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Power Politics and Willing Masses

By Kato Shuichi

The Sept. 11 Lower House election resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Liberal Democratic Party. Now the prospect that two great parties will alternate administrations in the manner of the prewar Seiyukai (Friends of Constitutional Government Party) and Minseito (Constitutional Democratic Party) is more distant than ever. How has this come about?

Of course, the single-seat constituencies systematically favor the large parties. Even if the LDP loses some votes, the party does not lose Diet seats. Even if the Social Democratic Party gains some votes, it does not gain Diet seats.

Strategically, there is no question that the prime minister and the executives of the ruling coalition partners, the LDP and New Komeito, have maneuvered adroitly.

However, all this pertains to the government parties; that is, the country's leaders. The reasons for the LDP's landslide victory are also re-flected in the political opinions of those who are led, meaning the Japanese citizens.

Reform vs. status quo

Why did the citizenry support the LDP? To know that, one would have to quiz each and every individual citizen.

This is obviously an impossibility, so instead I shall offer some hypotheses.

First, the majority of citizens want to maintain the status quo. Even if the number of unemployed people rises, the still larger number of employed people must prefer things as they are. Of course, although they still have a job, they are continually beset by worries about their future, the shrinking welfare system, the need to care for their elderly parents, their children dropping out of school, and soon.

Still, they are reasonably well fed and clothed; they do not want to change the general framework of society.

And who can guarantee that stability? The LDP and the machinery of the bureaucracy. Even if a bold and daring Prime Minister Junichiro Ko izumi announces a "reform" once every three days, the populace have faith that with the LDP in charge, nothing will change fundamentally.

Second, decade upon decade of money politics and hereditary Diet seats make boring fare indeed. Working men and women come back from their companies at the end of the day and must want from their TV something a little more dramatic, some more exciting spectacle.

Precisely at this point, the desire for reform appears. But what sort of reform? "Appropriate reform." And when should it take place? "At an appropriate time." It is on such metaphysical wings as these that the desire for reform soars in Japan.

The first desire (for the status quo) and the second desire (for reform) contradict each other. In dialectically overcoming such contradictions, the LDP has been successful, whereas Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) has failed. The process and results of the recent election have demonstrated this clearly.

The success of the governing parties--one might almost say their brilliant success--hinged on first dis solving the Diet, then making "postal reform" the key election issue. Here, "reform" meant privatization, and most of the electorate knew nothing of its costs and benefits. They must have calculated that however the postal system was reorganized, it would have no great effect on their daily lives.

As political spectacle, this responds sufficiently to the people's desire for reform, while also satisfying their desire to maintain the status quo. To borrow a phrase from a shrewd journalist, it creates an arena one might call the "Koizumi Theater."

Koizumi Theatre

Inside this theater one has the thrills and chills of an imaginary, potential adventure. But take a single step outside, and one discovers that the theater's internal adventures have no effect on reality. The LDP landslide was inevitable.

It is clear that preparations to revise the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution are progressing; at the same time the opposition of half of the citizenry is also becoming evident.

One would think that choosing whether our country will openly espouse war or not has a greater impact on the lives of our citizens than choosing whether postal deliveries will be handled by civil servants or private employees.

From the citizenry's point of view, it might be said that subsuming all electoral issues into the one issue of postal reform, and totally ignoring the Constitution, is a kind of misdirection.

As we noted above, from the LDP's point of view it constitutes an adroit electoral strategy. And from Minshuto's point of view, its position onthe Constitution was, prior to the election, much of a muchness with the LDP's, so they could not make an issue out of this, either.

The moods of the masses

But is this really the opinion of the individual citizens? Or is the very concept of "the individual citizen" a fiction? In a group-oriented society such as ours, where people are continually subjected to group pressures in their neighborhoods or workplaces, can they

realize their "inalienable rights" and achieve their unconstrained independence as free individuals all of a sudden, simply by making a political judgment and casting a ballot?

Yet if that does not happen, then what in the world is the meaning of "a free election?" As I consider where we have come from and where we are headed, my thoughts are troubled indeed.

One September day following the election, I viewed the restored edition of Fritz Lang's silent-film-era master piece "Metropolis" (1927), at a retrospective in Tokyo on the German periods of Lang and F. W. Murnau. This film is a sort of city-of-the-future tale, in which the ruling class lives above-ground while manual laborers toil away at machines underground.

The above-grounders have their masters, too, whose lives are hardly depicted at all. Likewise, the below-ground proletariat hardly ever appear as individuals: they are seen on-screen only en masse.

Due to an industrial accident, masses agitate for shorter working hours, appearing quietly and with drawing quietly under the leadershipof a female preacher. To alienate the working masses from this preacher, the ruling class sends in a robot provocateur who looks identical to the preacher. The masses are whipped up into a riotous frenzy by the robot's provocations and destroy the machinery indiscriminately. This results in a flood that threatens to inundate the city.

In their chaotic attempts at flight, many workers and their families are sacrificed. Believing that the robot is the preacher, and that it is a witch responsible for these calamities, the worker-masses pursue the robot and burn it at the stake.

So the masses are pacific, violent in their actions, and sometimes merely chaotic. The vision and the cinematic expression here are fabulous.

The film's dynamism rivals that of the tumult of workers attempting to occupy a factory, as captured by the camera of Vsevolod Pudovkin in his 1926 film, "Mother." In conveying the multifaceted nature of mass psychology and action (that is, the group as a group, not merely as a collection of individuals) there must be few films that can surpass "Metropolis."

The main character of this film is not any of the individuals portrayed so much as it is "the masses" as such, with all their collective sense of solidarity but defenselessness against provocation; their righteous pride and their malleability; their obedience to authority and their self-interest.

In the Weimar Republic of the late 1920s, Lang tried to depict the city of the future: Was he not something of a prophet? Such are my musings in the aftermath of the election.

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