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Finding a Way Forward: A Vision for Mongolia's Future Role in the World

*Exclusive stars interview with **Dr. Dangaasuren ENKHBAT, Founder of Business 2.0 Academy and Executive Chairman of ONE Foundation, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.** The interview was conducted by Chuluunbaatar ENKHZAYA, independent analyst and consultant, stars Mongolia alumna, on the sidelines of the stars Mongolia alumni study tour in July 2017.*

Chuluunbaatar ENKHZAYA: The stars Mongolia alumni study tour took place during a period of domestic political drama. What are your thoughts about the results of the presidential elections?

Dangaasuren ENKHBAT: Voters simply chose a personality for president; there were no real debates about the country or the common interests of society. In my opinion, people had to make a hard decision, choosing the lesser evil from three (and later two) candidates. That is why the election campaign was very noisy and even when candidates tried to talk about economic and social issues, people did not believe them. It is too early to talk about the consequences of the election results. Personally, however, I do not expect any big progressive change or reforms.

The dirty campaigning has disclosed just the tip of the iceberg. How do you expect politics to develop after this election?

We are getting more and more cynical from one election to another. We neither expect better nor worse, we do not trust politicians any more. I think this election strengthened this sentiment. We only have two influential parties – the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) and the Democratic Party. And these two are actually "merged" or "married", if you will, through their economic interests. Thus, the next big conflict will take place not between the two parties but between groups existing across party lines. It is superfluous to talk about things like principles or accountability because nobody will really hold anybody accountable. Although we have the tip of the iceberg revealed, I do not expect any power to really fight for reforms. I think that only when these two parties are weakened and very deep down in crises we will realise the urgency for real reform.

How does the current situation impact your business?

For the time being, there is no tangible impact. The overall economy is still weak and I think it will remain so for some time. I will move forward without waiting for any significant positive steps from the government.

What does this environment mean for current and potential foreign investors?

Big businesses are not interested in Mongolia's domestic market. And mining - which is the main interest of foreign investors in Mongolia - depends more on developments in global commodity markets rather than on developments in Mongolia's domestic economy. However, it depends on Mongolian politicians and internal party politics and struggles might get turbulent in the coming one or two years. As MPP's chairman lost the

presidential election, there will definitely be a change within the MPP. Discussions around making changes to the constitution are also continuing.

But there are also good news: due to the past short-sighted behaviour of politicians the economy has been badly weakened, and as a consequence our government is now thirsty for foreign investments. It will try not to make the same mistakes again - it will probably be softer and more open to foreign investors.

Do you think there is a shared idea among Mongolians – be they individuals or institutions – about Mongolia’s relationship with the world?

I do not think so. At least, I do not see it yet. Certainly, there are people reflecting on and discussing it. But there is no recognizable evidence about an idea shared by the majority of the people.

In your opinion, how should Mongolia position itself in the global context?

Mongolia’s history is that of a “connector”. Additionally, in the last 100 years we have played the role of buffer country in our region. This remains unchanged. In my view, the question is whether we would like to continue to be a passive buffer - being perceived as empty, nobody’s land - or whether we want to see ourselves from a different angle and become a new kind of an *active* buffer. By active I mean a country in the regional and international economic context that serves as a stable, democratic and relatively liberal “island” in the region. I believe that there is a historical need for such a role in North East Asia. In short, we should again strengthen our role as a “connector”.

What assets does Mongolia have in order to play such a role?

Our main assets are the vast territory with its nature and the confident, free-spirited people who have “created” our own, long history and tradition. Of course, there are many things yet to learn. We have to do a lot of homework, but we have a good position to start from.

How can Mongolia leverage these assets?

I see enlightenment and education as our only gateway to success. By enlightenment I mean that we look at the world and ourselves anew and that we understand the whole picture. We Mongols call this process “to come out of the upside-down pot”. We are a nation that has been able to find a way of living within the “system” earth and its nature. We have been able to adjust our lives to it. However, over the last 400 years, we have been very isolated from the outside world. Now we have to find a way to become a part of this global “system” of 7.5 billion people and to learn living in it. Thereby I mean every aspect including economic diversification, infrastructure, cultural relations and so on. Put differently, we need to greatly expand our old mind-set to understand how the modern world works. Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew said “the difficult part was getting the people to change their habits so that they behaved more like first world citizens, not like third world citizens”. Mongolia faces exactly the same challenge. We need to connect with the world more actively and more openly. In order to do so, we have to be clear about who we want to be in the future. We can achieve this only by educating ourselves systematically, improving step-by-step, and to learn by actively engaging with the world.

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