

## **REPORT ON THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN MONGOLIA ON MAY 24, 2009**

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On May 24 of this year, the Mongolians elected their next president. A total of 1.5 million registered voters had to choose between two candidates: the current incumbent, N. Enkhbayar of the Mongolian Revolutionary People's Party (MRPP), and his challenger, Ts. Elbegdorj, who was standing for an opposition alliance consisting of the Democratic Party (DP), the Civil Will Republican Party (CWRP), and the Civic Alliance Party (Greens). To the surprise of many, Mr Elbegdorj won a resounding victory at 52 percent, a lead that was even greater in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, than in the provinces. The incoming president will probably assume his office on July 11 of this year.

Both candidates are outstanding actors in Mongolia's young democracy:

Born in 1958, Mr Enkhbayar studied at the Maxim Gorki Institute in Moscow as well as in Leeds. He acquired great merit not only between 1992 and 1996 when, as minister of culture, he promoted the reform of the MRPP, which was communist at the time. He was also one of the driving forces when the MRPP sought to regenerate itself in opposition in the second half of the nineties, after the new democratic movement had taken the helm. It is due to the impulses he provided that the party today is regarded as one of the pillars of the country's democracy even on the international plane. In June 2000, the MRPP won another clear victory, and Mr Enkhbayar became prime minister. One year after the end of his term, in 2005, he emerged victorious from the presidential elections, and he might have had a good chance of being re-elected this year if this was permitted by the electoral code.

Born in 1963, Mr Elbegdorj studied journalism in the Ukrainian city of Lvov during the Soviet era. Until 1990, he was one of the editors of the Mongolian Army Journal. As early as November 1989, he began supporting democratic reforms and leading opposition demonstrations in Ulaanbaatar. One of the fathers of the country's first democratic constitution, Mr Elbegdorj was the democratic movement's most important guide on its way to the Democratic Party of today. After a brief spell as prime minister in 1998, he went to the USA to study communications science following the defeat of his party in 2000. Regarded as the leading light of the Mongolian Academy for Political Education, Mr Elbegdorj was again elected prime minister for two years in 2004.

The recent presidential elections were still noticeably marred by the memory of the violent riots which broke out on July 1, 2008, when the MRPP government announced that the result of the parliamentary elections had been a

clear vote in its favour. Demonstrators who charged the MRPP with having rigged the elections and vented their fury were arrested in their hundreds. Although international observers found no proof that the elections had actually been manipulated, there may well have been some irregularities. There can be no doubt that the MRPP still holds all key positions in the administration, is still regarded as the 'state party', and was well placed to campaign much more efficiently than the opposition. Mistrust was further fuelled by the blurring of the boundary line between state action and party support, so that judgement on the charge of manipulation must be reserved.

However, the shock of July 1 was also beneficial in a way. Thus, the campaign and the election itself remained largely free from violence, and the readiness with which the MRPP leaders recognized Mr Elbegdorj as the winner also had a de-escalating effect.

The recent campaign, like the previous one, was a contest between the MRPP and the DP. Although it did focus on content here and there, it was dominated by persons and their endeavours to brush up their own image.

Mr Enkhbayar sought to display his competence as head of government during the last few years, albeit without the effect he had hoped for. His campaign seemed listless, the MRPP's campaign machine was slow to start, and there was hardly any of its representatives who promoted the president visibly and efficiently. To be sure, Mr Enkhbayar embodied statesmanship with his experience as party chairman and prime minister, but the way in which he did it was not convincing. He did earn some respect with his attempt to establish Buddhism as a kind of state religion, but it was just that attempt which made him appear cynical because the MRPP was the party which had tried to extirpate Buddhist culture in 1937/38 by order of the Soviets and prosecuted any religious practice until the eighties. Another factor which Mr Enkhbayar had underestimated was the people's wish for change. The steadily widening social gap is worrying many Mongolians. Moreover, people are fed up with corruption, an evil that is largely associated with the 'old guard', of which the president of the country is seen as the most prominent member

For Mr Elbegdorj and his DP, the chances of winning the elections looked anything but good at first. The challenger himself was criticized with having partially caused the explosive atmosphere in the capital with his massive charges of electoral fraud against the MRPP. Moreover, his image was further tainted when he lost his position at the head of his party and refused to form a coalition government with the ruling party. It is all the more astonishing that he did succeed in lining up his party behind him and taking aboard the CWRP and the Greens, both minor parties in the Mongolian parliament. It was the latter step which proved greatly advantageous because a growing number of Mongolians are turning their backs on the big parties. When the

opposition joined forces and Mr Elbegdorj was supported by the chairpersons of the minor parties, large segments of the population were added to his following: Mrs Ouyn, the head of the CWRP and onetime foreign minister, is sister to the country's leading democracy activist, while Mr Enkhbat, the chairman of the Greens, is seen as epitomizing civil society. Even Mr Obama's 'change' slogan had its effect when Mr Elbegdorj, a gifted orator, used it to put himself into the limelight – in a country where the importance of television is growing.

The still-young Democratic Party has certainly been strengthened enormously by the outcome of the election of May 24. Moreover, it is a personal triumph for Mr Elbegdorj himself, all the more so as he was twice dismissed before the end of his term when he was prime minister before. The new president of Mongolia will not have much time to make good on his promises and present his first successes. The population has been growing impatient since the last parliamentary elections as both major parties had made many promises then, the most important among them being that Mongolians should have a generous share in the revenue from the sale of primary goods. At the time, there was some talk of massive foreign investments in mining. However, these will hardly materialize anytime soon, not only because of the current crisis but also because of the passivity of parliament, which keeps deferring the execution of the relevant contracts. At the same time, the new president himself will be largely relegated to the role of observer in all these matters.

But then again, Mr Elbegdorj is certainly not a man to confine himself to mere political symbolism. He will use the options offered by his office, initiating bills and shaping day-to-day politics to his liking wherever he can. His success in mitigating poverty and his resolution in fighting corruption will certainly be the standards by which the people will measure his quality first of all. His foreign policy, on the other hand, might harbour a few surprises. In his relations with Russia and China, he will probably keep to the strategy of playing the 'third partner' to the two 'first partners'. As a self-declared friend of the USA, however, Mr Elbegdorj will have to reckon with some coolness on the part of Moscow and Beijing. At the same time, the leaders in Ulaanbaatar are well aware that, like it or not, they will have to relate all important steps in foreign as well as in export policy to the two neighbouring countries.

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