BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
Covering about 603,909 square miles (1,564,116 square kilometers), Mongolia is slightly smaller than Iran and about the same size as the U.S. state of Alaska. Grasslands and semidesert cover up to 80 percent of the nation's total area. Less than 1 percent of the land is suitable for farming. The vast grassland plains of eastern Mongolia are considered the largest intact grazing ecosystem in the world. The Gobi region of southern Mongolia is mostly desert and semidesert, though it also has forests, oases, and mountains. The highest of Mongolia's three mountain ranges is the Altai Mountains, in the far west. The country's major rivers are in the north.

Mongolia has an extreme continental climate, with short summers and long, cold winters. Mongolia is called the Land of Blue Sky because it averages over 250 cloudless days a year. Rain falls mostly in the spring. Winds also sweep the arid south and east in springtime. Summer (June–August) can be warm, and temperatures often exceed 70°F (21°C). Winters are very cold (usually below freezing). The country receives little snow, and annual precipitation is usually less than 15 inches (37 centimeters) per year in the wettest areas. When blizzards send enough snow to cover the grass, livestock cannot graze, and many die because herders often cannot afford to buy grain. This unusually cold winter weather, called zud, struck Mongolia for three successive winters (1999-2002), and again in 2010. Combined with summer droughts, harsh winters have led to food shortages and economic hardship.

History

Mongol Empire and Manchu Alliance
While the area of present-day Mongolia has been inhabited for thousands of years, Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan) created the first unified Mongol nation in the 13th century. He and his descendants built an empire that stretched from Korea to Hungary, the largest contiguous land empire ever known. His grandson Kublai Khan founded the Yuan Dynasty in China in 1279. The Mongol Empire began to fragment in the early 1400s, and the Mongols retreated to their homeland. In the power struggles that continued for the next two hundred years, Mongolian nobles fought each other. In the 1600s, the Khalka Mongols allied themselves with the Manchus of China, though the Manchus, who established the Ch'ing Dynasty in China, eventually dominated all of Mongolia. Southern Mongolia became Inner Mongolia (now part of China), and present-day Mongolia was Outer Mongolia. The Manchus controlled the nation mainly through the nobility, which was loyal to the Ch'ing Dynasty, and through the Tibetan Buddhist church, which was centered in Beijing at the time. However, local fiefs (called banners) had a fair amount of autonomy.

Communist Rule
By 1911, when the Ch'ing Dynasty collapsed, the Mongol-Manchu alliance had dissolved and the Mongols declared independence. Because the head of Buddhism in Mongolia, Bogd Khan, was the only unifying political and religious figure in the country, a theocratic monarchy was established under his leadership. It ended in 1919 when the Chinese invaded. The Chinese were driven from the capital by the White Russian Army in 1921, but the Red (Bolshevik)
Army allied with Mongolian national hero Sukhbaatar to liberate the country later that same year. Mongolia became the communist Mongolian People’s Republic in 1924. The communists destroyed the nobility and Buddhist monasteries, and thousands of people died fighting the changes. During the Cold War, Mongolia tried to remain neutral as ties between China and the Soviet Union weakened, but Mongolia eventually sided with the Soviet Union, weakening ties with China in the process.

**Transition to Democracy**

With communism's collapse in 1989, Mongolia embarked on a peaceful transition toward democracy. Successive governments have implemented reforms designed to modernize Mongolia, increase economic development and foreign investment, and further strengthen democratic institutions. These reforms have at times been painful and unpopular; however, political and economic restructuring continues. In 2008, violent riots erupted and a state of emergency was declared after allegations that national election results had been manipulated. Despite the upheaval in 2008, subsequent elections (most recently in 2012) have proceeded peacefully.

