

Policy Forum 06-07A: Eurasia Burning: A Dark Day for Mongolian Democracy

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Essay by Steve Noerper

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I. Introduction

Steve Noerper, who teaches *Asia Today* at New York University and was a Fulbright Senior Scholar

to the National University of Mongolia, writes “the downfall of Mongolia’s coalition government late Friday marks a relapse for freedom’s progress in a country that until recently had been held out as a harbinger for new democracies in the region.”

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II. Essay by Steve Noerper

- Eurasia Burning: A Dark Day for Mongolian Democracy
by Steve Noerper

The downfall of Mongolia’s coalition government late Friday marks a relapse for freedom’s progress in a country that until recently had been held out as a harbinger for new democracies in the region. The acceptance of the resignation of ten cabinet members from the formerly communist Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) was led by MPRP parliamentarians, effectively robbing the democratic coalition and a large portion of Mongolia’s population of a voice. Employing strong-arm tactics akin to the dark days prior to democracy, MPRP parliamentarians decried efforts by Prime Minister Tsakhia Elbegdorj, who held the position for less than two years and helped lead the country to democracy in the early 1990s, and verbally assaulted Dr. Sanjaasuren Oyun, leader of the minority Civil Will Party and a woman famous for her integrity and efforts at anti-corruption and good governance. A vast majority of Mongolians were shamed, petrified and left in tears at seeing democratic voices such as those of Elbegdorj and Oyun stifled. MPRP parliamentarians served notice to the Prime Minister that poverty and recent economic woes demanded his resignation, a move suspect and wholly incorrect, as the MPRP has dominated government the majority of the time since Mongolia’s turn to democracy. Though the past year has been one of political tumult and rising concerns about skyrocketing prices and a lack of jobs and effective wages, actions this week were unwarranted and now place democracy in jeopardy.

Those in Asia, Europe and the Americas concerned with recent trends toward neo-authoritarianism and a rollback of democratic gains note the striking similarities of the political crises confronted in recent days by Elbegdorj in Mongolia and President Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. Moreover, both flank a Russia that in recent years has curtailed personal and press freedoms, countered reformers, and used energy resources as a weapon, in Ukraine’s case to register its anger and in Mongolia as a result of the Yukos affair. Putin has become an exemplar for neo-authoritarians across the Eurasian arc, with democracy under threat in Central Asia from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan – and to Mongolia, where the Soviets held sway for seventy years. The light proffered by the “colored” revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan is now dimmed, rather than emboldened, by recent events, including those in Mongolia. Many international observers, myself included, had seen Mongolia consolidating democracy, demonstrating to the Central Asian Stans and nearby countries like North Korea that a reform of Stalinist economies and political liberalization were the way forward.

U.S. President Bush in his November visit applauded Mongolia for its democratic model and thanked Mongolia for its support of Iraqi peacekeeping efforts. Implicit in the US President’s visit -- which followed an early October visit by the US Secretary of Defense -- was a heightened awareness of Mongolia’s strategic importance, cushioned between Russia and China. Mongolia’s democratic progress and economic reform had merited it a spot as the only Asian continental player qualifying for funding under the U.S. President’s Millennium Challenge Account -- a position that may now be in jeopardy. Ousted PM Elbegdorj had actively crusaded for an independent media and greater public access to insure transparency and accountability.

Current developments could usher in a cycle of popular violence similar to that of this week's or lead to further crack-downs. Mongolia may see a period of political turbulence that could lay waste to a majority - some suggest the entirety -- of its democratic gains. That 2006 is the 800th anniversary of Mongolia's First Empire, marking a time when its influence spanned the known world and laid origins for state relations, is now sadly ironic. The personal attacks and stark threat to democracy posed by Mongolia's bloodless coup merit heightened international attention and monitoring. As Mongolia once watched the known world, so now the world and its crusaders for democracy now sadly watch Mongolia.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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