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The Beginning of the End of Postwar Politics

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[This article discusses the Japanese political landscape in the wake of the important House of Councillors election held on 11 July 2004, and the prospects for the emergence of a new political formation.

In the July election, half the seats in Japan's Upper House were contested. The absolute number of seats was less than last time, however, because of the completion of a two-phase program that cut 10 seats from the House. This reduced the total to 242. Of these, 96 were decided by a system of proportional representation, while 146 were elected from 47 prefectural constituencies.

The election was marred by high voter disinterest and, as Yamaguchi discusses in the article, marked voter discontent over issues such as reform of the national pension program, and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's call for the dispatch of Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to Iraq to support the US-led multinational force.

According to figures released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications on 12 July, the voting rate for election districts in this election was only 56.57%. This is only a slight improvement on the 2001 turnout -- which at 56.44% was the third lowest turnout ever recorded. It also marks the fifth straight election, since 1992, that the turnout has been less than 60%. Although this year's figure is some 12% higher than the miserable 44.52% recorded in 1995, it does little to change the general downward trend in voter participation. This is despite the fact that a simplified system for casting absentee ballots was introduced for the first time in a national election, making voting relatively easy.

Yet given such disquiet and disinterest, it surely came as no surprise that six parties suffered setbacks. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the so-called 'New Komeito Party' (NKP) were the only two parties that added to their pre-election strength. The DPJ won 51 seats (including one seat won by an independent it supported, who has now joined the DPJ Upper House caucus). This represents a large increase on the 38 seats it defended. Of the DPJ victories, 31 official candidates and 5 recommended candidates won prefectural constituency seats, while 19 DPJ candidates won proportional representation seats. The DPJ is generally regarded as having 'won' the proportional representation vote. The NKP, a partner in the ruling coalition, gained one seat, bringing its haul to 11.

By contrast, the ruling LDP lost one seat, retaining 49 of the seats it contested. A reason for the LDP's unexpectedly strong performance is that it was competing for seats that it last contested in 1998. That was a particularly disastrous election for the LDP, and it forced the resignation of then Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro in a gesture of responsibility. As such, they were relative safe seats backed by hard-core supporters. This buffered the LDP's losses. However, despite this generally poor result, the LDP and NKP were able to hold onto their two-party coalition majority in the Upper House on the back of their success in the 'Koizumi whirlwind' election of 2001. Therefore, although in this election opposition parties and independents won 61 seats to the ruling coalition's 60, overall they have a total of only 103 seats to the ruling coalition's 139. With 242 seats in the Upper House, the LDP held 115 and its ruling coalition partner the NKP had 24 seats. The main opposition party, the DPJ had 82 seats.

Sources: Information about the election was drawn from the following Asahi Shimbun and Nikkei Shimbun election websites: http://www2.asahi.com/2004senkyo/index.html, http://www.nikkei.co.jp/senkyo/200407/. It also draws on the House of Councillors website, http://www.sangiin.go.jp/eng/, and the homepages of the various parties. All Japanese political parties maintain English language homepages. The DPJ website is: http://www.dpj.or.jp/english/index.html; the LDP website is at: http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/english/; while the New Komeito website is at: http://www.komei.or.jp/en/index.html.

-- Ben Middleton]

In the recent House of Councillors election, no obvious loser emerged as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) managed to finish stronger than expected. Although the shake-up of the progressive parties continued and the trend towards a two-party system became clearer, there is still only a vague pattern of opposition between the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP). Many commentators have taken to describing this situation as 'hardly lucid.' I am as good as anyone when it comes to talking about the current political situation pessimistically, but I have a deep feeling that this election result heralds a hastening of the end of the long-drawn out transition period of Japanese politics. My sense is not the rush of hope that we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Instead it is a premonition that the postwar political system that the LDP has after a fashion supported until now is about to end, and that within the next two to three years there will emerge a genuinely decisive political contest.

There is no predicting whether the post-postwar politics will lead to a deepening of democracy or imply its attenuation. However, we cannot walk away from the imminent process of political change. I want to locate one point of departure for engaging the launch of post-postwar politics in this past House of Councillors election.

