was elected by parliament and enjoyed the powers of both a president and a prime minister together. Ter Petrosian and El'tsin occupied the presidencies in superpresidential systems — that is, in regimes in which the president enjoys far more extensive power than the legislature and in which the latter

holds little or no real oversight authority. Each of these men, after playing the role of the liberator, subsequently turned autocratic.

The phenomenon is similarly evident in Inner Asia. Akaev's role in Kyrgyzstan was virtually identical to El'tsin's in Russia. Akaev embodied popular aspirations for national independence and democratization and enjoyed the status of a national hero at the time of regime change. He won the presidency under a regime that afforded his office wide prerogative. Within a half-decade after assuming power, he began embracing more autocratic methods. Nazarbaev never enjoyed democratic credentials as impressive as those of El'tsin and Akaev, but he was viewed as an enlightened and relatively liberal figure as well as the founding father of Kazakhstan's independence. The opening that he did preside over in the early years of transition, such as it was, he subsequently reversed, dragging Kazakhstan back down the path toward a kleptocratic authoritarian regime. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had national founding fathers as well, in Karimov and Niyazov, respectively, though neither ever sincerely pretended to the role of the democrat. Both established polities as closed and authoritarian as the Soviet state had been.

Mongolia, by contrast, did not have a single dominant leader at the time of regime change. No single person was universally regarded as the nation's founder of independence and/or democracy. The absence of such an individual proved to be a great blessing for democratization. Since overweening chief executives have invariably been the central agents of authoritarian reversion in the postcommunist region, Mongolia lacked the greatest potential hazard to sustained democratization. Hungary, the Baltic states, Romania, Moldova, and Bulgaria also lacked a controlling charismatic actor at the time of regime change. Democratization in these countries was extensive and lasting during the 1990s, and it similarly benefited from the absence of a dominant founding personage.

### **Concentration of central of power**

The presence or absence of a national father figure is, from the standpoint of democratization, related to the institutional configuration of power at the national level. As discussed above, the presence of a dominant hero figure at the time of regime change advanced democratization only where the hero assumed an office whose powers were strictly circumscribed. In the postcommunist world, constitutions that invest great power in the executive on the national level have consistently undermined democratization. Superpresidentialism has been a catastrophe. Even in countries that made impressive strides toward democracy, superpresidential constitutions have led to aborted democratization. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Armenia serve as examples. Belarus's adoption of superpresidentialism in the mid-1990s set the stage for a sharp turn toward autocracy. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan all moved from party dictatorship to personalistic dictatorship under constitutions that afforded the chief executive a free hand. Slovakia's parliamentarism, with its unicameral legislature and toothless president, furnished the prime minister with abundant opportunities to act despotically and reverse democratization. Vladimir Meciar gleefully did so during his half-decade in the position leading up to 1998, when his party was defeated in elections and a prodemocratic coalition came to power.

Democratization has been more robust in countries with constitutions that disperse central power. Semipresidential and moderate presidential regimes, both of which provide for a genuine division of power between the president and the legislature, have provided reasonably sturdy foundations for democratization. The experiences of the six countries in the postcommunist region with semipresidential or moderate presidential constitutions — Mongolia, Moldova, Poland, Lithuania, Georgia after 1995, and Romania — provide evidence. The mean freedom score in the 1999–2000 survey for these six countries was 2.3. This favorable rating is all the more remarkable given that neither individually nor as a group were these countries favored by initial conditions such as high per capita income, strong economies, or (with the exception of Poland) a legacy of relatively soft authoritarianism. In some countries where power is concentrated in the prime minister, as in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, and Bulgaria, democratization also has been reasonably successful. In most of these countries, however, the presidency was either not as powerless as in Slovakia and/or it was occupied during the early years of regime change by an individual with great moral authority who was capable of containing potentially democracy-degrading ambitions on the part of the prime minister. For example, in the Czech Republic, President Havel weighed in periodically against the overweening inclinations of the former prime minister, Vaclav Klaus. The Hungarian president, though he also operates in a parliamentary system, enjoys enough power to check some prime-ministerial actions. One could argue that the first postcommunist president, Arpad Goncz, indeed provided a counterweight to the first prime minister, Jozsef Antall.

