

# Japan's LDP:

## Shaping and Adapting to Three Distinctive Political Systems; Military Occupation, High Economic Development and Accelerating Globalization

By *Inoguchi Takashi*

**MORE** than any other political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dominates the political system in contemporary Japan. The LDP-dominated political system has two broad, salient characteristics: flexibility and adaptability. The LDP has created a framework that has adapted through two significant periods in Japan's history, post-war reconstruction and the subsequent years of strong economic growth. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the party is striving to create a framework that is capable of adapting to the serious work of globalization. In this article, the author discusses the characteristics of the LDP-dominated political system throughout these three periods, describing the LDP support base, policy priorities, and the key government actors; public mood and concerns; the LDP support base and that of the opposition parties.

### Features of the LDP-Dominated Political System throughout History

Having been soundly defeated in World War II, Japan was occupied by the Allied Powers (AP) for seven years. The United States (specifically General Douglas MacArthur) led the AP, occupying and reforming Japan by indirect, rather than direct, rule. This choice was based on a strong impression that the AP were dealing not with the Japanese who had intrepidly resisted throughout a war they had almost no hope of winning, but with a Japanese people who welcomed the occupation forces warmly. Moreover, since the US government's top priority was the global confrontation with Communism, it was deemed preferable that as much of the actual

governing as possible be turned over to the people of the occupied nation themselves. Few people doubt that the foundation for Japan's contemporary political system was rebuilt during the period the country was occupied. First, the groups in power who had led Japan into war were dissolved and purged. Second, most of the bureaucrats and personnel, with the exception of war leaders and prominent bureaucrats who conspired with them, were retained. Third, the restructuring of the political parties was undertaken mostly by younger bureaucrats who rose to the top during the occupation; middle-aged politicians who were purged as war leaders or conspirators during the war; and younger politicians who emerged on the scene after the war. This restructuring paved the way for the LDP as a center-right party by 1955. Fourth, freedom of expression, labor unions, and universal suffrage irrespective of gender emerged as part of the new framework put forth under occupation reforms, and the left wing was able to significantly expand its power, as well. Fifth, Japanese citizens gradually adapted to the new framework, and the universal suffrage irrespective of gender in particular came to function as a means of conveying public opinion to politicians.

### LDP Adapts through Three Distinct Periods

An examination of the broad political path of transformation from 1945 through 2006 is essential to any analysis of the LDP-dominated political structure, because as the LDP-dominated political system has adapted, so has the LDP itself instituted changes to its own organization and structure. For the sake

of convenience, the post-war LDP-dominated political structure can be conceptually divided into three periods: the occupation/reconstruction period, the strong economic growth period, and the accelerating globalization period. The first, the occupation/reconstruction period, spanned the years from 1945 to 1960, followed by the second, the strong economic growth period, from 1960 to 1985, and the globalization period from 1985 to the present. The following sections describe the LDP support base, priority policies, predominant ministries, public sentiment and concerns, and the reasons other voters support opposition parties.

The political priorities during the first period we address, the period of occupation and reconstruction, formed the cornerstone of the political focus that later came to be called the Yoshida doctrine. Based on pacifism, this doctrine renounced Japanese participation in war. The Japan-US Security Treaty was designed for the continuation of the military aspects of occupation by the AP, leaving Japan markedly dependent on the United States for security. Also devoted to economic growth, the Yoshida doctrine focused on reconstruction to boost Japan to a respected position within the international community. Initially, however, there was extremely strong domestic opposition to the Yoshida doctrine during the occupation, and it took a great deal of work to merely incorporate this doctrine into the Japanese political structure.

This was a period of intense political conflict in Japan. Immediately after the war, extreme poverty drove a large portion of the population to oppose the government. As recovery and reconstruction began to gradually take hold,

Table Features of the LDP-Dominated Political System in Three Historical Periods

	Military Occupation	Strong Economic Growth	Accelerating Globalization
LDP Support Base	Self-employed farmers Self-employed businessmen	New middle-class masses	Voters who appreciate optimism in the face of stresses from globalization
Priority Policies	Employment, Energy, Financing, Obtaining foreign currency, Industrial infrastructure	Macroeconomic policies Social policies	Value of currency, Science and Technology, Gender, Population
Predominant Government Ministry	Economic Planning Agency	Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health and Welfare	Prime Minister and his Cabinet
Public Sentiment and Concerns	Survival	Desire for economic rebuilding	Desire for risk-sharing and optimistic approach to future
Reasons for Supporting Opposition Parties	Platform for elimination of poverty, Removal of military bases	Platform for peace and equality	Platform for community-based system with a more human touch

the center-right gained power with strong support from the self-employed. This was around 1955. The transition to power was instrumental in the founding of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan in 1955. A large class of landowning farmers was created by the farmland reforms instituted under the occupation, and support for the LDP increased even in outlying rural areas, which had been at the heart of the massive pre-war farmers movement. The growing support from self-employed businessmen in response to government subsidies and other frameworks fell under this umbrella, as well. Although it is true that the LDP was at times referred to as “the provincial party,” the vast majority of Japan was in fact provincial during the occupation. In this period, policy priorities revolved primarily around economic management policy to ensure economic recovery and reconstruction through government regulation and administrative guidance designed to address various issues: guaranteeing food provisions for the people; guaranteeing energy supplies (coal for thermal power, dams for hydroelectric power, etc.); the processes for obtaining corporate capital from banks and other institutions; and obtaining the foreign currency required to achieve all this.

If one must point to a predominant ministry during this period, it would

have been the Economic Planning Agency (known at the time as the Headquarters for Economic Stability). The driving force behind this agency was the bureaucrats who had graduated from engineering departments and had experienced an economy mobilized for war during the 1930s and 1940s. Methods of economic management did not change considerably between the war years and the period of occupation, and the social engineering concepts behind them were adapted from engineering studies. Okita Saburo is a perfect example of this. He believed that, whatever else the public may be concerned about, people’s greatest need is for survival, and ensuring food provisions should be given the highest priority. Those with vested interests lost everything in the war, and their assets changed hands overnight to become public property through occupation reform. In 1945, Japan had the lowest national income per capita of any country in East and Southeast Asia. The low standard of income and high unemployment rate drove popular opposition to the government. Rising from the ashes was a matter of survival for both the nation and the individuals. Based on this popular sentiment against the government, opposition parties enjoyed strong support at this time. Occupation reforms served to strengthen corporate and governmental labor unions, and

opposition parties used this energy to their advantage.

Whether in elections or routine Diet debates, political conflict was extremely contentious. There was already strong opposition in Japan to the country’s military relationship with the United States. At the time, factions who felt that welcoming US military bases would involve Japan in war, or serve to invite war against Japan, held greater sway than those who felt it would discourage or prevent Japanese involvement in war. The party that would later become the LDP took the latter stance, while the Japan Socialist Party and the Japanese Communist Party took the former. Another aspect of political contention was the issue of whether building fundamental economic strength to promote national recovery and reconstruction should be given high priority or whether greater concern should be given to improving the household finances of Japanese families and individuals. The former was put forth by the group that would later become the LDP, and the Socialist Party and the Communist Party took the latter as their platform. **J.S**

(Continued in Part 2)

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