**THE PEOPLE**

**Population**

Mongolia's population of nearly 3.2 million is growing by about 1.5 percent annually. Almost one-third of Mongolians live in the capital, Ulaanbaatar. About one-fourth live in smaller cities, such as Darhan, Erdenet, and Choybalsan. The rest of the population is spread throughout rural Mongolia. Most of these inhabitants are nomadic herders. With rural conditions increasingly difficult (due to unemployment and harsh winters affecting livestock), more people are moving to cities—a trend that threatens the survival of traditional nomadic society.

Mongolia's population is quite homogeneous. About 95 percent is comprised of subgroups of the Mongol ethnicity, the largest being the Khalkha, who are mostly concentrated in central and eastern Mongolia. Distinctions between the Khalkhas and other Mongols (including Buryads, Dorwods, Zakhrchins, Bayads, Oolds, Uriyankhais, Uzemchins, and Bargas) are minor and may be expressed through various dialects and folk traditions. The largest non-Mongol ethnic group is of Turkic descent, made up mostly of Kazakhs (5 percent). They are a Turkic-speaking, Muslim, pastoral people who live in extreme western Mongolia. A small percentage of the population is Chinese or Russian.

**Language**

Mongol belongs to the Altaic language family. The majority of people speak the Khalkha Mongol dialect. It is also used in schools and for official business. Other Mongol dialects are used by their respective groups. Mongolia's traditional script was replaced under communism with a Cyrillic alphabet similar to that used for Russian. In 1991, the parliament voted to revive the old script. It is slowly being introduced in schools. The process is slow due to the lack of printed materials and the fact that few adults can read it. The Mongol alphabet has 26 letters; text is written vertically and individual characters are written differently depending on where they appear in a word. Vowel-consonant sequences are combined to create a single letter, which is sometimes very different from the individual letters.

Because of geographic proximity and past ties with the Soviet Union, most adult Mongols speak at least some Russian, and many Russian words have been incorporated into the Mongolian language. Kazakhs use their own language in schools and local government. English is spreading rapidly.

**Religion**

Tibetan Buddhism (also called Vajrayana Buddhism) coexists with the region's traditional shamanism. Tibetan Buddhism shares the common Buddhist goals of individual release from suffering and reincarnation. Tibet's Dalai Lama, who lives in India, is the religion's spiritual leader and is highly respected in Mongolia. As part of their shamanistic heritage, Mongolians practice ritualistic magic, nature worship, exorcism, meditation, and natural healing.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Mongolia had hundreds of monasteries and about 50 percent of all men were monks. The Communist antireligion campaign in the 1930s destroyed the extensive monastic system; atheism was promoted and monasteries were closed (though shamanistic practices survived). From 1945 to 1990, only one monastery, Gandan in Ulaanbaatar, was in operation. Reform has allowed freedom of religion, and more than one hundred monasteries have reopened. Many young Mongolians receive an education through these traditional centers of learning, and people once again are able to practice cherished traditions. Boys increasingly apply to become monks, and 50 percent of Mongols are now Buddhist. Muslims (about 4 percent) are free to practice Islam. Christianity is gaining influence. Forty percent of the population does not subscribe to any religion.

**General Attitudes**

The people of Mongolia are proud of their history, especially the era when their empire stretched across much of Asia and Europe. As pastoral nomads, Mongolians have always regarded themselves as freer than settled nations. This way of life has given them a love of the environment and wildlife; for example, elk foraging for winter food are allowed to wander freely on city streets. Unfortunately, urban sanitation systems are underdeveloped and cities are increasingly polluted. Life in rural areas is dramatically different than in the city. Rural Mongolians appreciate wide-open spaces and feel a oneness with nature. A fast-running horse is prized everywhere. Voting is so important that rural residents will ride for hours on a horse just to reach a polling station.

Mongolians sometimes struggle to adapt to their society’s new challenges. Because conformity was fostered under communism, older people are not used to personal initiative, risk taking, and entrepreneurship. Mongolian egalitarianism emphasizes shared values and common goals. Younger members of society are enthusiastic about change and Western values, though many Mongolians still have a
favorable view toward Russia. Even as some Mongolians have adapted successfully to changing values, many others have struggled. They favor a balance between the market-oriented system and a government that cares for the people. National unity is undermined by growing differences between rural and urban areas and a widening gap between the rich and poor.

