

## The End of post-socialism? An account of the 1st of July riots in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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On 1 July, 2008, rioters set fire to the headquarters building of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) following allegations of electoral fraud. The MPRP have held the majority of seats in the *Ih Hural* (Parliament) for most of the post-socialist period, and early returns gave them a majority in the Parliamentary elections on 29 June. In the riot, five people died and Mongolia's first state of emergency since the collapse of socialism in 1990 was declared.

Post-socialist Mongolia is no stranger to protests, and indeed, allegations of voting fraud on the part of both the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and the Democratic Party (or any of its almost innumerable predecessors or coalitions of the moment) have marred almost every election. Yet the riot of 1 July was radically new, both in the fact that people lost their lives and the extent of the destruction. In comparison, the democratic revolution that unfolded over the winter of 1989–90 was decidedly peaceful. (A few accounts claim one person was killed in a protest during that spring, but this has never been confirmed.) In the era of *perestroika*, pro-democratic protesters, largely young intellectuals, held public demonstrations and engaged the government in high-level discussions over political reform. This process was brought to a head by a hunger-strike held in the main square, Sühbaatar Square, which led to the resignation of most of the Politburo. This resulted in the first multi-party democratic elections in Mongolian history.

The riots of 1 July were a watershed in the Mongolian political landscape and caused public shock and led to widespread debate. This was said to be the first time military armoured vehicles were seen on the streets of Ulaanbaatar. We present here a report on the day's events and the reactions that followed. This takes the form of a brief chronology of events as we witnessed them, followed by a short discussion of the interpretations we were told or encountered in the days after the event.

### CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Parliamentary elections were held on 29 June. No official results were announced for several days, although early indications gave the MPRP an unexpected lead.

Almost immediately, there were allegations of voter intimidation and fraud on all sides, similar to claims made in earlier elections. By 1 July, unofficial results gave about forty seats to the MPRP, twenty to the Democratic Party and roughly sixteen left unaccounted for. The impression was that most of these would be split among the two main parties, with several smaller parties losing out entirely. These results clashed with expectations among their supporters that the Democratic and smaller parties would make a much stronger showing than they did.

Protests over both the preliminary results and alleged fraud started as early as the night of 30 June. Political leaders such as Magnai, head of the Civic Movement, called for a mass gathering in Songino Hairhan, one of the disputed electoral districts, to be held the following day. The Electoral Commission in Songino Hairhan acknowledged that there were discrepancies in favour of the MPRP candidates, fuelling suspicion and outrage. Another, smaller gathering, took place in Sühbaatar Square the morning of 1 July, where banners called for an honest rerun of the election. In addition to allegations of fraud, the demonstrators complained about corruption, inflation and threatening foreign interests buying key resources. These concerns reflected sentiments common throughout Mongolia.

At this stage, the large mass of demonstrators who were still in Songino Hairhan in the western parts of the city began to march to the centre. In the early afternoon, the Democratic Party started construction of a stage with loudspeakers, presumably intended for a peaceful rally, which was a common enough sight in the central square. In the mid-afternoon, Magnai and the leaders of other small parties made speeches alleging fraud and calling for new elections.

By around 3.30 that afternoon, a large, vocal crowd had already begun to gather in front of the MPRP headquarters building. By the time the protest started to heat up around 5.00 pm, the main body of marchers from Songino Hairhan had arrived, and riot police were in evidence around the building. The crowd began to bang on corrugated metal fencing around a nearby construction site, chanting and shouting abuse. There was a good deal of pushing and shoving in the crowd, and by about 5.30–6.00 the police had retreated far enough for the protestors to gain access to the flag poles at the bottom of the steps to the building. Flags representing the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Civic Movement and others were raised. At this stage, it appeared as if a large part of the crowd thought this symbolic act was the goal of the protest, and that it would soon disperse. However, a sizeable portion of the crowd clearly had other plans.

By around 7.00 pm projectiles were being thrown, windows smashed and the façade of the building was marked with red paint. A large force of riot police advanced from the west side of the building pressing the crowd back, with a dozen or so police sitting on the steps of the headquarters, sheltering behind their riot shields. Suddenly there was a surge from the direction of Sühbaatar Square, with protesters charging and hurling projectiles. The police fled, retreating to the interior of the building. This was a crucial turning point in the course of events.