The Construction of Collective Identities and Post-Socialist Political Mobilization in Mongolia

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Abstract

In the 20th century, Mongolia became subject to the Soviet version of nationalist thought. As the state constructed a single national ‘people’ (үндестен, ard tümen) it also, following the Soviet model, constructed the past in terms of tradition (уламжлал), and launched the ethnographic project of identifying and describing sub-national ‘ethnic’ groups or tribes (aimag, yastan). Since the collapse of Soviet-style state socialism and the introduction of multi-party parliamentary politics, notions of both tradition and collective identity have become potential resources, particularly for politicians, to mobilize public support. Concepts of ‘local homeland’ (nutag) are particularly significant, reflecting to some degree the importance of social networks.

As Laclau (2005: 154) notes “the construction of the ‘people’ is the political act par excellence”. Both nationalism and populism require this construction, although the “exaltation of this ambiguous “people” can take a variety of forms” (Canovan 1981: 294). Nationalism and ethnicity have frequently been constructed reciprocally, and as Alonso (1994: 391) remarks, “ethnicity is partly an effect of the particularizing projects of state formation”. In the early twentieth century Soviet activists, in particular the Comintern, created a new vocabulary for “revolutionary” national and ethnic groups. One of the principle architects of the Mongolian nationalist lexicon was Tsyben Zhamtsarano, a Buryat nationalist and ethnographer trained in St. Petersburg University. A set of Mongol terms were chosen to translate the key elements of Soviet theory on the historical stages of ethnic communities. The term yastan was taken as the equivalent of the Russian narodnost (ethnic group/nationality).

Like the tribe, the concept of ethnic group is rooted in the notion of kinship and common descent (Hobsbawm 1990, p. 63); as Alonso (1994: 392) puts it the “false precept… that ethnic groups are genetically pure breeding populations with distinct, homogeneous, and bounded cultures.” Indeed, the yastan ‘ethnic groups’ were not autochthonous kinship communities, but politically defined categories that had been historically formed by rulers. The Zakhchin (‘Borderers’) of southern Khovd province, for example, was originally the name given to a Zünghar administrative division formed from a diverse set of subjects charged with the duty of acting as border wardens. After their lord surrendered to the Qing they were formed into a banner (khoshuu) and assigned duties to support the Manchu official at Khovd (Atwood 2004, p. 617). They remained administratively distinct and were labeled a yastan in the Soviet era. Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, the newly elected president of Mongolia is of the Zakhchin ‘ethnic group.’ The electoral success of politicians from ‘ethnic minorities’ suggests that Mongolia’s political discourse is not entirely dominated by the ‘Khalkh-centrism’ described by Bulag (1998, p. 137), since sub-national ethnicity has not proved to be a barrier to high office in
the Post-Soviet period. Politicians identified with ‘minority’ backgrounds have attracted plenty of ‘Khalkh’ voters, and there are, as yet, no political parties based on ethnicity or religious domination. But ethnic mobilization as a cultural project, rather than a party political one, is anything but a spent force. There are a number of movements that seek to mobilize yastan sub-national groups, and these may yet prove electorally significant.

Politically, the most salient sub-national form of collective identity is locality, rather than ethnicity. Since territories are divided into nested series of named administrative districts, in most cases locality is conceived of in terms of units of government. This need not be seen as a recent development; forms of regional political identity were of central importance in the past. The importance of ‘roots’ in local homelands is a central theme in Mongolian public life. With the collapse of Soviet communism as a viable political ideology, nationalism became one of the central features of the new political culture. The state celebration of Mongol tradition almost appeared to fill the gap left by the implosion of Marxist-Leninism. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the ‘homeland’ was elevated to the point of becoming a sacred principle. State sponsored culture celebrated the saikhan ekh oron ‘beautiful mother-land’ in literature, song, poetry and art. The logic of people rooted in their native places also applied to parts of the nation-state, and the notion of the nutag ‘local homeland’ plays an important role in the imagination of community. Politicians of all stripes have been keen to present themselves as having rural roots, with a strong sense of tradition.

Interestingly, since the collapse of state socialism local homeland identities have given rise to a new institutional form. The 1990s saw the rapid growth of the nutagyn zövlöl ‘local homeland councils.’ These organizations were established to operate as fundraising and lobby organizations, and also serve as a central node for personal networks that can link rural inhabitants to figures with a local attachment. Most were formed in the 1990s, many of them at a time of the 60th or 70th anniversary of the foundation of the administrative district concerned. Officially classified as non-government organizations (töriin bus baiguullaga), a nutgiin zövlöl sprang up to represent every aimag and some sums in the national capital. Many other sum districts who do not have such representation in Ulaanbaatar have established nutgiin zövlöl in the provincial aimag centres. These councils approach figures linked to the locality that have become successful in business, politics or some other sector, and ask them to join the nutgiin zövlöl.

We can see collective identities in Mongolia as discursive claims, rather than a series of ‘social building blocks’ that fit neatly inside each other, from household to region to nation. The terms used for collective identities are employed flexibly, referring to a wide range of categories of people, and applied to different contexts and modes of imagination – national, regional, ethnic, religious and so on. These are context specific groupings, dependent on a particular discourse or point of reference – be it as strangers in a capital city, activists in an environmental movement, or participants in national or local ceremony. We can see each as projects of mobilization, including the micro-mobilization projects of households concerned with common descent and stressing their local rural roots, using the idiom of descent or relatedness.