

Post-Coronavirus Populism & Japanese Politics (Part 1)

By Sota Kato



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Globalization movements suffered a great setback around the world with the coronavirus pandemic. As countries were pressed to address the crisis, the momentum of populism which had been a powerful force around the world before the pandemic was losing steam. This essay will examine how globalization may impact populism and what the implications will be for Japanese politics.

Globalization & Populism Under the Coronavirus Pandemic

It now seems like an ancient memory, but before the coronavirus pandemic, what was shaking the world was the global expansion of populism and skepticism towards democracy. Populism presented itself in varying forms in various countries, but the rise of populist leaders and parties in the past was often inter-connected with anti-globalist movements. Globalization progresses in the order of goods, money and people, but in recent years what has caused strong repulsion, especially in several Western countries, has been immigrants and refugees moving across borders. Economic and cultural populists have both attacked the immigration policies of their countries. Wealth inequality, which is said to be another big factor behind the rise of populism, has also been amplified by globalization due to cheap labor and products crossing over borders.

The trend of globalization in the modern era was, however, already stalling before the coronavirus pandemic. There was a rise in anti-globalization movements and global economies had deflated due to the sub-prime loan financial crisis. Now with the coronavirus pandemic, the trend of globalization seems to have decisively stalled. Was this an unexpected victory for anti-globalist populism due to the black swan of the coronavirus pandemic?

From one aspect, the pandemic seems to have all at once materialized things that populist leaders had been calling for. With the pandemic, certain aspects of globalization that they have been especially critical of, such as the movement of people across borders, seem to have been blocked, if only temporarily. Envy of authoritarian leaders, another element of populism pointed out by some critics, has been fulfilled as the desire for strong leadership has heightened under coronavirus pandemics in polls of various countries. The public sentiment of “rallying around the flag”, a strong support of national leaders by the public during national crises such as war, was also observed in many countries except for a few including Japan. Overall, the current situation in which

globalization has seemingly halted and the sense of national unity among people has strengthened under the pandemic is close to something many populist leaders were advocating for prior to the coronavirus.

Yet the full force of populism cannot be seen in countries under the pandemic. On the contrary, some commentators have pointed to a decline in populism, especially during the early phase of the pandemic. Political philosopher Francis Fukuyama even stated that not all things are bad under the coronavirus pandemic, mentioning the lost momentum of populism since the dissemination of Covid-19. Election results under the pandemic have been mixed, but overall, as symbolized by U.S. President Donald Trump's loss in the presidential election and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's falling approval rates, populist leaders and parties have not fared so well.

Some critics cite populists' lack of administrative ability to respond to a crisis and disregard of scientific wisdom as reasons why populist figures have lost momentum. Although this might have been the case for Trump and Bolsonaro, according to more careful analysis, populists and populist parties around the world were not uniform in their handling or mishandling of the crisis: responses varied widely according to factors such as whether they were holding office or not.

Rather, the decline of populism during the coronavirus pandemic might be more attributable to populists' losing sight of the “enemy” they have been attacking. Various definitions of populism are available, but most of them include a political stance of defending the interests of the “common people (us)” in contrast to the “privileged elite (them)”. By portraying the elites and the policies they have been promoting as the “enemy” of “us”, populism has gained enthusiastic support among the public by amplifying the anger towards “them”.

In this sense, populist movements can be seen as a relative political campaign by presupposing the existence of “them” to compare with “us”, rather than the pursuit of absolute policy objectives. In other words, if “them” as the enemy ceases to exist, populism could ironically lose its momentum. With globalization and the inflow of immigrants and refugees declining under the coronavirus pandemic (according to the OECD, those immigrants to OECD nations declined by 46% in the first half of 2020 over the same period in 2019), continued attacks on “them” (such as EU bureaucrats and domestic elites who promoted globalization) began to lose their meaning. As borders closed and cities were being locked down, populist leaders who had been attacking globalization

could not garner enough public enthusiasm and anger for populism to burn up.