The Lost Decade Caused by the Survival of the LDP

The pillars of the postwar politics that the LDP operated were: centralized bureaucratic control, continued government by the LDP, equality-orientated profit-sharing politics, and a passive foreign-policy stance under the auspices of the pacifist Article 9 of the Constitution. These pillars started crumbling from around the time of the collapse of the Cold War structure and the end in the early 1990s of economic expansion as a result of the bursting of the bubble. My recent book, The Collapse of Postwar Politics, published in June this year by Iwanami [in Japanese], details this process. To simplify the argument, together with the crumbling of the pillars of postwar politics, both domestic and foreign policy faced tremendous challenges. Domestically, in response to the end of the expansionary economy and the transformation of the demographic structure, it became necessary to change the system of resource-distribution that had ossified through both bureaucratic sectionalism and LDP interest-politics. Internationally, when the sole remaining super-power, the United States, with the weight of the Cold War structure removed, began engaging in direct military action in pursuit of its interests throughout the world, Japan was confronted with the questions of how to respond to this new situation, and how to transform and operationalize the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, which had been predicated on a hypothetical threat from the communist bloc.

Faced with these great changes, the united front of the LDP and bureaucracy, which in fact held the reigns of power, was unable to respond with gradual change. A paradigm shift brought about by a new actor became necessary. The responsibility for this adaptive

failure lies in the nature of Japanese politics. This is both because the bureaucratic system is by nature averse to change, and because political leadership is necessary in order to change policy frameworks and systems.

The disarray of contemporary Japanese politics can be traced to the failure to grasp the first chance to finish off LDP politics in 1993-94 when the 1955-system collapsed. At that time, the non-LDP coalition administration lacked an adequate vision of what to change about LDP politics. On the one hand, by just changing the electoral system, they could not close in on the policy and systemic core that supported LDP and bureaucratic power. Further, through its short-term experience in the political wilderness, the LDP realized that the sole glue holding the party together was power, which it soon managed to regain at the expense of the other political parties. The golden thread of the trajectory of LDP coalition politics is spun of opportunism and a perpetual lust for power.

The Koizumi administration, after all, is only an expression of the opportunism of the LDP. Precisely because the nation was weary of the LDP, people responded hopefully to Koizumi's caustic talk of 'smashing the LDP.' However, Koizumi could not transcend the framework of his party. Under his administration, the linkages among politics, bureaucrats and business continued, for example in the scandal over the substitution and false labeling of meats by large food wholesaling companies and supermarkets at a time of social panic about BSE (mad cow disease). While this scandal cannot be attributed to the PM, it is certain that Koizumi, who had campaigned under a banner of reform, did nothing to end the pork-barreling that has been the stock-in-trade of the LDP and the bureaucracy.

Koizumi Politics as Nonfeasance

To a nation that had been moping its time away hoping for a reformist politics, the slogan, 'structural reform' resonated alluringly. However, the practical implementation of the reforms laid out by the Koizumi administration ended with a few exemplary episodes, such as the drama surrounding the dismissal of the director of the Public Highway Corporation. The Koizumi reforms have almost completely lacked any form of discussion geared towards systematically constructing policy on the basis of a normative vision of the economy and society. Indeed, Koizumi has still not made clear what he means by the term 'structure.'

On the contrary, both on the domestic and foreign policy fronts, Koizumi's politics have failed to do what needs to be done. In terms of foreign policy, the administration has quite passively accommodated US initiatives in transforming the Mutual Security Treaty. While, this phenomenon began with LDP administrations prior to Koizumi's, he fell completely into line with the post-9/11 unilateralist US military strategy, and accelerated the transformation of the US-Japan Ampo system. Today the US-Japan Ampo has changed from a framework designed to protect Japan from external threats to a mechanism in which Japan provides back-up to US military actions throughout the world. Koizumi, right before the election, assured President Bush that Japan would join the multi-national force in Iraq without putting the matter to the nation or the Diet. He then ignored the constraints of Article 9 of the Constitution in sending the Self Defence Forces to Iraq. This decision was neither a consequence of deep strategy nor careful thought, but simply a reflection of the dogma that if Japan does as the US says, then everything will be alright. This superficially pro-active participation in international politics is, in its conception, shot through with a politics of omission that has renounced all subjectivity.

