On June 29, 2008 just over 1,500,000 Mongolians cast their vote for representatives in the Ikh Khural, or parliament. Not only was this the fifth time Mongolians voted, but the election was closely watched by international relations and political experts interested in the impact of different electoral systems and the fate of post-socialist democracy. The riot that followed the election and led to the declaration of a 4-day state of emergency in early July brought much unwanted attention to Mongolia. The further aftermath of the election has since cast a shadow over Mongolian democracy and governance.

The election was contested largely by the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and the Democracy Party (DP). The MPRP was governing in a coalition with members of the Civil Will Party and other smaller parties prior to the election. Prime Minister Bayar and President Enkhbayar were both elected on MPRP tickets. The MPRP’s strength continues to lie especially with older voters and rural voters. Although the DP led by former Prime Minister Elbegdorj, is generally seen to be more pro-business than the MPRP, the ideological and policy differences between the parties remained relatively vague throughout the campaign.

At the beginning of the official campaign on June 7, most observers agreed that the outcome was too close to call, not least because this was the first election under a new electoral system that gives each voter up to four votes in his or her riding. A voter could vote for as few as one of the candidates or cast four votes, though they all had to go to different candidates. Voters were free to vote a straight party-ticket, or to split their votes in whatever fashion he or she chose. The population of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, thus voted for 20 representatives in six urban ridings, representing less than a third of the total membership of parliament.

The block voting system was seen to favour the large parties, but also personally prominent candidates. Among the smaller parties, one of the most prominent candidates was Oyun, the current foreign minister and leader of the Civil Will Party. Along with two other small-party representatives, she was elected in her Ulaanbaatar riding. Oyun recently agreed to participate in the international conference on contemporary Mongolia that the IAR’s Program on Inner Asia is organizing for this November.

One of the notable candidates of the Green Party in Ulaanbaatar who was not elected was Enkhzaya who visited the IAR as a member of a delegation on a “Responsible Mining Study Tour” organized by the Asia Foundation earlier this year in her capacity as an official with the Mineral Resources and Petroleum Authority of Mongolia.

Even though most observers expected a hung parliament and many Mongolians were hoping for a clear majority that would be able to govern effectively, the outcome of the election appears to be very different from these predictions. The official results have given the MPRP a strong parliamentary majority. However, the DP continues to boycott parliament since an opening session was held at the end of July. This DP boycott comes partly on the heels of DP allegations of electoral fraud and a difficult debate about the context in which a state of emergency was declared by President Enkhbayar following a riot on the day after the election and the announcements of preliminary results.

Foreign election observers, including IAR’s Julian Dierkes who joined a team of election observers organized by the Asia Foundation, have not reported widespread or systematic fraud in the election. These observers were concentrated almost exclusively in urban ridings and were for the most part not able to observe the counting of ballots. Clearly, there were some challenges in the administration of the election, particularly involving the issuing of voter registration cards to citizens, but it is not clear that these challenges necessarily left the election open to systematic fraud. The DP’s allegations of fraud, however, are undermining not only the legitimacy of the new parliament, but its
Polling Stations in Ulaanbaatar.

Rural Propaganda Yurt of the Democratic Party.

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Institute is surely also having an impact on citizens’ trust in public institutions. With local elections planned for September and a presidential election coming up in May 2009, fears are now rising that Mongolian politics will be mired in post-election paralysis for some time.

This impasse continues to hamper investigations into the July 1 riot that followed the announcement of preliminary results of the election and led to several deaths. Criticism is being focused on the police’s response to protests as well as on President Enkhbayar’s decision to respond not only with a 4-day state of emergency, but to impose a complete press blackout on the country except for the state broadcaster. The apparent theft of computer records from the MPRP headquarters during the riot as well as the burning of the party archives have proven to be fertile grounds for speculation about the origins of the riot which was initially blamed on DP and independent party leaders.

Beyond the impact that the current impasse has on the continuing development of democracy in Mongolia, it also provides the context in which Canadian interests are unfolding in the relationship with Mongolia. Just ahead of the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Mongolia, Ottawa is establishing an embassy in Ulaanbaatar. Canadian mining companies are increasingly frustrated with indecision over proposed amendments to mining legislation that would pave the way for continued exploration activities and beginning production preparations.

The IAR’s November 14-17 conference on “Contemporary Mongolia—Transitions, Development and Social Transformations” will include policy roundtable discussions that will address the unfolding political situation as well as a fascinating array of research presentations (see http://www.iar.ubc.ca/programs/innerasia).

All photos by Julian Dierkes.