

In Mongolia, too, change is on the way

by Lydia Cherry

The hitherto isolated and backward nation of Mongolia, geographically encircled by the Soviet Union and China, and politically dominated by Moscow, will hold a multi-party election on July 29—the first since it turned into a communist state in 1924. Participating will be the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and five new opposition parties.

Even though the opposition parties are merging for electoral purposes into a Coalition of Democratic Forces, it is generally predicted that the refurbished communist party will outpoll the newer parties. One reason is that opposition activists have only recently begun to campaign in rural areas, where half of Mongolia's 2 million people reside. However, in order to be in this position, the communists have been forced to make major changes to keep ahead of the popular cry for change.

Turn away from Moscow

The impact of the initially tiny opposition movement—which, beginning Jan. 21, endured temperatures of -23°C to defy their communist leaders and call for a split from Moscow—is undebatable. Sanjaasurengiyn Dzorig, the 27-year-old university lecturer who led the first protests and hunger strikes, now heads one of the five new parties, the Mongolian Democratic Party. "Our goal is to build a normal society from a sick and deformed one," he said on that first cold day. Mongolia must "rapidly develop relations with other countries."

Opposition leaders were quoted by East German news agency ADN on July 8 saying that "the elections are only a first step toward democracy." "There cannot yet be talk of equality in these elections," they said, "because the administrative election preparations are completely in the hands of the MPRP-controlled state authorities." The opposition leaders, who had considered opposing the electoral process, in early July called on supporters "to return to the election commissions and to fight for every vote."

Constitutional amendments which create a new governmental structure were approved by the national legislature the second week in May. The constitution will now allow a directly elected standing legislature and legalizes political parties. The new MPRP chairman, Gombojavyan Ochirbat, then immediately registered his party in preparation for the July 29 elections. Opposition parties—which include the Mongolian Party of National Progress, the Social Democratic Party, the Mongolian Democratic Party, the Mongolian Green Party,

and the National Progressive Party—also registered.

In recent months, the ruling party has taken steps to distance itself from Moscow and has even criticized the Soviet Union for exploiting Mongolia economically. At the April 10-13 extraordinary party congress held in the wake of demonstrations for democracy, Gombojavyan Ochirbat, previously chairman of the Mongolian Trade Union Council, was named head of state. The congress elected a central committee of 91 members, most of them new.

Mongolia's diplomacy has turned increasingly toward Japan, Thailand, and South Korea. It was announced on June 4 that compulsory learning of the national Mongolian script, in place of the sole language of Russian, will begin following the 1990-91 academic year.

Moscow, meanwhile, has largely turned Mongolia loose, apparently because it didn't need another headache, and because it has already milked it dry.

Economic program the key issue

Even though a significant livestock-producing country, there are acute food shortages in Mongolia, particularly meat shortages, since it exports almost all its meat and livestock to the Soviet Union. In the smaller towns, sources say, no meat has been available for four years. In the cities, Mongolians are not able to use the best-supplied shops, which are only open to Russians and other foreigners. Opposition leader Dzorig pointed out on April 8 that "a number of large factories have been built in Mongolia with the support of the Soviet Union, but all their products have been for export. And now, Mongolians are forced to import even their daily necessities." A total foreign debt of \$15.5 billion was owned by Mongolia to the U.S.S.R. as of Jan. 1, but Soviet officials were told in April that Mongolia did not have the money to pay.

A debate on economic program is the major focus of the campaign now under way. The MPRP's Ochirbat is himself focused on this subject, and the government has set the objective of developing basic branches of industry such as ferrous and non-ferrous metals, engineering, and chemicals, which have big accumulation returns and a greater impact on economic development. The country's economic program, unveiled May 9, aims to raise real per capita incomes by 20% for townspeople and by 30% for the rural population by 1995. It will build the country's first iron and steel complex, to produce 100,000 tons of rolled metal a year.

The Japanese firm C. Itoh and Co. is involved in construction of a copper smelter. Mongolia is seeking to obtain a \$50-60 million credit from Japan for developing the metallurgical industry. Already, 40% of Mongolia's free currency trade per year falls on Japanese companies. A direct air route with Japan will open Aug. 16. After having established diplomatic links with South Korea, Ochirbat said on April 12 that Mongolia was calling on South Korea to promote the development of bilateral economic and trade relations.