The same can be said for Koizumi's approach to domestic politics. The economic recovery that has begun under the Koizumi administration is, as he himself is on record as saying, not the consequence of anything his government has done. The recovery can be connected to corporate downsizing/restructuring and movement of production sites, but as for the negative aspects of these transformations -- such as the destabilization of employment and increasing disparity -- the government has simply sat on its hands. Further, the Koizumi administration has advanced reforms of the medical insurance and pension systems, but has fallen short of fundamental systemic reform -- stopping short of policy changes such as increasing the burden of the taxpayer in order to balance the books. In terms of the real state of the economy, the Koizumi administration has neglected to deal with the penetration of the principle of competition and increasing disparity, while in policy terms it is equally remiss in that it has simply accepted cues given it by bureaucrats in the Finance Ministry and the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry to increase the nation's fiscal burden.

Until just two months before this past House of Councillor's election, it was a battle that the LDP should have lost overwhelmingly. However, the Democratic Party went into self-destruction mode over the issue of its former leader, Kan Naoto's non-payment into the national pension scheme, and failed to produce a new leader. The economy, emerging from a long tunnel, has started to recover; while regional disparities remain, optimism about the economy has begun to gain ground. Abroad, the Prime Minister, who promoted the Iraq War, has been overwhelmed by harsh criticism, yet he alone has continued to enjoy a high rate of support.

This writer believes that the cause of the LDP's defeat lies in the growing national realization that the essence of the Koizumi reforms is nonfeasance, i.e. a failure to do what politically ought to be done. Although the economy is said to have recovered, the ordinary worker and consumer cannot yet experience any real sense of it. Moreover, the LDP's forcing through votes on participation in the coalition force in Iraq and on pension reform only exposed the emptiness of Koizumi politics. It has become obvious that PM Koizumi simply surrenders himself to the current of economic and international affairs, and thinks of matters of no greater importance than maintaining his grasp on the reigns of power.

The Final Crisis of LDP Politics

The LDP's line of using Koizumi -- who ostensibly sails under the flag of rejecting the LDP -- to maintain its grip on power, contains a decisive contradiction. If Koizumi were to smash the LDP as he promised, then obviously the LDP would literally no longer exist as a party. Conversely, should the old sections of the LDP be preserved, even if only in words, then the nation would be thrown into depths of despair, and voters would turn to other parties because of their dislike of the LDP. The ballot in this past election plainly showed the disillusionment towards Koizumi.

In the elections both three years ago and this August, the LDP followed the dual strategy of having Koizumi draw in non-affiliated votes on the one hand, while acquiring block votes by having the bureaucrat old-boy network, supported by industry groups, appeal for the preservation of existing vested interests. Three years ago, in the midst of a phenomenal Koizumi boom, few voters took stock of this contradiction. However this time, the nation was able to see past the dual personality of the LDP. The bloc of nonaligned votes abandoned Koizumi on the one hand, while the party's regional support-base centered on the construction industry and industry groups declined as a consequence of policies based on the nonfeasance of deregulation and retrenchments in public enterprises. The LDP was able to mask its deeply rooted chronic illness with Koizumi's popularity three years ago, but it could no longer go on camouflaging the problem.

The next national election must be held within three years, but for the time being the LDP, with the support of the Komeito, can maintain its current administration. Politicians who are quick to seize opportunities have already realized that if the LDP returns to factional in-fighting at this stage of the game, and if the same tired old factional bosses are brought in to replace Koizumi, then the nation will become utterly disgusted with the LDP. The LDP seems willing to support the poster-boy Koizumi so long as they see any hope of recapturing the old ways in terms of personnel and policies. This very lack of a sense of defeat speaks volumes of the depletion of vitality in the LDP as a political party. The fact that not a single LDP politician could look at the defeat and call a spade a spade implies that there are no politicians within that party with the nerve and insight to provide the basis for a post-Koizumi

politics.

The end of the LDP has drawn so near yet the party has averted its eyes from the reality of its defeat, fiddling while Rome burns. Over the past decade, generalized political blockage stemmed from the hindrance to effecting policy shifts and party reorganization -- things which had originally been seen as necessary -- posed by the LDP's unquenchable thirst for power. Looking at the result of this election, it is the factors discussed above that have led this writer to feel that finally, an end to this kind of stagnation is in sight.