Mongolia's choice of semipresidentialism has been a boon to democratization. Its pattern of relative success is also found in other countries that chose constitutions that invested formidable power in parliament and also granted the president prerogatives that extend beyond ceremonies and symbols. The outcome might seem unexpected given the virtues that politicians and social scientists so often associate with unified central power. Indeed, the debate on constitutions in new democracies centers on where to concentrate power — in the presidency or in the legislature — rather than on how to divide power up. Most of the writings that tackle the problem of dividing power focus on federalism and specifically on the advantages and drawbacks of specific arrangements for devolution of power from central to subnational authorities. Madisonians — that is, apologists for dispersing power among branches at the center — are not numerous among students of constitutionalism in new democracies.

Reasons for the paucity of advocacy for Madisonian schemes are found in misconceptions prevalent among comparative political scientists and economists. In a nutshell, a division of powers is frequently associated with a 'politics of blame' between the branches of government. Such a circumstance, in turn, is said to induce deadlock and governmental paralysis and undermine governments' ability to implement necessary but potentially painful reforms, particularly in economic policy.

Yet the dread maladies that supposedly attend divided power actually do not do so in practice. Certainly a 'blame game' is often found in countries where power is dispersed. In Mongolia and Poland — not to mention the United States and France — the politics of mutual blame indeed often characterizes relations between the president and the legislature, even when both branches are controlled by the same party

or coalition. Interbranch conflict is even more likely when the presidency and the parliament are dominated by political rivals. In late 1998, Mongolia endured a months-long stint in political purgatory, as President Natsagiyn Bagabandi of the postcommunist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) rejected candidate after candidate for prime minister put forward by the Democratic Coalition, made up of the MNDP and the MSDP, that dominated in parliament (At Long Last, Mongolia Has a New Prime Minister, 1998). Bagabandi's right to reject candidates for prime minister, and thus to thwart the formation of a new cabinet, gives him institutional muscle that exceeds that of, say, the Slovak president. Had Bagabandi not enjoyed such authority, the long-simmering government crisis probably never would have happened. On the other hand, however, had the former president of Slovakia, Michal Kovac, enjoyed the prerogatives that his Mongolian counterpart did, Slovakia may well have been spared the wreckage of a half-decade of rule by the former prime minister, Vladimir Meciar.

In fact, a 'blame game' is central to political life in all open polities. There is no logical reason why — and no empirical evidence to confirm that — the politics of blame is more severe or that the dangers to democracy or economic reform are worse in systems where power is dispersed. Observers who regard the blame game as more debilitating in regimes that divide power disregard a crucial benefit that such regimes provide. In Mongolia, like in Poland, Lithuania, France, and the United States, politicians from different branches of government do often accuse one another of bearing responsibility for all of their country's problems. But they may do so without impugning the political system itself. Most crucially, ordinary citizens can and do fault their least favorite political force — without necessarily regarding democracy itself as the source of their troubles. In the late 1990s, as unemployment remained stuck at a high level and the murder of Sanjaasuren Zorig for the first time appeared to taint what theretofore had been an extremely pacific political transformation, Mongolian citizens could fault the quarrelsome, out-of-touch liberal parliament or the nostalgic, conservative-socialist president. They could even blame the semipresidential system itself for the gridlock that left the country without a government for several months. But they would have been — and in fact have been — far less likely than voters in many other countries in the throes of regime change to pin their problems on democracy and to back extremists. The same phenomenon has been evident in Poland. As the president and parliament in the early and mid-1990s cursed one another for high unemployment, so too did the Polish worker blame either the bumbling, undereducated liberal-nationalist president, Lech Walesa, or the insensitive, perfidious, atheistic former communists who controlled parliament. Neither option meant turning against democracy.

The Mongolian and Polish electorates' tendencies to express political dissatisfaction by shifting their political support from one essentially prodemocratic force to another may be contrasted with, say, the Russian experience. In Russia, parties that question the value of democracy itself, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPFR), the Communists-Working Russia Party (KTR), and the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), as well as parties that have no distinct political complexion at all, such as Edinstvo (Unity), have fared well in

