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# Between Yurts and Skyscrapers

Mongolia's Youth Are Grappling with a Corrupt Elite

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Young people in Mongolia are fighting for a say in politics. Internet activists are protesting against corruption in politics and business. In Ulaanbaatar, young women are fighting against sexual violence, and for more political participation. Meanwhile, traditional ways of life are in retreat. Are profound social changes, coupled with an ossified political elite, splitting Mongolian society?

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### **A Local Expression of a Global Debate?**

“Now it’s war” – the New York Times recently used these words to describe young people’s feelings of resentment towards the baby boomer generation, i.e. those born between 1945 and 1965.<sup>1</sup> The hashtag “OK Boomer” is used by young people to disparage certain attitudes attributed to the older generation. “OK Boomer” is a digital way of dismissing them, a way of saying “Sure thing, grandpa”, that is taking the world by storm. The Fridays for Future protests, and the viral video by vlogger Rezo, have shown that Germany is also experiencing a gap in understanding between the young and the old, particularly when it comes to climate change. Whether it is Greta Thunberg, climate protests or the OK Boomer hashtag – these topics are also covered by the Mongolian media. The journalist Manjaagiin Ichinnorov recently raised the question of whether this landlocked Asian country is also threatened by generational conflict.<sup>2</sup> However, due to the different starting points and objectives, such a comparison hardly seems possible: While climate protection is at the forefront of the European debate, in Mongolia, young people are mainly fighting to uphold basic democratic rights, and for more social and political participation. Young Mongolians are confronted with a corrupt political elite that shows no willingness to listen to their concerns. On top of this, a proposed new law on NGOs is calling into question the future of civil society. Political disenchantment and growing scepticism towards politicians are the immediate consequences. In parallel, the rapid advance of urbanisation is leading to large-scale social upheaval.

### **Resignation and Protest**

“Including Youth in the Development of Mongolia” was the title of the United Nations’ 2016 Human Development Report on the country.<sup>3</sup> This study provides valuable insights into young people’s attitudes towards politics. Mongolia’s youth, which the organisation defines as people aged between 15 and 24, makes up the country’s largest demographic group, at over thirty per cent. They are the first generation to grow up in a democracy in the wake of the peaceful revolution of 1990 and the fall of the socialist dictatorship. Unfortunately, it has been characterised by frequent changes of government – 16 over the last 30 years – and rampant corruption. Young people’s socialisation has also shaped their political consciousness: according to the report, more than 60 per cent of youth in Mongolia consider politics to be dirty, and believe that injustice drives good people away from politics.<sup>4</sup> Very few want to join political parties or get in touch with their MPs. Yet the impression of an apolitical generation is deceptive, as became clear about a year ago, when tens of thousands took to Twitter and Facebook to protest a corruption scandal involving the ruling party under the hashtag Ждү (SME, small and medium-sized enterprises). At the time, in late 2018, it emerged that numerous politicians in the ruling Mongolian People’s Party (MPP), including two ministers and fourteen MPs, had embezzled a sovereign wealth fund set up to support small and medium-sized enterprises.<sup>5</sup> According to Mongolia expert Julian Dierkes, over the next few weeks Ждү became “one of the most active and unifying hashtags we have seen emerge on Mongolian social media.”<sup>6</sup>

But this massive protest by young internet activists merely led to the dismissal of the parliamentary speaker, Mijeegombyn Enkbold, and the Minister of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry, Batjargal Batzorig, who was responsible for allocating the money and, among other things, had given his wife a loan from the fund. The fourteen MPs who had enriched themselves in the SME scandal were not prosecuted and remained in office. A subsequent parliamentary vote decided that the government should stay in power, and also split the opposition Democratic Party (DP). Three members of the DP had voted for the MPP government; two of them set up a new party a few months later. Meanwhile, media reports of corruption in the ranks of the ruling party continue unabated. In early November 2019, two MPP politicians were each sentenced to four years in prison for their involvement in the sale of government offices.<sup>7</sup>