**Personal Appearance**
Western-style clothing is common in urban areas. Because of the influence of movies and pop music, styles from the United States and South Korea are especially popular. Mongolians are well dressed in public. The youth wear jeans and Western-style jackets, and men often wear suits. In rural areas, the *deel* (a traditional gown or tunic) is more popular. A woman’s *deel* is made of bright colors and has silk ornaments and fancy buttons; a man’s *deel* is less intricate, but both have a sash, embroidered cuffs, and designs. Urban women may have a silk *deel* for formal occasions. A winter *deel* commonly is lined with sheepskin or fur. In the coldest weather, urban people wear heavy coats, fur hats, and leather boots.

**CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES**

**Greetings**
A handshake is the most common greeting in urban areas. A standard greeting in formal situations or among strangers is *Ta sain baina uu?* (How do you do?). Acquaintances prefer more casual greetings such as *Sain uu* (Hello) or *Sonin yu baina?* (What’s new?). Mongolian names consist of a patronymic (the possessive form of the person’s father's name) and a given name. For example, a person named Hashbatyn Hulan is called Hulan and the father is known as Hashbat. All people are called by their given names; the patronymic is rarely used in ordinary speech and never used alone—its purpose is to distinguish between people who might have the same given name. A title, used to recognize a person’s rank, seniority (in age or status), or profession, often follows the given name. For example, a respected teacher named Batbayar might be addressed as Batbayar bagsh. The term guai is added when addressing an elder (male or female) or someone of higher status. Sometimes a younger person will call an older person whom they respect “uncle” (ahaa) or “aunt” (egchee), even if they are not related.

**Gestures**
Mongolians gesture and pass items only with the right hand. To show special respect, one supports the right elbow with the left hand when passing an item. Mongolians point with an open hand; pointing with the index finger is seen as threatening. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm down. Crossing legs or yawning is avoided in the presence of an elder. Mongolians do not like to be touched by people they do not know, but unavoidable contact, such as in line or on a crowded bus, is not offensive. However, kicking another person’s foot, even accidentally, is offensive if the two people do not immediately shake hands to rectify the insult. It is impolite to sit in a way that shows the soles of the feet.

Mongolians use gestures to show appreciation, and gestures often take the place of a verbal “thank you.” Some use a respectful gesture (*zolgoh*) when first meeting on the holiday of Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year): the younger person gently holds the elbows of the older person, whose forearms rest on the younger person’s forearms; the older person lightly touches his or her lips to the younger person’s forehead if they are a child. After Tsagaan Sar, friends and family may perform the *zolgoh* when meeting for the first time after the New Year, though a husband and wife do not perform the *zolgoh* to each other.

**Visiting**
Mongolians enjoy having guests in their homes and are known for their hospitality and respect for visitors. Unplanned visits are common. The host and family members usually greet guests at the door in apartment buildings or outside a *ger* (a circular, domed, tent-like home) in rural areas. The door of a *ger* always faces south. When entering a *ger*, people customarily move around to the left. Men often exchange and use sniff when visiting. During formal visits, the host sits opposite the entrance; women sit to the left and men to the right. Hosts serve tea with milk. Airag (fermented mare’s milk) might be served instead of tea during summer, and vodka may be served at any time. Guests often give the hosts a small gift.

**Eating**
The main meal is eaten in the evening; the whole family generally eats this meal together. Western utensils are common for all meals, but some Mongolians use chopsticks. Most urban dwellers use a knife to cut meat and a spoon to eat rice or vegetables. In urban apartment blocks, people have dining tables and chairs. In rural areas, people sit on the floor or on small stools to eat from a low table. In the evening, soup is served in separate bowls. If the main dish is boiled meat, diners eat it from a communal bowl. At restaurants, toasts commonly are made to all seated at the table.