parliamentary elections. In Russia, with its superpresidential system, the president is closely identified in the public imagination with the regime itself. As Edward Walker noted presciently at the time of the codification of superpresidentialism in Russia in 1993: “Unfortunately, the power concentrated in the presidency will also mean that the declining popularity of the president will probably be accompanied by declining support for democracy” (Walker, 1993–1994, p. 118). El’tsin’s decline in popularity throughout the 1990s was indeed accompanied by an erosion of public support for democracy. Such a trend has not characterized public opinion in Mongolia. Not only have parties that condemn democracy failed to gain traction, but Mongolians have consistently expressed their support for regime change in opinion polls. Remarkably, even as public trust in parties, the government, and individual politicians has oscillated, in every survey conducted in the second half of the 1990s at least 85% of Mongolians answered “Was the transition to a democratic system in 1990 the right or the wrong step?” in the affirmative. Even while the economy tumbled and the popularity of the ruling Democratic Coalition plunged, setting the stage for the MPRP’s comeback in the spring 2000 parliamentary elections, nearly nine in ten respondents continued to assert that “the transition to a democratic system in 1990” represented the “right step” for the country (Sumati, 2000b). The difference between Mongolians’ and Russians’ proclivity to separate the legitimacy of the democratic regime from their attitude toward specific officials, parties, and governments is stark, and dissimilarities between the constitutional systems in the two countries help explain disparities in public perceptions and convictions.

The consequence of dividing power among branches at the center is clear: more extensive and robust democratization. The causes underlying the choice of constitution are less tractable to unqualified cross-national generalization. In fact, constitutional choice cannot be understood purely in terms of the egoistic interests of constitutions’ authors, public opinion, the strength of social movements at the time of transition, or any other single factor. The sources of constitutional choices in the postcommunist world, as in other regions, were manifold. In Mongolia constitution-makers were particularly concerned with guarding the country against any possible future efforts on the part of Russia or China to compromise Mongolia’s independence. Rather than viewing the concentration of power as the best means to such an end, Mongolia’s leaders thought that dispersing power as widely as possible would best protect the country’s sovereignty. The reasons for such thinking are found in the country’s communist-era past. Unlike citizens in many other postcommunist countries, Mongolians tend to regard their previous communist regime less as a typical Soviet-type partyocracy than as a single-man dictatorship headed by a puppet of the USSR. Such a view is justified by the way the country was ruled. Horloogiyn Choybalsan’s rule was virtually coterminous with Stalin’s in the USSR, and Yumjaagiyn Tsedenbal’s rule with that of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko combined. Thus, just two men dominated Mongolia’s pre-Gorbachev-era history. Even by Soviet-bloc standards, both were exquisitely sycophantic in their relations with Moscow. In contrast with many other Soviet-bloc party first secretaries, moreover, they lived in flamboyant luxury, apart from their colleagues and on general public display. Tsedenbal inhabited a mansion in the center of Ulan Bator — a

circumstance that may be contrasted with Brezhnev's residence in a large and well appointed but nevertheless much less conspicuous apartment in central Moscow. In this respect, Tsedenbal more closely resembled his Romanian counterpart and contemporary, Nicolae Ceausescu — though Tsedenbal lacked Ceausescu's penchant for flouting Moscow's dictates.

Since Mongolia's communist regime resembled a single-man dictatorship controlled by a foreign power, many Mongolians associated dispersing power with both democracy and national independence. Many leaders, regardless of their political orientations, therefore sought a regime that would provide for a vigorous legislature. They sought a presidency that was far too weak to allow for the emergence of a dictator in that office, but that was strong enough to check the emergence of a dictator as head of the legislature or government. Discussion over the constitution that the Great Hural ratified in January 1992 was by no means calm and genial. On the contrary, it was raucous and contentious, as one would expect in a polity in tumult in which politics was open enough to allow for such debate and in which such a fundamental matter was under consideration. Yet the selection of a parliament-heavy form of semipresidentialism at the end of the day reflected the elite's concern with dispersing power, and in particular with proliferating the number of persons who would have to be bought off in order for Mongolia to be returned to foreign control (Boldbaatar and Lundeezhantsan, 1997; Boldbaatar, 1998; Dashyondon, 1998; Gonchigdorj, 1998).

