



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Mongolians win multi-party democracy, 1989-1990

- Asian Democracy Campaigns (1980s)
- Soviet Bloc Independence Campaigns (1989-1991)

December 10,
1989

to: May 10,
1990

Country: Mongolia

Location City/State/Province: *Mostly in Ulan Bator*

Goals:

Primarily: To end the Soviet-influenced Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party's monopoly on political power in Mongolia by forcing multi-party elections in 1990

Secondarily: Freedom of the press, respect for human rights, and the implementation of a market economy

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals

- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Forming illegal opposition parties

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 097. Protest strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Wearing outlawed, traditional clothing
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Educated youths
- Mongolian citizens as a whole

- rural workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Sanjaasurengiin Zorig, a leader of the Mongolian Democratic Union (MDU), who called for nonviolent action during the campaign; Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, who led the Mongolian Democratic Union's steering committee; Eleven others initially founded the movement

Partners:

Erdenet copper miners, who joined the reform movement out of anger that Russian miners received higher wages for the same work; Mongolian Democratic Journalists' Union

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Mine workers in Erdenet
- Mongolian Democratic Journalists' Union

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Newly-formed opposition parties

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Buddhist monks
- Students
- Workers in towns throughout Mongolia

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 25 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

During the hunger strike, unruly mobs killed one person, caused some property damage, and stole cars

Repressive Violence:

Police only arrested protesters one time: in April, 1990.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners achieved all their goals, including multi-party elections, freedom of press, greater respect for human rights, and a move towards a market economy

The Mongolian Democratic Union survived through the campaign and led to the creation of many opposition parties.

The campaign grew from a small group of 200 people to rallies of over 40,000 people and had support from all over Mongolia

In 1921 the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) came to power and soon aligned the country with the USSR. Until this democracy campaign in 1989, the MPRP ruled Mongolia through a constitutionally-sanctioned single-party government. By the mid-1980's, pro-reform sentiments and movements were spreading in Eastern Europe, especially at the universities. However, Mongolians remained isolated from all of this except for the few students who could afford to study abroad in Eastern Europe. Although Jambyn Batmunkh, who came to power following a 1984 coup, enacted very limited reforms and a large part of the party had become more sympathetic to reforms, no significant reforms had been made. Nonetheless, by 1989, students had begun organizing underground meetings and secretly putting up posters that protested the ruling party's monopoly on power.

On December 10, 1989—by no accident concurrent with International Human Rights Day—the opposition group that would soon become the Mongolian Democratic Union (MDU) held its first open demonstration in Sukhbaatar Square with 200 people in attendance. Although opposition groups had held clandestine meetings for the past few years, and had posted placards calling for democracy around Ulan Bator, they had never done so openly, let alone in the same square that housed the Khural—or parliament—and where the MPRP held their many pro-regime rallies and celebrations.

The demands at this initial rally were small compared to what they would become, with demonstrators holding signs calling for openness, the honoring of human rights, and freedom of the press. The speeches of opposition that day were also accompanied by music from the rock group Khonkh.

After the December 10 demonstration the campaigners officially formed the MDU and began to hold meetings, drawing more and more supporters every day. Meanwhile the MPRP Politburo was already showing initial signs of reform by expressing their support of openness and restructuring, although they did not officially instate these policies.

On December 17, the MDU held another rally at Sukhbaatar Square, this time attended by 2,000 people, ten times the number at the first demonstration. Having developed greater support and better organization, the group presented the Politburo with a petition of specific goals. In particular, they called for free, multi-party elections and a market economy to replace the failed, centrally planned economy. They continued their demands for basic human rights, openness, and freedom of the press.

As the MDU held regular demonstrations in Sukhbaatar Square throughout December, the support for the movement continued to grow and to incorporate a membership that was more representative of the Mongolian population. MDU representatives recruited mineworkers in the city of Erdenet, who were spurred by their disdain for the Soviet control of the mine. This same

anti-Soviet inclination was beginning to emerge in the movement as a whole.

On January 14, the MDU held a meeting of 1,000 people in the Lenin Museum in Ulan Bator. This was part of a series of meetings for open discussion that expressed the possibility of true democracy in Mongolian society. Later in the month, continuing to weaken the MPRP's hold on the population, the MDU gained the support of the Mongolian Journalists' Union—which was then renamed the Mongolian Democratic Journalists' Union—representing a possible shift towards free press.