### **Since the youth lacks adequate representation in parliament, Mongolian politicians are rarely taking their views seriously.**

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Even four years ago, the UN report was critical of young people's dwindling trust and lack of involvement in political institutions. It concluded that Mongolia's youth lacked adequate representation in parliament, and that their views were rarely taken seriously by politicians.<sup>8</sup> Party funding is a serious problem in this respect, but this is not covered in the report. Party funding not only lacks transparency but also requires prospective MPs, particularly newcomers to politics, to make large payments out of their own pockets. Very few young people have the personal resources or sponsorship to finance expensive election campaigns. High membership fees for political parties disadvantage young women in particular, who, on average, earn 1.4 times less than men.<sup>9</sup> Particularly in rural Mongolia, women often cannot afford to join political

parties. This is also reflected in the composition of parliament, where only 13 out of 76 MPs are women. The youngest member of parliament, Nyam-Osoryn Uchral, is 34 years old, followed by five aged 39.

The MPP and DP both have youth wings that are represented in every province around the country. A glimmer of hope was provided by the fact that the DP's youth wing was heavily involved in drafting the party's new manifesto. Sukhbaatar Erdenebold, the chairman of the youth organisation, was entrusted with this process. The draft manifesto was debated at 21 regional conferences and finally unanimously adopted on 5 December 2018 at the DP's 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. This was a groundbreaking step in light of young people's general lack of engagement with politics. It also raised hopes that parliament could be rejuvenated after the June 2020 elections. But the DP's recent announcement that candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections will be required to pay one hundred million Tugrik, the equivalent of over 30,000 euros, into the party's coffers has triggered controversy and disillusionment.<sup>10</sup> It is feared that these financial obstacles will prevent many talented young politicians from standing for election.

Policy failures and persistent corruption mean that young people are increasingly losing trust in their country's democratic institutions. In a comparative survey of twelve Asian countries, Mongolia's youth had the most negative view of parliament. Only ten per cent of them believed that parliament responds to the interests of its citizens.<sup>11</sup> Although they are disenchanted with politics, many young people nevertheless get involved in civil society organisations as a way of making their voices heard.

### **Young Women and the Fight for Equality**

In late November 2019, the chairman of Mongolia's constitutional court, Dorj Odbayar, finally succumbed to public pressure and was removed from his post. The 52-year-old was accused of sexually harassing a South Korean flight attendant on a flight from Ulaanbaatar to Incheon.<sup>12</sup> He was

allegedly drunk during the incident that took place last October. He was initially backed by the government, and the parliamentary speaker stated that the South Korean police had confused the seat number and arrested the wrong person. The constitutional court's press office stated that the judge was simply defending a fellow Mongolian who had been wrongly accused of sexual assault.<sup>13</sup> But in the end, these versions of events could not be sustained. Once the incident became public, the social media furore continued for many weeks, and an online petition, which has attracted thousands of signatories, is still demanding an official apology from the chairman of the court. The fierce controversy ignited by this incident in Mongolia's media was partly due to the fact that sexual violence against women is so widespread. For example, a report by the United Nations Population Fund reveals that more than half of all women in Mongolia who are in a relationship experience one or more forms of violence, whether physical, sexual or psychological.<sup>14</sup> Domestic violence was only made a criminal offence three years ago. Mongolia is clearly a very patriarchal country, as is demonstrated by the fact that all 21 of the country's provincial governors are men. The situation is similar in business, where only 15 per cent of top executives are women – despite various statistics showing that 60 to 80 per cent of university graduates are women.<sup>15</sup> Several years ago, the United Nations Development Programme called for an overhaul of labour market policy, but so far little has changed.

