

Digital Politics in Mongolia

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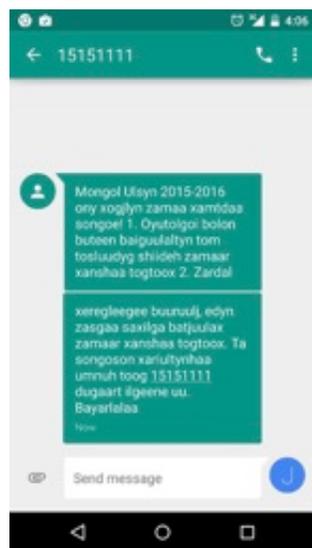
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This post is written by researchers on an ERC-funded project entitled '[Emerging Subjects of the New Economy: Tracing Economic Growth in Mongolia](#)' based at the Department of Anthropology, University College London.

Our project focuses on the mineral-rich country of Mongolia, once heralded as the world's [fastest growing economy](#) but now experiencing [sharp economic slowdown](#). We trace the kinds of subjects and activities that are emerging out of this economy of flux - when promises of economic growth are continually referenced but never seem to materialize; when people are forced to live with the rhetoric of hope and potential which everyday reality never approximates - leading to alternative experiences and imaginaries.

Through [ethnographic studies](#) of the mining industry, ownership and property regimes, the bank and credit market, free trade zones, and environmental and nationalist movements, we examine how different subjectivities, temporal perspectives, politics, and environments are produced through engagements with different economic visions and promises.

This post examines the reception and implementation of a poll that circulated through mobile phones in Mongolia seeking to gauge the opinion of the population at a critical economic juncture. We pay particular attention to the language used in the poll and the way it presented choices for economic futures as well as masking potential decisions.



Photograph of the text message received from the government on a mobile phone

What happens when a dispersed population in a country the size of Western Europe suddenly receives a text message on their mobile phones from the government asking them to vote on the future of the country's economy? This is exactly what happened on Friday, January 30th, 2015, when Mongolians opened a text message on their phones asking them to vote on furthering large mining projects (like Oyu Tolgoi) or 'disciplining the economy' and resorting to austerity measures, neither being particularly inviting solutions.

The economy in Mongolia, as elsewhere, is something that is at the forefront of people's minds. Last February, Mongolia's President, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, welcomed the year of the 'Blue Wooden Horse', calling it a 'victorious' year. According to the Buddhist Lunar calendar, horse years mark times of monumental change and Mongolia was to 'gallop forward' to a prosperous future fuelled by the discovery of its vast mineral reserves.

The year of the Blue Wooden Horse has, however, been far from victorious. The country had the world's fastest growing economy in 2011 due to foreign investments in mining. But it is now experiencing a sharp economic slowdown. Over the last 3-4 years, global commodity prices in coal and copper have fallen and foreign investments have stalled or declined. As [public and private debt mount](#), [inflation rises](#), and [jobs disappear](#), Mongolians are increasingly questioning the motives of foreign investors and politicians who once heralded their country's mineral wealth as key to their national development.

Now as the new Lunar Year is here, the government under Prime Minister Chimediiin Saikhanbileg is attempting what appears to be last-ditch efforts to end the Year of the Horse on a fortuitous footing. Instead of the government imposing a decision on the populace, Saikhanbileg has turned to the Mongolian public. Posing a question to Mongolians on national television, he invited them by text message to vote for one of two key directions for Mongolia's Development Path for 2015-2016.

The text from the Mongolian government read:

'Together let's choose our pathway of development for Mongolia 2015-2016.'
Mongol ulsiin 2015-2016 onii hōgjiliin zamaa hamtdaa songoyie.

The message asked people to reply by text on two economic policy options:

- Set the price [meaning to reverse the depreciation of the Mongolian currency and rising inflation] by deciding on Oyu Tolgoi [a copper and gold mine] and other big construction projects.

Oyutolgoi болон buteen baiguulaltiin tom төслиүдииг shiideh zamaar hanshaa togtooh.

- Set the price by reducing our spending and consumption, and discipline the economy.
Zardal heregleegeе buuruulj, ediin zasгаа sahilga batjuulah zamaar hanshaa togtooh.

The message asked people to reply by text at no cost between 10:00am on January 30th (a Friday) and 10:00pm on February 3rd (a Tuesday).



Image of the political question and conditions for voting

In a country where mobile phone use is ubiquitous across rural and urban areas, and where using a mobile phone to participate in competitions like 'Mongolian Idol' is familiar among many, the Mongolian government's decision to harness mobile technology to reach citizens should not be read as particularly surprising.