**LIFESTYLE**

**Family**

**Structure**
Most Mongolians live in nuclear families, though elderly parents live with the family of their youngest son (or daughter if they have no sons). In the past, under socialist rule, rural families were often large; socialism required families to contribute a certain amount in terms of crops or livestock, which necessitated large families to help with the labor. Rural families with at least five and as many as ten children were common. Urban families under socialism had between two and three children. Today, Mongolia is a capitalist nation, and rural families’ sizes have fallen to two to three children on average; they can hire additional help to work with their livestock if needed. Due in part to low incomes, urban family sizes fell to an average of one to two children directly after...
the transition to capitalism; however, as incomes have increased (mining income in particular has raised the standard of living) family sizes have since returned to between two and three children per family.

Extended families live near each other; however, if children attend college in another city or accept jobs away from their families, they may live on their own. Mongolians are involved in their extended families’ lives; for example, extended family members often assist in raising children by offering guidance and support (e.g., watching children while parents work). Networks of family reciprocity are also an important means of support. Rural relatives may supply their city relatives with meat and dairy products, and the urban dwellers may reciprocate by taking one or more of the rural family's children to live with them to receive a better education.

**Parents and Children**

In urban areas, both parents generally work outside the home. Parents support their children until they move out, usually to attend school or marry, and even offer continued support thereafter. Older children are expected to care for younger siblings, and adult children are expected to look after their elderly parents. When adult children have financially established themselves, they often provide transport, housing, health care, and other financial support for their parents. Children's responsibilities begin early (around age four), when they are expected to clean up after playing. Their responsibilities increase over time. At roughly middle-school age, children are supervised as they do more household chores, including laundry, chopping wood, building sheds, and tending gardens. High school–aged children are expected to do the same chores without supervision. The youngest son inherits the family home and what is left of the herd and other property after older sons have received equal shares. Grandparents are treated with great respect for their wisdom and life experience, which they use to help raise their grandchildren.

**Gender Roles**

The father is head of the family and is looked to for direction and as an example for the family. The mother is responsible for household affairs and building a bridge of communication between father and children. Rural husbands take care of herding and slaughtering, while wives handle milking and food preparation. Urban women commonly work outside of the home in fields such as health care, education, and administration. However, they are found working in nearly every industry (with the exception of underground mining), including the military and police forces and construction. Women also hold political office and leadership positions in business, but their numbers are small. Women continue to manage the household and raise their children even if they work outside of the home.

**Housing**

Some rural families live in a ger, a circular tent with a four- or five-piece wooden lattice, a roof frame, and a door. Its average size is 18 feet (6 meters) in diameter. The ger is covered with one or more layers of sheep-wool felt and a white cloth. It is easy to erect or dismantle and is warm in cold seasons. Rural households relocate regularly to find good food for their livestock. Nomadic extended families often live in a camp of several gers. Because a rural ger lacks electricity access, some are equipped with solar panels to generate power. A smoke stack from a stove passes through the roof. A khadag (white silk scarf) hangs from the ceiling as a symbol of welcome. The ceiling, table, and lattice walls are decorated with ornamental carvings. Other rural homes are made of wood and brick and may be painted. Small flowerbeds may be featured at the front of the home as well. Rural homes have two bedrooms and may have modern conveniences such as refrigerators and televisions. Most homes have outhouses, but some have access to running water.

Urban families generally live in high-rise buildings ranging from five to nine storesy. Some families live in a ger, with a surrounding fence and storage shed. A ger in or near a city will have electricity but not heat or water. Other urban homes are typically built of concrete and brick with shingle roofs. Landscaping (such as having grass and a yard) is new to Mongolia. Due to a housing shortage, three generations must often share a small apartment; parents sleep in the living room and children and grandparents in the bedrooms. Apartments can have as many as four bedrooms and one bathroom. Some apartments have dining rooms as well. Inside homes and apartments, walls are generally covered in wallpaper and have wooden furnishings.

