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‘Horses were better’

Empty petrol stations, long queues, growing frustration: in Mongolia, the fuel crisis is becoming a political stress test

Can a petrol station queue really put pressure on a democracy? In Mongolia, where fuel has been in short supply for weeks, this has become an increasingly pressing question.

These days, those wanting to make small talk don’t ask about the weather. Instead, they ask: Where can I get any petrol today? How long was the queue at the petrol station — three hours or the whole night? Are you allowed to drive with your plates today? Do you think the government will solve the fuel problem before the winter? These are at least the questions suggested by an Instagram video with the title ‘Small talk ideas with Mongolians’. What sounds like everyday frustrations touches on a broader political question: when will a supply crisis turn into a crisis of trust and potentially of democracy?

Daily frustrations turned political

Mongolia has been facing fuel shortages since the start of July. Queues of cars, some stretching for kilometres, are forming outside petrol stations. At the start of August, sales of petrol were limited to 50 000 Tugriks per vehicle at times – around 12€ – and allocated according to even and odd digits on number plates. The supply crisis is also becoming politically controversial because it comes at a time when confidence in political institutions is already low. The fuel shortage is following hot on the heels of the 2025 political turmoil. In June 2025, Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene stepped down after losing a vote of confidence in parliament. When his successor, Gombojavyn Zandanshatar, was deposed after only four months in office, President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa exercised his veto. Mongolia’s Constitutional Court then declared the parliamentary decision to be unconstitutional due to procedural errors. It is therefore not only the empty pumps that are behind the political mistrust in Mongolia.

The fuel crisis is compounding an already existing climate of political scepticism. This could also have political consequences. Events in South

Asia are demonstrating that economic pressures related to energy and fuel can bring people onto the streets. Higher energy prices and increases in the cost of living are behind countless protests and upheavals in 2026, particularly in Pakistan and Nepal. This does not, however, mean that Mongolia will follow a similar trajectory. The decisive factor is rather how a society processes such unrest at a political level. Research suggests that there may be a connection: as a working paper of the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research demonstrates, there may be a link between severe fuel price shocks and fuel riots. It claims that, between 2005 and 2018, 41 countries witnessed at least one fuel-related uprising.

For Mongolia, however, one of the study's other findings offers a particularly interesting insight: countries with more scope for civic engagement are much less likely to experience such unrest. The authors claim that a higher degree of civic freedom goes hand in hand with a substantially lower probability of fuel riots. This would suggest that the opportunity to express political discontent can absorb tensions. For Mongolia, it is therefore not only relevant how angry people are at the fuel crisis but also how they express it. Some (limited) insight is offered by social media, where daily frustrations increasingly turn into political debates.

The real stress test does not start at the pump but with the question as to whether politics can find answers to this debate.

Interestingly, the fuel crisis is, at first sight, being viewed with humour. A young man films himself riding a scooter and adds the following caption: 'You own a Land Rover... but fuel prices have turned you into a scooter boy.' Others leave comments such as 'Horses were better' under videos of long queues of cars in front of petrol stations. Yet behind the jokes, a more serious political debate quickly becomes evident.

While some reduce the crisis to a single word – corruption –, others sharply criticise the dependency on Russia. This shifts the debate from a temporary fuel shortage to a fundamental question: Why is a country rich in natural resources so dependent on its neighbours when it comes to such a vital commodity? This dependency is directly linked to the paradox that Mongolia produces crude oil itself, but does not have the capacity to refine it and therefore needs to import refined crude oil products — 95 per cent of which come from Russia. Online discussions do not therefore only cover empty petrol stations but also options for reducing this dependency. The comments sections contain some very concrete suggestions: greater import diversification, the completion of

the planned refinery in Dornogovi, as well as long-term alternative energy sources. The question as to when petrol will be available again is increasingly switching to why the state has allowed this dependency to persist — and what it is doing about it.

What initially appears to be the usual combination of social media jokes, pointed comments and hasty accusations, actually reveals a serious political debate. A comments section cannot, of course, replace political participation or a functioning civil society. It shows, however, that the irritation at petrol station queues has long since raised broader issues: Mongolia's corruption, economic dependency and political scope for action.

In contrast to the current situation in parts of South Asia, the economic hardship in Mongolia has so far not led to larger protests or political unrest. This does not mean that the crisis will not have any political consequences. There is, however, a case to be made for not viewing Mongolia too hastily as the next example of an escalating fuel crisis. On the contrary, discontent is being openly expressed, reasons are being discussed, and politicians are being called to account. That alone does not prove democratic resilience. It demonstrates, however, that social frustrations are finding an outlet rather than simply piling up. This could be one of the strengths of Mongolia's democracy. The real stress test, therefore, does not start at the pump but with the question as to whether politics can find answers to this debate.



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