Indeed, there have been a number of moves to promote 'direct democracy' in Mongolia via mobile technology. For example, as [Julian Dierkes](#) notes, the Mayor of Ulaanbaatar, E. Bat-Uul, has gone to residents on three occasions to seek their input via SMS. The former Prime Minister, Noroviin Altankhuyag, who parliament expelled from government last November for ineffectively reviving the economy, began direct communications with citizens starting in 2012. He created a free telephone line, '11-11', that allowed citizens to call to provide their thoughts and opinions on a wide array of issues from everyday life to government policies.

What is intriguing and important about this SMS poll is: 1) the type of politics it created as people engaged with the text message, as well as 2) the implications of the text message for future political and economic development interventions.

Engaging the Text

The language used in the text message is striking. The two options are polarized in terms of the

language used and the solutions presented.

The heading of the text message, 'Together let's choose our pathway of development for Mongolia 2015-2016' presents the view that national development as a *collective endeavour*. The phrasing of this statement is reminiscent of socialist-era propaganda posters and slogans, which appealed to Mongolians to become agents of socialist development and modernization. Such development language is familiar to people today and used in everything from commercials on television, music videos, and governmental speeches.

The two options that the text message presents as 'pathways of development' were unequally phrased. This SMS poll was not just about Mongolians choosing their preference for 'mining' or 'austerity' to revitalize the economy. Rather, one option was arguably presented as far more appealing than the other.

The language of the first option to 'Set the price by deciding on Oyu Tolgoi and other big construction projects' conjures a positive pathway. When Mongolians we spoke with read the phrase, '*buteen baiguulaltiin tom töslüüdiig*' ('big construction projects'), they imagined a prosperous future of industry and production. This differs starkly from the phrase, '*zardal hereglee buuruulj*' used in the second option, meaning 'to reduce our costs and consumption.' The second question calls for a reduction – specifically a 'disciplining' (*sahilga*) of the economy, and, interestingly, people's own consumptive behaviour. The use of the reflexive on the word consumption (*heregleegee*) puts the onus of this austerity not just into the hands of the collective but also the individual, suggesting it could likely lead to personal reduction and loss of economic autonomy.

Furthermore, both 'pathways to development' are couched in economic terms. Each of the two options ends with '*zamaar hanshaa togtooh*', which roughly translates to 'by which pathway should we choose to set the price?' The use of the word '*hansh*' or 'price' here is important, as well as a bit awkward. There is the implication that setting the price refers to addressing inflation and the depreciation of the Mongolian currency, which recently hit an all-time low in [February 2015](#), measuring 1960.50 Tögrög to the US Dollar. Thus, the poll was more about addressing economic health vis-à-vis the currency rate rather than national development more broadly.

A Gesture of Democratic Politics

What kind of neoliberal democratic gesture was this SMS poll? Certainly, Saikhanbileg might want to be demonstrating that he is reaching out to the public, to have their voices counted in the direction of their country's economy. Since the mid-2000s, mining has been central to the public imagination as a way forward to create a better economic future for Mongolia since its transition to a democratic market economy in 1990. However, the development of the extractive industry has been mired with debate. There has been a growing protest base questioning the government's policies in relation to mining, with concerns centred around the impact of the extractive industry on

the environment and herder livelihoods, Mongolia's national autonomy in relation to foreign investors and capital markets, and socio-economic inequality.

Last summer, the former Prime Minister Altankhuyag attempted to revive and intensify the economy with an ambitious '[100 Day](#)' plan. The plan effectively pursued both the policy options put forward in the SMS poll, calling for an upsurge in investment in the mining, infrastructure, and construction sectors while simultaneously decreasing government spending. Unlike the SMS poll, however, this was a top-down approach, where all accountability for the success of the policy program was on Altankhuyag. Once it became clear that the economy was not turning around, the Mongolian [parliament ousted Altankhuyag](#) from government in November 2014 on the grounds of economic mismanagement, corruption, and nepotism.

The use of mobile phones to reach people and invite them to take part in a poll does a number of things. First, it redistributes and decentralizes responsibility, in effect throwing the decision out to the people. Here, the government appears to be pursuing the option voted on, and if it does not work, it is not accountable. Second, it gives the government greater legitimacy to pursue risky options. If the government can say that the public voted in favour of a particular policy option, it potentially gives the government leverage to pursue this option regardless of whether it is favourable to the public or not. For example, it might allow the government to take greater risks in acquiring debt from foreign lenders, or it might pursue controversial mining projects.