### **Young women feel let down by their political representatives since they withdrew a law against sexual harassment in 2017.**

In Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital, young women are no longer prepared to simply put up with sexual violence and gender inequality. This is where four like-minded women banded together a few years ago to form a women's

Anti-government sentiments: Policy failures and → persistent corruption mean that young people are increasingly losing trust in their country's democratic institutions.

Source: © Rentsendorj Bazarsukh, Reuters.

rights organisation called Young Women for Change. Apart from organising demonstrations, this NGO also runs training courses and seminars in a bid to raise awareness of the problem and change society's attitudes. The activists also use comics and videos to deliberately draw young men into the debate. They feel they have been let down by their political representatives, who passed a law against sexual harassment in 2015 then promptly withdrew it two years later. With bizarre reasoning, one of the few female MPs, Oyunkhorol Dulamsuren of the MPP, justified it as follows: "The reason why parliament removed it from criminal law is that the action was taken in the same vein as sexual violence, so it was unfair for men."<sup>16</sup> Around one year later, in June 2018, Dulamsuren's fellow MP and party member Gantulga had to step down from parliament after being accused of rape.

But the Young Women for Change are not ready to give up. Several of its founding members have been involved in politics for years and now want to stand in the parliamentary elections in June 2020 in order to finally achieve the longed-for transformation in women's policy. They are also taking their fight for equality to the country's digital media, with more than 67,000 followers on Facebook alone.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Threat to Nationalise Civil Society**

Recent plans by the Mongolian Ministry of Justice are giving rise to concerns that young people could also experience repression in their civic activities. On 16 October 2019, the Ministry of Justice website published a proposed draft law on NGOs, which seeks to give the government vastly more power over civil society.<sup>18</sup> Mongolia currently has around 21,000 registered NGOs compared to a mere 1,000 twenty years ago. The draft law on "non-profit legal entities" calls



for the creation of a Civil Society Development Council, which is to be endowed with extensive powers and rights of intervention. For example, the council is to be empowered to monitor the activities and finances of NGOs, and to examine them for their “public benefit”.<sup>19</sup> What exactly is meant by “public benefit” and the consequences of not meeting this criterion, remains unclear.

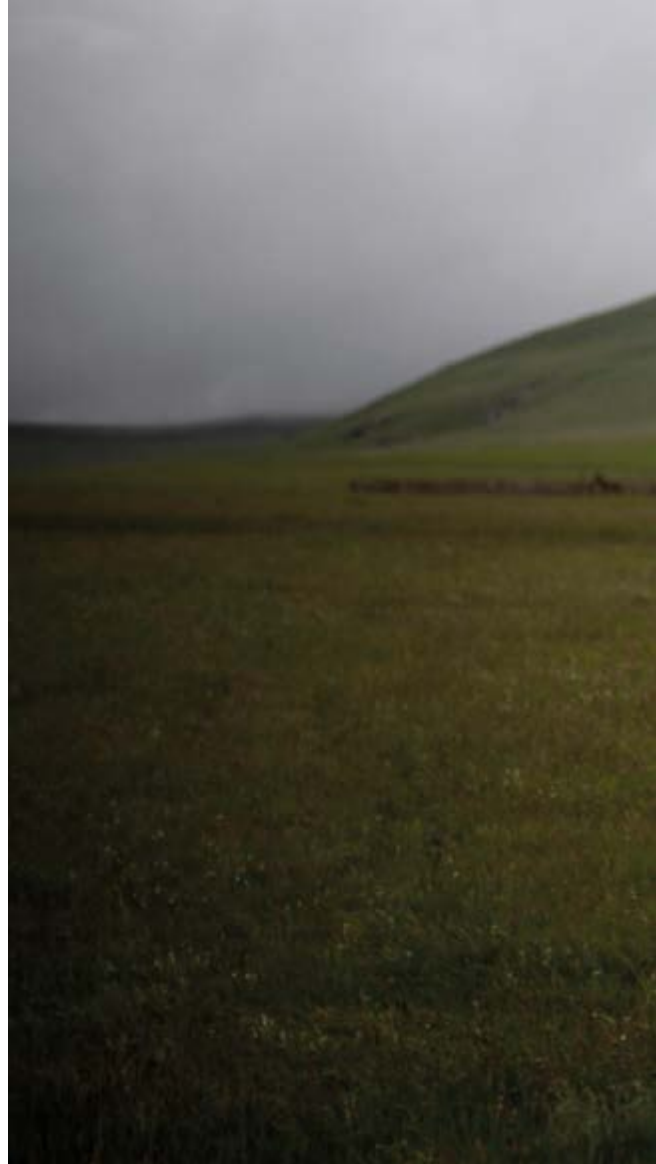
### **Critics of the new NGO law stress that the room for interpretation could turn out to be highly problematic.**

