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The new Genghis Khan

By SWANEE HUNT
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One way to get to know a country is through an extraordinary person. And in a remote land whose best-known figure lived more than 700 years ago, it takes a real star to draw you into the intricacies of the place. In 2004, an articulate and energetic woman came into my office to tell me about her work in Mongolia. Her name is Nora Manjaa, and our meeting that afternoon led to my visit to Ulan Bator last November.

Manjaa grew up in a windswept village in western Mongolia. At 18, she left to study law in Russia. For the next five years she often traveled by train between home and school. It was in those long journeys that Manjaa first became aware of human-rights abuses by the state. She often watched as guards or customs officers harassed passengers; then one day she was a victim. The experience had a profound impact on Manjaa and led to her career in human rights and the rule of law.

She thought, "If I, an educated person, can be abused, how will ordinary people know their rights and defend themselves?"

Since the times of Genghis Khan, Mongolia has been ruled by surrounding giants: China and Russia. It was under Chinese rule (and known as Outer Mongolia) until independence in 1921. Soon after, it fell under Soviet rule, where it remained until the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Mongolia's transition from communism to a free-market economy and democracy was bloodless and fairly smooth.

Manjaa's career began as that transition was unfolding. As an assistant to the Mongolian Supreme Court, she felt that the laws and attitudes of legal professionals needed change. Rape victims had to go to great lengths to prove their innocence, while battered wives were harshly punished for attacking their husbands in self-defense. The young attorney began to provide free legal assistance. Eventually, she drafted the country's domestic-violence law.

Realizing how the world was changing, she set herself to studying English and eventually earned a scholarship at American University in Washington. That experience was a fountain of new ideas and renewed energy. Returning to Mongolia, she established the Lawyers' Center for Legal Reform, through which she led public-interest cases, raising awareness of human rights and setting the tone for the accountability of state institutions. These highly publicized cases made Manjaa a nationally recognized figure.

Since the transition from communism, Mongolia has had free and fair elections, a multi-party parliamentary system, relative freedom of the press, and a strong civil society. By the same token, like other former Soviet enclaves, Mongolia suffers from rampant corruption and the rule of an oligarchy that controls the country's most profitable industry: mining. The public's indignation is increasing. Profits remain in the hands of a few while many Mongolians subsist in poverty. For some, life is worse today than it was during Soviet times.

In recent years, Manjaa has been a leader of the national anti-corruption movement. "People in Mongolia are tired of the old politics and they're looking for new leadership. That's why I want to mobilize a new generation of leaders for the next elections and develop strategies to really empower the public," she says.

Her plan is to unite the country's progressive movements (environmental, human rights, etc.) under a common cause: transparency and good governance.

A major component of this effort is the mobilization of women, who make up the large majority of civil society leaders, to run for public office. Late last year, the Mongolian government adopted a quota requiring that 30 percent of parliamentary candidates be women. Through the Women's Leadership Foundation, which Manjaa founded and directs, she's trying to fill the pipeline with women candidates. She'll make sure they're not only 30 percent, but have the skills, knowledge and public recognition to earn prominent spots on party lists and make it into the State Great Hural, Mongolia's parliament.

The value of adding women to parliaments is supported by research disseminated by the World Bank, which says that a higher number of women correlates to lower graft. That research has been corroborated in my conversations with U.S. diplomats around the world. As Manjaa mobilizes women for political leadership to combat corruption, I'm betting that her work will pave Mongolia's road to progress.

Move over, Genghis Khan.

(Swanee Hunt, former U.S. ambassador to Austria, teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and is author of "This Was Not Our War: Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace." She can be reached at [response\(at\)swaneehunt.org](mailto:response@swaneehunt.org).)

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