

Local Governance in Global perspectives

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Key Features of Japan's Local Government Election System and What Mongolia Can Learn from It

Final Report

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MONGOLIA

Election is the foundation of democracy. Especially, participation in local elections to choose representatives of self-governing bodies—who make decisions directly affecting citizens’ daily lives—is the most fundamental form of citizen participation. This report aims to compare certain features of the local election systems of Mongolia and Japan, identify some elements within Japan’s local electoral framework that could serve as potential models, and examine the feasibility of adopting and implementing those elements within the Mongolian context.

Local elections in Japan consist of four types: at the prefectural level, gubernatorial elections and prefectural assembly elections are held; at the municipal level, mayoral elections and municipal assembly elections take place. In contrast, Mongolia conducts two types of local elections: elections for the Capital City and Provincial Assemblies, and elections for District and Soum (Town) Assemblies.

In the case of Mongolia, only assembly members are directly elected by the citizens, while governors and mayors at the capital city, provincial, district, and soum levels are appointed based on nominations made by the respective Assemblies. In contrast, in Japan, all such officials are directly elected by the public. The reason why governors in Mongolia cannot be directly elected by the public originates from the Constitution. Articles 60 and 61 of the Constitution of Mongolia (1992) stipulate that governors at all levels are the implementers of state authority within their respective territories. According to these provisions, governors are to be nominated by the Citizens’ Representative Assembly and appointed by the higher-level governor or the Prime Minister. This legal arrangement is intended to promote “consensus” among the parties involved in local governance (D. Ganzorig et al., 2022).

Another distinctive feature of Japan’s local election system is the requirement for a candidate deposit. In order to exercise their right to run for local office, candidates must deposit a specified amount of money as part of the candidacy process. According to Harada and M.Smith (2014), the election deposit in Japan was first introduced in 1925 as part of an election law extending suffrage to all adult males. After WWII, the Public Office Election Law of 1950 replaced the old law, but the system of deposit remained unchanged.

Japan’s election deposit is relatively high compared to deposits in other countries and the threshold for retaining the deposit in Japan is also high (Harada and M.Smith 2014, p.8). Regarding local election, the deposit amount is 600,000 yen for prefectural assembly elections, 300,000 yen for city assembly elections and 150,000 yen for town and village assembly elections (Electoral system, 2021).

The confiscation condition is, if a candidate fails to obtain a specified minimum number of votes, the deposit is confiscated. This mechanism serves not only as a financial filter to discourage non-serious candidates but also as an incentive for candidates to conduct meaningful campaigns and gain a basic level of public support. There is a method for calculating the amount of confiscation. For local assemblies, the deposit is confiscated to the relevant local public bodies, if the candidate's obtained vote is less than 10% of threshold of the average votes per seat.

In the context of local elections, both Japan and Mongolia employ a majoritarian electoral system. Therefore, the requirement for an election deposit—presents a potentially adaptable idea for Mongolia. For example, in 2024 local elections, a total of 1,992 candidates competed for 45 seats in the Citizens' Representative Assembly of Ulaanbaatar City (General Election Commission of Mongolia, official website). This means that, on average, approximately 44 candidates contested each seat.

Such a large number of candidates can create significant challenges for voters. It can lead to confusion and difficulty in distinguishing between candidates, especially when evaluating their election platforms or positions on key issues. The overwhelming amount of information may discourage voters from engaging fully with the election process. As a result, voter interest, participation, and turnout may decline.

Furthermore, an excessively high number of candidates contributes to significant inefficiencies and unnecessary expenditures in both the administration and election campaigns. In recent years, a growing concern has emerged wherein some individuals do not enter elections with the genuine intention of winning. Instead, they use the electoral process as a platform to increase their social media visibility or to expand their follower base. This modern challenge undermines the integrity of the election and public attention away from serious candidates and meaningful political debate.

In this regard, the introduction of a candidate deposit system, as practiced in Japan, could serve as a useful mechanism to encourage more serious candidacies and reduce ballot overcrowding, thereby improving the overall quality and accessibility of the electoral process in Mongolia.

Another feature highlighted in this report is the regulated duration of election campaigns. According to Japan's Public Offices Election Act, the length of the campaign period varies depending on the type of election, with the law specifying a minimum campaign duration that may be extended as necessary. For

local election, the campaign period is 9 days for members of prefectural assembly, 7 days for members of city assembly and 5 days for member of a town or village assembly (Electoral system, 2021). This regulatory framework ensures a clear and standardized campaigning window.

According to Law on Local Elections of Mongolia, the official campaign period begins on the day a candidate is registered and issued a candidate certificate and continues until the day before the election. The law also stipulates that the certificate must be issued no later than 15 days before election day. In effect, this establishes a maximum campaign period, but does not mandate a minimum.

This legal framework implies that while candidates are allowed to campaign for up to 15 days, they are not legally required to conduct any campaign activity. There is an assumption that, in the absence of a legally defined minimum campaign duration, a candidate could choose not to campaign at all. This could happen for various reasons—for instance, the candidate may already enjoy broad name recognition, may rely heavily on the reputation of their affiliated party, or may wish to avoid the financial burden.

While most candidates would still choose to campaign to build visibility and gain voter support, the absence of a mandatory minimum period means there is no formal obligation for them to engage in public outreach, organize events, or present their policy platform during the campaign window.

In conclusion, every country has its own unique context, and what proves effective or problematic in one country may not necessarily produce the same results in another. However, when a regulation or practice has demonstrated positive outcomes in a comparable context, it is reasonable and beneficial to study and adapt such experiences where appropriate.

Based on the findings presented in this report, the introduction of a candidate deposit requirement and the establishment of a minimum campaign duration, differentiated by election type, stand out as particularly relevant and potentially valuable practices. These measures could contribute to a more focused and meaningful electoral process in Mongolia.

That said, given the legal nature of electoral systems, such changes cannot be implemented directly. It would first require legislative amendments and careful legal consideration to ensure consistency with Mongolia's constitutional and electoral frameworks.

References

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