Third, though a national SMS poll can be interpreted as a [direct democracy initiative](#), it can also represent a *democratic gesture* lacking in real democratic politics. The poll was not a legal referendum, nor was it a policy option presented in the lead-up to a national election. In and of itself, it does not present a clear mandate to the government, however they choose to act on it. Additionally, other actors, like the [media](#) and [mining companies](#), might construe the outcome of the poll as evidence of public consensus around a particular policy option, which could generate significant economic effects.

The actual results of the poll present a mixed picture. Compared to typical turnouts at [Mongolian elections](#), participation was arguably low. However, given the fact that there was a five-day turnaround, perhaps this turnout was fair, especially given that many rural Mongolians have intermittent mobile network coverage and access to electricity. Overall, perceptions widely vary about whether this was a good turnout or not.

In all, 356,841 votes were cast, with 302,008 counted as valid. 56.1% voted for pursuing mining and big construction projects while 43.9% expressed a preference for austerity measures. With around 1.6 million Mongolians eligible to vote that would be a turnout of [less than 25%](#). It is difficult to ascertain how many people voted because people could have voted multiple times using different cell phone lines. Additionally, as [Julien Dierkes notes](#), a vote of 56/44 is by no means a clear endorsement for either option, and does not exactly present a unanimous consensus. Instead, it raises considerable questions about the mixed, uncertain and perhaps conflicting views

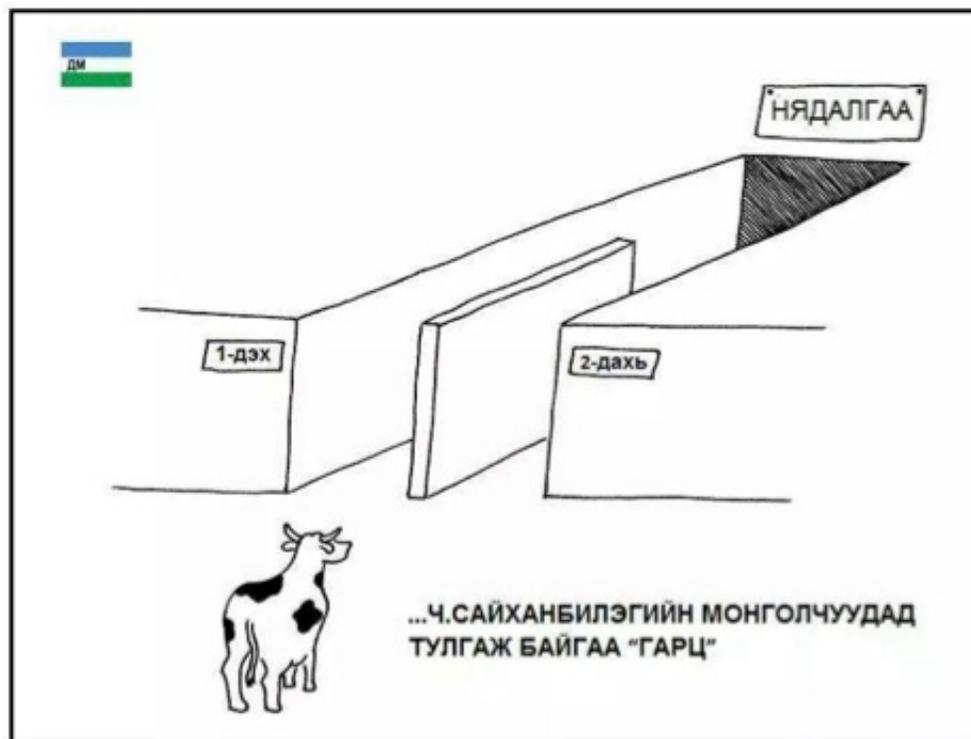
that citizens have of Mongolia's economic future and their place within it.

Given the polarized phrasing of the two options, we speculate that the SMS poll might have been part of a larger political strategy to sell the first option to the wider public. Considering some key recent events in Mongolia sheds light on the role of the SMS poll in the larger political landscape. At around the same time as the poll, Saikhanbileg sent a letter to the International Monetary Fund to request economic support. He signed the letter on January 26th, just days before he announced the poll to the nation. Someone leaked the letter on Twitter at the close of the poll, causing it to be widely circulated on social media. This suggests a public desire to share and understand political machinations occurring within government in the background of the SMS polling initiative.