On January 21, which was a day normally celebrated by communist governments to commemorate Lenin, the MDU's new coordinating committee organized another huge rally. Thousands of supporters joined this rally, celebrating Mongolian nationalism and culture instead of the communist hero. Rather than singing the MPRP songs that normally resounded in Sukhbaatar Square, the protesters—which now represented Mongolians from rural areas, small towns, large cities, and all classes—sang traditional Mongolian folk songs honoring the Mongolian conqueror, Genghis Khan.

Throughout January and February the Mongolian Politburo was unable to reach a solution for ending the emergent popular protest. They knew that violent repression would be looked down upon by the USSR, especially after the frenzy around the repression at Tienanmen Square in China. And yet, every day the MPRP government was losing legitimacy.

In mid-February, as an affront to the constitutionally sanctioned single-party rule, leaders of the MDU formed several new political parties, including the Mongolian Democratic Party and the National Progressive Party. Additionally, the MPRP control of the media was loosening further as opposition journalists began to publish newspapers without governmental approval. Protesters, having gained popular approval from Mongolian nationalists, dismantled the statue of Stalin that sat before the Mongolian National Library on February 22.

In another hugely symbolic action, ten MDU members, who were dressed in outlawed traditional clothing, launched a hunger strike in Sukhbaatar Square on March 7, 1990. The hunger strike was new to Mongolia and was greeted with some curiosity, but paired with the traditional clothing it became a national symbol. Throughout the day supporters gathered and marched in the square, students stopped schoolwork, and Buddhist monks came to show their support for the hunger strikers. In towns throughout Mongolia, including Erdenet, workers held short sympathy strikes in conjunction with the actions in central Sukhbaatar Square.

The still divided Politburo attempted to negotiate an end to the hunger strike that day, still hopeful to avoid any violent repression. The hunger strikers, however, claimed that they would not stop until their demands were met. Support for the strikers and their demands continued to grow throughout the day.

With so many people now in support of the democratic movement, the MDU began to lose some control over the crowd. On the second day of the hunger strike some protesters stole cars and buses and drove throughout Ulan Bator yelling anti-Soviet and anti-MPRP slogans. In several instances campaigners even used violence and vandalism, despite the leadership's continued advocacy for nonviolence. Nonetheless, the Politburo continued to refuse the use of forceful repression for fear of its negative effects.

On March 9, confronted by the widespread support for the hunger strikers and the ensuing chaos, the entire Politburo announced its resignation. This allowed the Mongolian parliament to put forth new governmental reforms and new MPRP leadership. The parliament held meetings with MDU members and representatives from newly formed civil groups throughout the country in the following days, and after several days the parliament also officially ended constitutional support for single-party rule and elected a new Politburo made up of younger, reform-minded members. Meanwhile, the MDU continued to hold rallies. Because of their continued actions, when police finally arrested protesters for the first time in early April, the MDU was ready to contest the arrests with a second hunger strike that eventually succeeded in freeing the imprisoned campaigners. By the end of April the number of people attending rallies had surpassed 40,000, several opposition parties had held their first congresses, and the parliament continued to reform the MPRP government.

Finally, on May 10, 1990, the parliament declared that free, multi-party elections would be held in July. Although the Communist Party did in fact win nearly ¾ of the seats in that election, hardliners were replaced by reformists in the party. Mongolia's time as a single-party, Communist dictatorship had come to an end. In 1996 the Communists lost their majority in the government.

Research Notes

Influences:

Anti-communist attitudes and organizations present in many Eastern European universities that Mongolians who studied abroad encountered, recent pro-democracy movements in other Soviet countries, Glasnost and Perestroika in Russia.

The idea for a hunger strike came from many influences, including the Irish Republican Army, Gandhi, and an American scientist protesting the Vietnam War.

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Additional Notes:

Sanjaasurengiin Oyun, sister of the movement's leader, preferred geology to politics and only reluctantly joined the campaign. However, she worked wholeheartedly and was instrumental in its success. Hashbat Hulan, another woman, was also an important part of the campaign. It is important to understand that women played a significant role in this movement. Oyun returned to politics in 1998 after the unsolved murder of her brother and served as foreign minister.

In 1996 the opposition won a majority for the first time. However, significant reforms had already been implemented by a coalition of reformers and the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party.

The reason or reasons why the campaign was not more violently repressed has been debated by a number of scholars, activists and officials. Two of the most interesting reasons given by some are that the government feared that violence would give neighboring China a chance to intervene and occupy the country or that Mikhail Gorbachev personally ordered the government not to crack down.

This case was originally written by Jasper Goldberg (01/12/2009) and researched again and added to, with significant changes to the narrative, by Max Rennebohm (23/05/2011).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Jasper Goldberg and Max Rennebohm, 01/12/2009 and 23/05/2011

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