Interestingly, the Mongolian experience casts doubt on the widely held notion that that executive-heavy systems and highly concentrated state power *result* from state weakness at the time of regime change. In such a view, executives were invested with overwhelming powers, as in Kyrgyzstan and Russia, or dictatorial powers, as in Uzbekistan and Belarus, due to a functional need for an agency capable of reestablishing some semblance of a state amid the ruins of crumbling institutions. But the crisis of state power was no less acute in Mongolia at the time of regime change than it was in these other four countries. Mongolia's economy and its state institutions were in near-complete dissolution at the time of regime change. Indeed, few other countries have ever suffered a more harrowing ordeal than Mongolia did (Pomfret, 2000). Yet Mongolia's leaders did not regard their circumstances as mandating a leviathan president. Their decision to disperse power was vindicated by the subsequent trajectory of political change. What is more, economic reform proceeded more expeditiously in Mongolia than in other countries in Inner Asia and outpaced that of many countries of East Europe and the Caucasus as well. During the first half of the 1990s, the rate of privatization in Mongolia was the highest in Inner Asia, and only Kyrgyzstan led Mongolia in terms of the pace of economic liberalization (Anderson et al., 1999; Fish, 1998a).

### **Summary and discussion: curses in blessings' clothing, or, blessed are those who want**

What appear to be blessings sometimes are not; indeed, they are sometimes not even 'mixed blessings.' Sometimes they are curses. Lacking things most coveted sometimes turns out to be the greatest blessing of all.

These include the five factors discussed in this paper. Table 2 summarizes these curses in blessings' clothing. One of these — superabundance of natural wealth — is purely structural in nature. Countries do not chose on this matter. If people could chose whether or not to have oil, gas, diamonds, and precious metals, no one would turn them down. Yet, in terms of democratization, blessed are the poor.

Two factors — geostrategic importance and the presence of an external patron, as well as regional power pretensions — have a structural component but are also influenced by more proximate political conditions. Mongolia's small size and isolation conduce general international disinterest in the country, thereby limiting external involvement in its politics. But the international political situation — and in particular, reasonably good Sino-Russian relations — has also helped ensure that Mongolia has not 'enjoyed' a great deal of foreign attention. Lack of external meddling, in turn, has favored democratization. Concerning Mongolia's lack of external power pretensions of its own, structural position again influences conditions. Governing a diminutive dominion has a felicitous effect on rulers. It keeps their minds focused on matters at hand. Delusions of conquest and other external mischief do not cloud their minds. They do not spill blood and treasure in pursuit of influence abroad; nor do they enjoy the opportunity to persuade their countrymen that their freedom is worth sacrificing in pursuit of such a cause.

The other two curses in blessings' clothing that Mongolia lacks are a national father figure at the time of regime change and a constitution that concentrates power in the executive. Neither of these is a structural factor. The first might be, to a large extent, a matter of chance. Russia happened to have a El'tsin, Kyrgyzstan an Akaev, Kazakhstan a Nazarbaev, and Armenia a Ter Petrosian. These were towering figures who were regarded by their countrymen as the personification of national aspirations and as indispensable actors in postcommunist transition. Mongolia had a number of forceful politicians of many political stripes at the time of transition, but no one politician who enjoyed such matchless prestige. The country has been reaping the benefits ever since. The absence of a constitution that concentrates power was entirely a matter of political choice. It left Mongolia bereft of the 'strong', unencum-

Table 2  
Curses in blessings' clothing: who has them and who does not in Inner Asia

	Superabundance of natural wealth	Substantial geostrategic significance and/or an external patron	Regional power pretensions	Father figure	Concentration of executive power
Kazakhstan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kyrgyzstan	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Mongolia	No	No	No	No	No
Tajikistan	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Turkmenistan	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Uzbekistan	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

bered executive that so many analysts, politicians, and ordinary citizens in new democracies regard as a boon to reform, stability, and development — but that in fact conduces stagnation, conflict, and authoritarian reversion. Mongolia has been blessed — or in this case, wisely blessed itself — with a constitution that spared it a tenacious obstacle to political development.

### **Hazards and hard tests**

Yet structural conditions and wise past decisions do not guarantee the continuation of democratization in Mongolia. In view of the framework advanced in this article, peril may be on the horizon.

First, the economic crisis of 2000, borne in large part of climatic disaster, greatly exacerbates already acute problems of poverty and unemployment. Mongolian democracy has heretofore demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of economic affliction, but there are no guarantees that such good fortune will last indefinitely. Most inauspiciously from the standpoint of an argument made in this article, many policymakers and analysts in Mongolia are now staking their hopes for economic betterment on a spectacular growth in extractive industries, especially and including oil production (Ochirbat, 2000; Joint Venture Ships First Crude to China, 1998). Many are cognizant of the economic hazards that oil and mineral wealth can bring. But few appear to appreciate the enormous political dangers. Despite the blinding luster of the promise of untold wealth springing from the ground, if Mongolia's hopes for great oil wealth are realized, the state may quickly become little more than a battleground for actors seeking control over the proceeds from oil rents. Such a circumstance would critically endanger democratization. Furthermore, as the Russian, Turkmen, Kazakh, and Azeri experiences demonstrate starkly, an oil or mineral windfall by no means automatically improves the material lot of ordinary citizens.