During the first week of February, Saikhanbileg also proposed an amendment to the Mineral Resources Law that would allow the government to exchange state-owned equity in Oyu Tolgoi for [higher royalty payments](#). Furthermore, parliament is currently pursuing a tacit strategy to change the terms of potentially high-royalty generating mining projects in order to override the '[Law with the Long Name](#)' that bans mining in 'no-go' zones. This latter move has sparked widespread social mobilization. Religious, environmental, and nationalist groups are currently protesting decisions in parliament to list the controversial Gatchuurt gold deposit on the list of 'Strategically Significant Mineral Deposits of Mongolia'. This would allow Canadian-owned Centerra Gold's large Gatchuurt mine project, whose operations the government banned in June 2010, to move forward with mining on the sacred and historically significant Noyon Mountain in northern Mongolia.

How are Mongolian people interpreting the democratic 'gesture' of the SMS poll? Aside from the inconclusive nature of the poll itself, responses to this initiative have been mixed. Based on our conversations with Mongolians, as well as our observations of social media coverage, we see some common themes. Some viewed the poll with trepidation. There is the view that the poll could give the government license to follow an uncertain or risky path, and blame the public if it does not work. Others felt that the poll did not offer effective solutions to the current economic situation, especially the second choice regarding austerity measures. As one Mongolian we spoke with put it: 'How can people tighten their belts when they have no belt to tighten?' Many Mongolians acutely feel the downturn of the economy, and worry what their future will be like if they, and the government, have greater economic restrictions. There were also concerns that the poll was not handled well. Not only were the questions strangely worded, but the fast turnaround of the poll announcement and closing of votes did not bode well in creating the impression that the government is truly considering peoples' decisions.

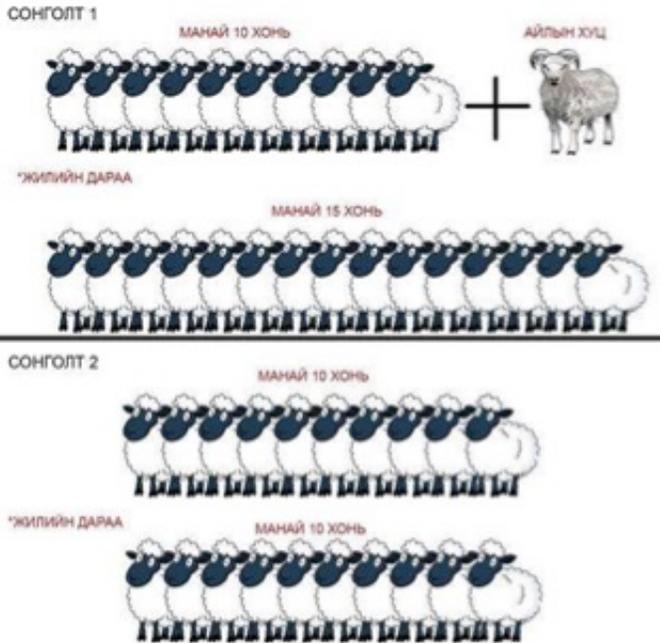
Overall, we get the impression that this poll was understood as a 'show', hinting at a larger distrust in government, as can be seen in the following cartoon that circulated on social media:



Cartoon of SMS poll

This cartoon circulated by Darkhan Mongol Nagoon Negdel (Sacred Mongol Green Association) presents the two options in the SMS poll as two corridors leading to only one place: 'slaughter'. Below, the caption reads, 'Ch. Saikhanbileg's Mongolian people confronting a "crossroads"'. Such a bleak picture speaks of a much wider public pessimism and scepticism over whether Mongolia will be able to create a better economic future, no matter what direction they take.

So what will the new Sheep year bring? On the eve of the new Lunar Year on February 19th, the Mongolian public waits to see what decisions and directions the government might take. Whatever the potential ineffectiveness of the SMS poll, it has garnered speculation, engagement and criticism from a wide range of people, as they see the government making quite a number of dramatic steps in a short period.



Cartoon depicting economic options in terms of animal husbandry

The poll also reveals particular Mongolian perspectives on economic futures, especially relating to what constitutes growth and austerity. In a nation of mobile pastoralism, maintaining a form of equilibrium is an essential part of herd management. This last image arguably presents a tongue-in-cheek (or not so) take on what austerity could mean. Like the previous cartoon, these are representations of the options provided in the text message. The first one, implying the adding of something new and taking a risk (such as pursuing mining projects with foreign investors) increases the herd the following year, but only by five sheep. The 'austere' alternative, however, presents not so bad a picture. The herd maintains itself without much intervention. Things remain the same. In this vision, holding the line and not acting may just seem like the best possible option when committing to change would mean relinquishing more than one gains.

Acknowledgements

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