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It is clear that the proposed council will be under the government’s control. According to the draft law, the guidelines for the new council will be set by the government chancellery, and the council’s nine members will be appointed and confirmed by the prime minister after an unspecified aptitude test.<sup>20</sup> Public funding currently accounts for less than two per cent of the income of Mongolian NGOs, but the draft law also aims to give the government more control over this area.<sup>21</sup> In future, the government proposes to draw up a list of priorities every two years to determine which topics and project areas it considers worthy of funding. The draft law has already set out the areas in which NGOs will be allowed to operate – and where not. For example, it aims to prohibit joint activities with political parties, and the promotion of religious activities or projects.<sup>22</sup> In addition, it proposes that NGOs should be dissolved if their “main objective” changes.

The multitude of vague and indeterminate terms leaves a great deal of room for interpretation. This is what critics of the draft law find particularly worrying. For example, Article 14.2 prohibits activities that are directed against “national unity” and that “promote extremism”. Whether criticising the government or demanding minority rights amounts to extremism remains unclear. In an article for the Washington Post, journalist Aubrey Menarndt highlights how Russia used

identical wording to ban NGOs advocating for the rights of sexual minorities.<sup>23</sup> This example underscores the fact that the draft law is not oriented towards Western models and grants the government extensive rights of intervention in civil society. This is also demonstrated by the planned reporting obligations on funding: in future, NGOs will not only have to report to the relevant financial authorities, but also be obliged to publicly declare all their income, expenditure and activities. This suggests that the state is not just interested in financial transparency, but also in discrediting NGOs that receive funding





Is the youth running off? Young Mongolians are particularly affected by vast internal migration.  
Source: © Mareike Guensch, Reuters.

from abroad. At present, foreign donors provide Mongolian NGOs with nearly 68 per cent of their funds.<sup>24</sup>

The journalist Jargal DeFacto is one of the draft law's most prominent opponents. He has been warning the public about its potential impact for months. Specifically, he fears that NGOs will no longer be able to exercise their government oversight function, and that it will be more difficult for civil society to make its voice heard to the authorities. One reason for this is the vaguely worded ban on political activities.

More seriously, however, the law could lead to self-censorship because NGOs are aware of the unclear legal provisions and the massive influence wielded by the state.

One of the law's supporters is parliamentary speaker Gombojavyn Zandanshatar, who said in a Facebook post that there was absolutely no desire to take "backward steps" with regard to the development of civil society.<sup>25</sup> However, he points to the need for more scrutiny of NGOs' financial flows. Indeed, this has been stipulated by the International Monetary Fund and the

Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering.<sup>26</sup> Over the last few months, politicians and the public have been preoccupied by the fact that the organisation recently put Mongolia on its “grey list”. And therein lies a danger: discussions with experts on the ground have revealed that the law is actually quite popular. The Mongolian public is keen to see steps taken to curb corruption. The large number of registered NGOs suggests that some of them are being used for tax evasion or even money laundering purposes. Most observers agree that there is a need for a transparent NGO law. However, the current draft goes far beyond what is needed, and threatens the continued existence of the flourishing NGO landscape that has emerged in recent decades. According to their own figures, over 44 per cent of young men and more than 55 per cent of young women are actively involved in the work of youth organisations.<sup>27</sup> These young activists are trying to alert people to the potential impact of the law, such as by posting videos on social media.<sup>28</sup> But it remains to be seen whether the law can be stopped.