**Dating and Marriage**

**Dating and Courtship**

Couples meet through a variety of social avenues: church activities, school, work, friends and family, and recently even online social networking sites. Young people generally begin dating at around age 15. Dates might include dancing, taking walks, visiting karaoke establishments or movie theaters, camping, or spending time with friends. Exclusive dating is assumed to result in marriage. If a relationship ends without marriage, the couple's families are disappointed by the breakup.

A young man generally asks his girlfriend to marry him and then seeks permission from the woman's father. When all have consented to the engagement, both families begin planning for the wedding celebrations. Engagements are typically short, lasting about two months, though some engagements are longer. Mongolians usually marry around age 25 (for men) and 23 (for women), though increasingly marriage is being put off until after education is completed or a career is established.

Among some Kazakhs in western Mongolia, bride kidnapping is practiced. While sometimes consensual, bride kidnapping is often done against the young woman's will. While the young woman is being held captive, an elderly female relative of the man's tries to tie a scarf on the young woman's head. If she succeeds in tying the scarf, the young woman is presumed to have accepted the marriage proposal. Young women who reject the proposal (even after much coercion) may have more limited chances for marriage in the future, as their reputations will be seen as tainted.

**Marriage**

Some couples are first married in a civil ceremony and obtain
an official marriage license from a courthouse. Although the couple is already officially married (and may be living together and even have a child), a wedding reception may be held months or even a year later, depending on the family's financial circumstances.

Western-style ceremonies are becoming more popular. Urban wedding ceremonies sometimes take place in “wedding palaces,” or rented halls used for weddings. Traditional wedding receptions begin when the newly married couple is received by seated guests at the reception hall. A large feast feeds as many relatives and friends as the new couple's families can afford. Following musical performances, an officiator for the reception introduces extended families to the guests. Music and dancing continue, after which guests are presented to the new couple. Guests offer words of encouragement and well-wishes when offering their gifts at the reception. Afterward, many couples now go to a Buddhist monk to receive a blessing or have their future predicted. Rural couples receive a ger from the husband's family. Mongolian families traditionally exchange gifts in conjunction with a wedding. The groom's family usually gives livestock in rural areas, while the bride's family offers jewelry and clothing. In urban areas, gift giving usually consists of money or housewares for the newly married couple.

**Alternatives to Marriage**

Common-law marriages and cohabitation without marriage are traditionally frowned upon but are increasingly common. Divorce has also become commonplace.

**Life Cycle**

**Birth**

Superstition sometimes surrounds pregnancy, and Mongolians often avoid talking about the pregnancy (for example, what the child will be named) to avoid bad luck. During Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year), pregnant women do not perform the zolgo (See Gestures) because of a belief that the baby's gender may switch. After a woman gives birth, she should, according to tradition, wear cold-weather clothes (even in the summer) to aid in her recovery. While the woman is recovering (over the course of about two months), the woman's mother or older female relatives will assist her around the house and administer traditional recovery treatments. Buddhist children are often named after a priest has prayed to determine what the child's name should be. Other naming traditions include drawing names from a rice bowl or allowing older family members to name the child. Family members celebrate the birth of a baby with a festive meal consisting of buuz (meat dumplings), salads, and soups.

**Milestones**

A hair-cutting ceremony is held for girls at age two and for boys at age three. The ceremony signifies that the baby has become a toddler and has officially entered the world. Prior to this age, children are still believed to be between this world and the world of spirits. Family members gather for the ceremony, and children receive gifts, which for rural children may include a horse, lamb, or goat kid.

The 16th birthday is an important event for teenagers, as they are legally adults and obtain a national identity card. Socially, children are considered adults at age 18. Mongolians also have large birthday celebrations when they turn 50, 25 (Silver), and 50 (Gold) years. These celebrations are important to the family.