Populist leaders sought to replace globalization with a new “enemy” under the coronavirus pandemic – for Trump it was China, generally thought to be the origin of Covid-19, while Bolsonaro furiously criticized regional governments and their leaders for overly restricting the economy and public life due to the coronavirus. Their attempts, however, have not been as successful as before.

Will Populism Regain Force Post-Coronavirus?

If populism is lacking the force it once had before the pandemic, will this continue after the virus and its variants have been contained? The key to the populist side is whether a separating line can be drawn to divide citizens of each country as “us” and “them”. To the anti-populist side, in contrast, the key to contain populist movements is how to maintain the unity of the public garnered through the fight with Covid-19.

Globalization, which was one of the driving forces of populism before the coronavirus pandemic, will come back although its shape and magnitude should be different from what it was before the pandemic. Under the pandemic, indicators such as trade and foreign direct investment have shown a large drop for the first time since World War II. But many of them are recovering much faster than initially estimated, and some have even surpassed those of the pre-pandemic level.

In the past, the global spread of pandemics has led to the widening of economic inequalities. As earlier studies imply, the Covid-19 pandemic is also highly likely to widen economic inequalities. In such circumstances, anti-populist political leaders need to carefully maneuver to maintain the sense of public unity gained under the Covid-19 pandemic and restrain the forces of populism. What is especially difficult for them is to address the issue of widening inequalities and the fast-recovering globalization.

Several national leaders have made an analogy between the fight against Covid-19 and real war. But those two differ greatly in terms of their redistributive effects. That is, after a war, as economists have empirically pointed out, economic inequalities usually diminish substantially. In contrast, inequalities are likely to widen “postwar” in the fight against Covid-19. Thus, post-Covid-19 leaders see themselves in a more complex and difficult situation than leaders in a normal postwar situation to maintain a sense of unity among the public. If inequalities widen after the “war”, the public will feel that their sense of unity during the coronavirus pandemic has been betrayed, and this could cause a populist backlash. Historically, postwar periods of turmoil have been breeding grounds for political

disasters such as the rise of totalitarianism and dictators.

During the coronavirus crisis countries have implemented mass-scale economic measures to address it. These economic measures have had an impact in reducing inequalities. But no country can continue to implement economic measures matching the scale under the coronavirus once the pandemic has been contained. In order to avoid a resurgence of populism after the coronavirus, national leaders will need to adopt liberal policies that will lead to diminishing inequalities. Scaling down the emergency coronavirus crisis measures to a sustainable level and then turning them to an income redistribution policy under normal times will become a test to prevent the rise of populism.

In addition to addressing the inequalities, post-coronavirus pandemic leaders will once again be asked about how to interact with resurging globalization. As political scientist Peter Katzenstein once pointed out, in order to address the economic and social issues that come with opening up an economy, political adjustments will be necessary. There will need to be compensation for those who bear losses with liberalization. If this point is minimized, as some economic fundamentalists did in the past, it could invite an anti-globalization backlash. A political system that excels in coordination among stakeholders in a flexible manner is crucial in responding to globalization of the economy. Indeed, as early as several decades ago, a paradoxical relationship has been observed by political scientists where the more open an economy is to foreign countries, the larger its government.

Throughout the pandemic, the role of the nation state has once again been rising. Center-left political parties which had been struggling globally before the pandemic have begun to come back in Europe and the United States, most recently in Germany, and in Latin American countries. In Japan also, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who took office last September, comes from a liberal faction in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and has declared a shift from neoliberalism to “new capitalism”. Such movements in various countries are not likely a coincidence. The liberal leaders need to undergo a difficult task of maintaining national unity amidst rising inequalities and fast-recovering globalization. Their failure would invite a resurgence of populism from both left and right extremes.

This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will appear in the March/April 2022 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*.

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