The Concept of a Post-Postwar Politics

We don't yet know what will follow the end of LDP politics. There is the danger that the destructive elements that appeared from within Koizumi politics -- the rampant theatricality devoid of all content; the military adventurism of hawks, such as Abe Shinzo and Ishiba Shigeru; the unbridled expansion competition may become the cornerstone of the next politics. It is the responsibility of the opposition parties to ensure that the end of the old system does not simply lead to chaos. Given this, what course of action should the Democratic Party -- which the public perceives as constituting one side of a two-party system -- take? Below I want to sketch out a rough vision of the ways in which the Democratic Party might enter the fray.

The Democratic Party is like a negative image of the LDP, and like the LDP, it is a multi-tenant party occupied by a variety of factions with different agendas. However, the multi-tenant Democratic Party has a huge historic mission. This is to put a complete end to LDP politics and to ensure that the clock of Japanese politics does not run backwards. Specifically, in order to break down centralized bureaucratic control, it should abolish discretionary subsidies, and on the fiscal front it should advance a shift to regional decentralization. In order to advance political control over policy formation, it should clarify the roles and division of labor between politicians and bureaucrats in the cabinet and the executive, as well as put an end to politicians arbitrating and exerting pressure on bureaucratic decisions. It should abolish authoritarian intervention in the media and civil society, and establish a new openness. If these reforms can be achieved, on top of the overthrow of LDP politics, then Japanese politics will move forward to the next stage.

Of course, in order to gain the support of the nation it must demonstrate that it has the necessary vision in terms of social and economic policy as well as foreign policy. The fundamental conflict of the two-party system will probably be between the 'American model -- the principle of competition and unilateralism' and the 'European model -- social solidarity and multilateralism.' In addition to resisting Koizumi-LDP attempts to pursue the American model, the Democratic Party should raise the banner of the European model. What enabled the Democratic Party to win this election was the mass of ordinary people who, unable to experience the fruit of economic recovery, hold grave fears for their employment and pensions. It is only the European model that can respond to the hopes of these people. If in addition to reforming the foundations of political administration, the Democratic Party pursues the European model of social-economic policy, a reorganization of political parties along policy lines will begin.

However, the constitutional question impedes such reorganization. If it appears that even the Komeito might abandon the declining LDP, then the latter will probably start a debate about revising the constitution with the intention of splitting the Democratic Party. The last option left to the LDP is to leverage constitutional debate in order to try to force a realignment of the opposition parties by splitting off the conservative elements of the Democratic Party. The worst possible scenario would be for there to be a political realignment along the axes of constitutional questions before the roots of LDP politics can be dug up. The Democratic Party must exercise its ingenuity to prevent the next election, which must be held by 2007, from becoming a 'constitution' election.

I am not suggesting that constitutional reform should never occur in the future. Constitutional reform is an issue that should be considered within a ten-year timeframe, while replacement of LDP politics should be dealt within the frame of three years. Simply determining the particular measures determining the procedures for constitutional reform should take some two to three years.

In politics, setting the terms of debate is tremendously important. Politicians are, of course, free as individuals to discuss constitutional revision, but they must adopt a broad viewpoint when thinking of how and when to implement constitutional revision. Politically, it would be exceedingly foolish to enter into debate on constitutional revision with the LDP, which is only using the issue as a means to maintain power and whose approach to revision is flawed in essentials. It would also be foolish to go along with the LDP's schedule for constitutional revision. While it should continue to discuss the Constitution, the Democratic Party should emphasize specific policy debate on the most important issues of the immediate future, such as social security, and measures to deal with the falling birthrate, employment, and so on.

In retrospect, since 1993 we have taken a considerable detour with regards to the launching of a post-postwar politics. With the passage of time, problems such as low national fertility and the graying of society as well as the labor market have become increasingly serious and their solutions have become increasingly difficult. We cannot afford to repeat the same mistake. On the occasion of the closing of accounts with LDP politics that must come within the next three years, the opposition parties must develop a vision for a post-postwar politics.

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