**Death**

Funerals last one or two days. The body of the deceased is usually placed in a coffin in the family home the night before and the morning of the funeral, at which a lama (Tibetan Buddhist teacher) offers prayers. After the funeral, family members return to the house and have a meal, generally consisting of noodle soup, steamed rice, and raisins. People then honor the deceased with speeches and eulogies. The person's portrait is displayed with a hadag (blue silk scarf) covering the edges. Bodies are commonly buried in coffins; however, there has been a resurgence of traditional funerary ceremonies in Mongolia. In these traditional ceremonies, bodies are wrapped in cloth and left out in the open, far away from people, to be consumed by birds. Being eaten by birds is seen as the means for a person to enter heaven.

Friends, coworkers, and associates of the deceased often contribute money to give to the family to assist in funeral costs. Funeral attendees are in return given a small gift in addition to a packet of matches, which they light during the funeral. The flame of the match points up and is thought to assist the deceased in getting to heaven. The more people who light matches for the deceased, the better. Twenty-one days after death, some of the deceased's belongings (including clothes) are burned. On the 49th day after the death, family and friends light 108 candles at a monastery. For one year after the death, a candle is lit every night. As with the matches, the light is believed to assist the person's soul as he or she passes through the dark tunnel of transition from this life to the next.

**Diet**

The Mongolian diet consists largely of dairy products, meat, millet, barley, and wheat. Most people eat mutton or beef at least once a day; goat, camel, and horse are also eaten at times. City dwellers enjoy rice. The climate limits the variety of available vegetables and fruits. Potatoes, cabbage, carrots, onions, and garlic might be added to soups. Wild berries—and in a few areas, apples—grow in Mongolia. In the summer, Mongolians eat milk products, such as dried milk curds, butter, airag (fermented mare's milk), and yogurt; meat is the winter staple.

Breakfast in rural areas might include dairy products and tea. In cities, people may add bread with jam or butter, cookies, and sometimes meat. Midday meals in cities are becoming more Westernized, while rural people generally eat dairy products. A common dinner meal is guriltai shul (mutton-and-noodle soup). Boiled mutton is popular. A favorite meal is buuz, a steamed dumpling stuffed with diced meat, onion, cabbage, garlic, salt, and pepper. When boiled, buuz is known as bansh; the fried version is huushur. Another popular dish is tsuivan (mutton, beef, and horse mixed with vegetables and noodles).

**Recreation**
Sports
Traditional wrestling, horse racing, and archery are traditional sports generally organized during the July festival of Naadam, though wrestling matches may be held several times during the year. The entire country gets involved in these competitions, which are among the most popular sporting events of the year. Mongolians also enjoy boxing, soccer, volleyball, basketball, sumo wrestling, and table tennis. Children play basketball, volleyball, and soccer at school. As many youth have been exposed to Western sports through the internet and satellite television, U.S. American football and baseball have become more popular. However, there are not many facilities to accommodate interest in these sports. Urban residents have access to golf courses. Many men enjoy hunting. Women also enjoy sports but do not participate in traditional wrestling.

Leisure
Urban Mongolians watch television, go to movies, or go on nature outings. The youth enjoy rock concerts. Visiting friends and family members is also important. Traditional games include games played with ankle bones of sheep and board games like chess. Sunday is a favorite day for picnics.

Vacation
During vacations, rural residents visit their children attending school in cities. In summer, Mongolians spend as much time as possible in the countryside, often staying in small cabins in the hills around the capital or visiting rural relatives. Urban residents also visit rural family to assist with planting and harvesting; these times are viewed as great opportunities to socialize with family. During winter, urban visitors might assist with livestock slaughter, for which they would receive a share of the meat.

The Arts
Mongolian arts reflect the country's nomadic heritage. Horses, nature, and freedom are common themes in a rich oral tradition. Poetry, especially magtaal (poetic songs of praise), is the heart of Mongolian literature. Storytelling is a respected art, and proverbs, legends, and epic tales are passed down through generations. Folk arts include embroidery, colorful mosaics, and shirdeg (felt carpets). Many Mongolians enjoy singing. Traditional songs are often performed at weddings or family gatherings. Traditional dance and music performances are popular. The morin-khuur (bowed lute with a carved horse head at the neck) is a symbol of Mongol culture.