### **Urbanisation and the Decline of Nomadic Culture**

Urbanisation in Mongolia is progressing rapidly and massively. In 1956, 75 per cent of the population still lived in rural areas. With the onset of industrialisation, between the 1960s and 1980s, a rural exodus began on an unimagined scale. Many nomads gave up animal husbandry and moved to the cities. Today, almost half of Mongolia’s 3.2 million citizens live in the capital, Ulaanbaatar. Only about 300,000 Mongolians still live as nomads.<sup>29</sup> Young Mongolians are particularly affected by internal migration: around 60 per cent of migrants arriving in Ulaanbaatar between 2000 and 2010 were aged 15 to 34.<sup>30</sup> Around 30 per cent of Mongolians live in poverty. According to an internal migration study published in 2018, the main drivers of migration are economic considerations, family welfare and the desire for improved living conditions.<sup>31</sup> There are no reliable figures on youth unemployment in Mongolia. Officially, around 18 per cent of young people between the ages of

20 and 24 are deemed to be unemployed, which is more than twice the national average.<sup>32</sup> However, the number of unreported cases is likely to be much higher.

## **The proposed NGO law calls the future of Mongolian civil society in question as a whole.**

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Urbanisation is bringing major changes to family life, and once again it is young families who are particularly affected. Often one or even both parents live apart from their children. Mothers often live in provincial towns with their children so that they can go to school, while the men work away in agriculture or mining. In November 2019 the National Statistical Office grabbed the headlines when it published its latest figures showing a sharp increase in the number of households headed by women – currently in excess of 72,000.<sup>33</sup> The authorities cited the main reasons for this as “early marriages, early sexual activity and divorce due to domestic violence”.<sup>34</sup> The divorce rate has risen dramatically over the last few years: 21,000 marriages per year are matched by 4,200 divorces. In light of these statistics, Oyunkhorol Dulamsuren, Chairwoman of the Standing Committee on Social Policy, Education, Culture and Science, called for the establishment of a Ministry for Families, Children and Youth. She stated: “Today’s youth policy is inadequate. The government should focus more strongly on increasing happiness rather than on economic growth.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Future of Democracy Is at Risk**

Young people are being shut out of Mongolian politics – with serious consequences. Trust in democratic institutions is rapidly being eroded. Young people’s protests about rampant corruption in politics and business are not being taken seriously by those in charge. Young women are inadequately protected against workplace discrimination and sexual assault. Although



many young people are actively involved in civil society, the proposed NGO law now threatens censorship and reprisals, while simultaneously calling into question the future of Mongolian civil society as a whole. Young people are also disproportionately affected by the consequences of internal migration, and the number of single mothers is on the rise.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Mongolian society is being divided by the actions of the political elite, who are not in a position to manage the massive social changes that are sweeping the country. There is an urgent need for political dialogue, but this will require politicians to make concessions. It is important that young people are actively involved in political processes, otherwise the country's achievements since democratisation will be jeopardised. An important first step would be to ensure that civics and politics are taught in schools. Young people have to turn to television and social media for information because they learn so little about Mongolia's democratic system at school.<sup>36</sup> It is also vital to provide political parties with public funding so that people can get involved in their work and stand for election regardless of their income level. Women need more protection against violence and should be supported in the labour market. Tightening up existing laws and introducing new ones relating to sexual violence would be a good step in the right direction, along with education campaigns and government funding programmes. There is no doubt that Mongolia's democracy is facing a major challenge. How will it handle the massive social tensions that have grown up between its yurts and skyscrapers?

*—translated from German—*

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