



Mongolia: model for transition merits international support by Steve Noerper

President N. Enkhbayar of Mongolia visited the United States for the United Nations summit last week. His visit should help Mongolia receive more international support. Mongolia is following a peaceful process democratic consolidation that involves the rule of law and its effective development as a regional player.

Last year's election was only the fourth free election in Mongolian history, and its peaceful tone speaks to the maturity of Mongolian democracy since the country was freed from 70 years of Soviet domination in 1990. Mongolia is among the freest and most democratic governments in Asia; for the countries of Central Asia and for North Korea, Mongolia is a model for democracy and transition. As Washington engages in the latest round of Six-Party Talks to check a North Korea potentially armed with nuclear weapons, Mongolia provides evidence that communist systems can reform, can liberalize, can democratize – and can even declare themselves nuclear weapons free zones. With minimal outside assistance, the Mongolian people have built strong democratic institutions.

Together with North Korea and Bangladesh, Mongolia ranks among the poorest nations of Asia with per capita income of around \$600. Yet, its 2.5 million people maintain an adult literacy rate of nearly 99 percent, making them more literate than the citizens of the much richer U.S. Although some Mongolians must ride a horse or camel to a polling station set up in a tent, voter turnout and participation in last year's election was approximately 80 percent of the adult population – far higher than the U.S. presidential election last November.

Mongolia is a productive and increasingly active member of the regional and international community, an early supporter of the global war on terror. Although sandwiched between the massive super-states of Russia and China, Mongolia defied both to join the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein. Mongolia has offered several rotations of forces to Iraq, and in 2004, a Mongolian guard prevented a suicide bomb attack on coalition troops.

During the effort to draw closer diplomatically to the U.S., Mongolia has maintained working connections to the remaining communist states, including Cuba and North Korea. With its old connections and new alliances, Mongolia is in a unique position to help the U.S. maintain ties with some of its most persistent adversaries.

Outsiders need to do more for Mongolia, especially by way of trade and foreign direct investment. The country stumbled through its transition to democracy and capitalism with minimal political assistance. With the collapse of Soviet subsidies in the 1990s, the economy came close to collapsing.

Health care for people and animals fell. When three years of animal famine, known as *zud*, followed, hoof-and-mouth disease and anthrax broke out among the animals, and the plague among humans. With a hardiness and determination born of centuries of herding life, the Mongolians not only survived but persevered in their quest to create a democratic and free society.

Today, Mongolia still faces enormous problems from rising oil prices to declining health care. As the people of Mongolia struggle to maintain their democracy through challenges and crises, the U.S. and other nations need to enhance support to guarantee that Mongolian democracy continues to serve as a harbinger for Central and East Asia. Mongolia has proven that it deserves U.S. help and international respect for its accomplishments.

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