Holidays
Mongolia's national holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.); Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year); Mothers’ and Children’s Day (1 June); Naadam (11–13 July); Chinggis Khaan's birthday; and Independence Day (26 Nov.).

Tsagaan Sar
The Lunar New Year, called Tsagaan Sar (white moon), is marked by family gatherings. People go to the home of the eldest member of their family at sunrise and greet them with the zolgoh gesture (where the younger person cups the elbows of the elderly, who in return places their hands on the younger person's upper arms). People also exchange gifts during this visit. Mongolians visit a lama (Buddhist priest) to get blessings to help them keep their new year's resolutions. New traditional clothing (called deel) is purchased to wear on Tsagaan Sar. Tradition says that one should clean the house before Tsagaan Sar, or else the home will be dirty all year. Several hundred buuzes (meat dumplings) are prepared for feasts on Tsagaan Sar, but a few are made with different ingredients (such as a salty meatball or vegetable) to indicate "lucky" buuzes. The person who eats the lucky buuz is said to enjoy luck in the coming year. In addition to buuzes, the meal features a sheep back boiled in a crock pot, though this is usually eaten only by older people. Cookies are enjoyed by all.

Naadam
Naadam is a three-day traditional festival featuring three sporting events: archery, traditional wrestling, and horse racing. While Naadam is a centuries-old event, it currently officially commemorates the 1921 revolution, in which Mongolia declared independence. Airag (fermented horse milk) is made or bought to celebrate Naadam. Special flat dumplings called huushur are also made for the holiday. The president of Mongolia typically addresses the nation during Naadam.

Other Holidays
Mongolians take work off for Chinggis Khaan's birthday, which is the first day of the first month of winter according to the lunar calendar, making it a different day each year. While there are no specific celebrations associated with this holiday, Mongolians take pride in Chinggis Khaan and view him as a national hero.

SOCIETY

Government
Structure
Mongolia's president (currently Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj) is head of state, and its prime minister (currently Norovyn Altankhuyag) is head of government. The president is elected by popular vote to a four-year term and is eligible for a second term. Candidates for president are nominated by political parties represented in parliament, the 76-seat Great Hural. The prime minister is elected by parliament and is usually the leader of the majority party or coalition in Mongolia's parliament. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, with 48 members being directly elected to represent constituencies and 28 members elected through proportional representation. At least 20 percent of each party’s candidate list must be reserved for female candidates.

Political Landscape
The Democratic Party and the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) are the main political parties, and several other smaller parties also contest elections and hold seats in the Great Hural. The MPP is Mongolia’s oldest political party and, as the country’s socialist party, was the only party allowed during communist rule. Even after the end of communism and the establishment of a multiparty system, the MPP remains a strong force in Mongolian politics. Many people are actively involved with political parties, but political activism is declining as the government is more responsive. Activists are
admired for their willingness to work for change. Government policies are viewed by some as more favorable to Buddhists than Christians.

**Government and the People**

Recently, the government has enjoyed a more favorable public opinion because of increased transparency and responsiveness to citizen input, though corruption remains a serious concern, especially as it relates to mining contracts. Mongolians generally have faith in their government leaders to provide things like education, health care, and jobs. All citizens may vote at age 18. Voter turnout has declined steadily since the first multiparty elections were held but remains relatively high (about 65 percent). Some still feel that elections are plagued by corruption and dirty campaigning. Personal freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion are generally respected by the government.