Second, the international environment could change in ways that jeopardize democratization. Deterioration in Sino-Russian relations could give rise to a competitive game between the Chinese and Russian governments for influence in Mongolia and spoil the benign neglect that Mongolia enjoyed in the 1990s. Even in the absence of heightened tension between China and Russia, the change of government in Russia could well presage a growth of external interest that would not serve democratization in Mongolia. The Putin government has made clear its intention to enhance Russian sway in areas that traditionally have fallen under Russian influence, and Mongolia certainly falls in this category. Were Putin to pick a particular politician or political force in Mongolia and back such an individual or force unconditionally, democracy's prospects in Mongolia could suffer severely.

As it was intended to do, the division of powers in Mongolia could help mitigate the effects of external interference. But even the dispersion of power, while enshrined in the constitution, is not etched in stone. An elite consensus prevailed in Mongolia in the 1990s over the advantages of dispersed power, but that consensus may be under strain. Some Mongolian leaders regard concentration of power as necessary to move the country forward and to protect national security. Sanjaagiyn Bayar,

President Bagabandi's chief of staff, remarked in early 1998 that "given the immaturity of society, we need one person who can take charge of everything." Bayar complained that the economy was stalled and that the country lacked a long-term plan or vision for rapid development. He further asserted that the West would be neither willing nor able to come to the rescue if Mongolian security interests came under pressure from China or Russia. Only a state structure in which "we have more concentration, not the disunity we now have" could, in his view, mitigate the hazards of drift. Bayar admitted at the time that his was a minority view within the political elite, but the governmental paralysis of late 1998 and current economic stress may push more of the political class toward his view (Bayar, 1998). Such a tendency to confuse concentrated executive power with strong state capacity is widespread in neodemocracies and among Western social scientists. Economic or international insecurity can exacerbate the urge to concentrate power, despite evidence that doing so rarely has the desired consequences (Fish, 2000).

Even given a continuation of an institutional division of powers, the outcome of the spring 2000 parliamentary elections, which humbled the then-governing Democratic Coalition and handed 72 of 76 seats to the MPRP, threatens to upset the balance that was obtained in Mongolian politics during most of the 1990s. The MPRP held a similarly commanding majority during 1992–1996, but was sometimes checked by the relatively liberal president, Punsalmaagiyn Ochirbat. Shortly after the Democratic Coalition triumphed in the 1996 parliamentary elections and threw the MPRP out of power in the legislature, the MPRP's Bagabandi defeated Ochirbat in the contest for the presidency. Thus, during most of the previous decade, Mongolia had not only a division of powers but also a form of divided government. Now, as the June 2001 presidential election approaches, both the presidency and the parliament are dominated by the MPRP. As of this writing, the presidential election has not yet been held, but polls indicate that Bagabandi is headed for reelection, which will extend one-party-dominant rule to the middle of the decade (Politbarometer, 2001). According to a leading Mongolian social scientist, the MPRP is far too disunited internally to pose a threat of reviving party dictatorship (Sumati, 2000a). What is more, the MPRP has long since embraced competitive politics and given up any claim to a monopoly of power or a 'leading role' in society. Still, a single party's dominance of the national government does not necessarily provide an optimal basis for maintaining full openness and pluralism in neodemocracies.

Whether Mongolia can maintain a reasonably high level of democratic attainment depends in large part on the skill and imagination of its political leaders. Mongolian politicians cannot strongly influence the international environment. But their decisions regarding whether to attempt to build the economy on the hollow hope of oil, or whether to succumb to the temptation to scrap the semipresidential constitution in favor of superpresidentialism, will help determine the sustainability of Mongolian democracy. If open government does survive the onerous challenges it currently faces, Mongolia will continue — by its vigorously competitive electoral system, multiple peaceful transfers of power, and its impressive civil freedoms — staunchly to defy the dominant regional trend toward more stifling authoritarianism and greater political closure.

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