**Economy**

Many Mongolians raise livestock, such as horses, cattle, Bactrian camels, sheep, goats, and yaks. During the socialist era, herding was done in collectives, but with the transition to democratic government, the collectives were privatized and herds were split. A small light-industrial base produces animal-skin clothing and building materials. Mongolian goats produce cashmere wool for export. Mongolia is rich in coal, copper, tin, tungsten, and gold. Cashmere and copper are among Mongolia's main exports. Oil and mineral discoveries, rising gold production, and road construction projects are expected to help future economic growth, though some Mongolians believe too many of these related jobs are going to foreign workers. Tourism is a growing industry. Unemployment, inflation, and rising food costs are serious problems, and poverty affects around 40 percent of all people. The ongoing cycle of drought and severe winters has long-term negative effects on the economy. While Mongolia's banks were relatively insulated from the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent global economic slowdown reduced demand for the country's exports and discouraged foreign investment. The currency is the Mongolian tugrik (MNT).

**Transportation and Communications**

Paved roads are common in cities, but over 90 percent of all roads are unpaved. Cities have buses and trolleys. Cars and trucks are important outside urban areas. Private ownership of cars is rapidly increasing, causing hazardous driving conditions (due to unlicensed or untrained drivers, speeding, and drunk driving) in some areas. Nearly all international trade and some passenger travel are conducted on the Trans-Mongolian Railway, which connects Ulaanbaatar with Naushki, Russia, and Erenhot, China. The Mongolian airline provides domestic travel and some international flights.

The most widely viewed television stations are government owned, but privately owned stations do exist. There are many private newspapers and radio stations. While the government does not censor the press, many journalists practice self-censorship because of strict libel laws. Mail moves slowly. Landline telephones are uncommon. Cellular phone use is widespread in urban areas and is rapidly extending to the countryside—over 75 percent of the population has cell phones. Internet availability is increasing in urban areas, but just over 10 percent of the population uses the internet.

**Education**

**Structure and Access**

The public school system provides free education for students beginning with elementary school at age seven. Middle school begins at roughly age 11, and high school follows around age 15. Education through high school was mandatory until 1990, but students are now free to determine how far they pursue education. Parents encourage children to continue as long as they can, and a majority of children in rural and urban areas complete primary and secondary schooling. Nearly 90 percent of school-aged children are enrolled in primary school.

The majority of schools are public, but private schools established by companies or foreign institutions are available. Students at public schools incur minimal fees, while private institutions charge tuition, which many families cannot afford. Public schools have also recently had to solicit funds from parents to cover gaps in their budgets due to governmental spending cuts. These contributions can be a hardship for parents. In rural areas, illiteracy may be high due to the inaccessibility of education or traditional lifestyles that do not stress education.

**School Life**

Classes are primarily lecture based, and children are evaluated more by tests and individual work than group work. In addition to homework, children participate in extracurricular activities such as wrestling, basketball, and volleyball several nights a week. Parents assist their children with their homework and hire tutors if they can afford to do so.

Students are eligible for two years of vocational training after middle school. Common vocations include becoming a barber, waiter, or driver. Students are also eligible for college after vocational training; otherwise, they may enter the workforce. Knowledge of English can help secure employment for an individual. Some students study abroad to increase their English-language skills.

**Higher Education**

An increasing number of students pursue four-year degrees in colleges or universities. Acceptance to a college is determined by performance on an admittance test and the GPA from a secondary education institution. Women are more likely than men to enter higher education. Higher education was once carefully regulated by the government but is being reformed and liberalized. As institutions aim to improve instruction, they face financial challenges, academic corruption, and the growing expectations of Mongolian youth.

**Health**

The government provides free medical care throughout the country. However, doctors tend to be undertrained, imported medicines are in short supply, and healthcare facilities are poorly equipped, especially in rural areas. Maternity and child care are high priorities. Dental problems are a serious issue with many children, and alcoholism afflicts a significant
number of men. Private insurance and higher-quality private clinics (especially dental and vision) are being integrated into the system.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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<th>POPULATION &amp; AREA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Population</td>
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<td>Area, sq. mi.</td>
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<th>DEVELOPMENT DATA</th>
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<td>Human Dev. Index* rank</td>
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<td>Gender inequality rank</td>
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