

# What Next for the LDP?

By Masayuki Fukuoka

The July 1986 election that ended in resounding victory for the LDP and defeat for the JSP and the DSP is very significant in trying to chart Japan's political future. At the very least, it indicates a further entrenchment of conservatism in Japan and calls the role of the opposition parties in Japan's parliamentary democracy sharply into question.

Although space does not permit extensive analysis of the reasons for the opposition parties' defeat, it may well be that their malfunctioning has been a major reason for the LDP's electoral appeal.

## The ability to govern

One of the features of Japanese post-war politics is the idea of "ability to govern." Because the concept of "ruling party" implies that the party has been given control of the Diet and entrusted with the task of governing, only a party that has a chance of winning half of the seats in the more powerful House of Representatives (i.e., only a party able to field at least 257 candidates) can claim to be capable of governing.

Only the LDP meets this requirement. In none of the 11 general elections since the LDP was founded in 1955 has any of the opposition parties managed to put up enough candidates to win a majority even if they all won, and only the JSP has fielded over 100 (Table 1). Instead, the opposition parties have run defensive campaigns aimed at denying the LDP a clean sweep of the multiple-representation election districts. This inability to field a full slate in turn calls into question the opposition parties' viability as an alternative to the LDP.

As a result, the LDP has governed uninterrupted and Japanese society has developed a number of arrangements conducive to continued conservative rule.

## Right, left and center

Although people tend to think of elections bipolarly in a right-left matrix, it is more accurate to think in tripolar terms. The conservative right (LDP) has seen its support slip 16%, from 58% in the 1958 election to 42% in the 1976 election, but has rebounded to garner 46% in the 1983 election and 49% in this most recent election. Over the same period, the reformist left (JSP plus JCP) has seen its support slip 10% from 36% in 1958 to 26% this year. Yet there have been four centrist parties created over the last quarter-century (DSP in 1960, Komeito in 1964, NLC in 1976 and SDF in 1977), and their share of the votes has grown to about 20%. In the 1986 election, the LDP alone won a near-majority 49% of the vote, and this is over 50% if we include people who won a near-majority 49% of the vote, and this is over 50% if we include people who were enrolled after winning election (Fig. 1).

Over the years, the JSP's support has been leached off to the centrist parties and the JCP as people fed up with the JSP's impractical parliamentary tactics and sterile policies drifted over to the centrist parties and those who felt the JSP was too accommodating and not doctrinaire enough defected to the JCP. Buffeted from both sides, JSP support has dropped from 90% of all opposition votes to less than 40% today. This in-

ternecine bickering within the opposition is one of the factors behind the vapidness of Japanese parliamentary democracy. Unable to function as a viable alternative to the LDP, the left, still dominating the opposition, has fallen into posturing complacency and accommodation with the LDP. Despite the need for a popular opposition voice enunciating alternatives to LDP policies, the JSP's enfeeblement is reflected in the other opposition parties as well.

## After the landslide

There are a number of reasons for the LDP landslide. One, of course, is the creeping conservatism in Japanese life. The electorate is largely satisfied with its standard of living and lifestyle, except for some dissatisfaction with how high taxes are. The Japanese economy has been growing steadily better and people have felt less need for a change.

Another factor this year was the fierce competition among the post-Nakasone contenders (Shintaro Abe, Noboru Takeshita and Kiichi Miyazawa) to get out the vote for the LDP and their supporters. While there may be some question about these people's ability to rule, there is no question about their ability to recruit candidates and voters to the cause.

The sympathy vote also had a lot to do with it. No matter how many people a district returns to the Diet, there is always someone who just misses the cutoff. As the LDP faltered in the 1983 election, its candidates began to draw sympathy for their losing efforts. Thus it was that 38 of 1983's 41 LDP runners-



Ineffective opposition parties and entrenched conservatism resulted in another LDP election victory.



Opposition parties in Japan have run lackluster, defensive campaigns and are unable to field a full slate in multiple-representation election districts.

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Table 1 Candidates Fielded and Seats Won

	LDP		JSP		JCP	Komeito	Minor parties	Unaffiliated	Total	
May 1958	(287) 413		(166) 246		(1) 114		(1) 33	(12) 145	(467) 951	
Nov. 1960	(296) 399		JSP (145) 186	DSP (17) 105	(3) 118		(1) 34	(5) 98	(467) 940	
Nov. 1963	(283) 359		(144) 198	(23) 59	(5) 118		(0) 64	(12) 119	(467) 917	
Jan. 1967	(277) 342		(140) 209	(30) 60	(5) 123	(25) 32	(0) 16	(9) 138	(486) 920	
Dec. 1969	(288) 328		(90) 183	(31) 68	(14) 123	(47) 76	(0) 37	(16) 130	(486) 945	
Dec. 1972	(271) 338		(118) 161	(19) 65	(38) 123	(29) 59	(2) 15	(14) 134	(491) 894	
Dec. 1976	LDP (249) 320	NLC (17) 25	(123) 162	(29) 51	(17) 128	(55) 84	(0) 17	(21) 112	(511) 899	
Oct. 1979	(248) 322	(4) 31	JSP (107) 157	SDF (2) 8	(35) 53	(39) 128	(57) 64	(0) 7	(19) 129	(511) 899
June 1980	(284) 310	(12) 25	(107) 149	(3) 5	(32) 50	(29) 129	(33) 64	(0) 6	(11) 102	(511) 840
Dec. 1983	(259) 339	(8) 17	(112) 144	(3) 4	(38) 54	(26) 129	(58) 59	(0) 4	(7) 102	(511) 852
July 1986	(304) 322	(6) 12	(86) 138	(4) 5	(26) 56	(27) 129	(57) 61	(0) 20	(2) 100	(512) 843

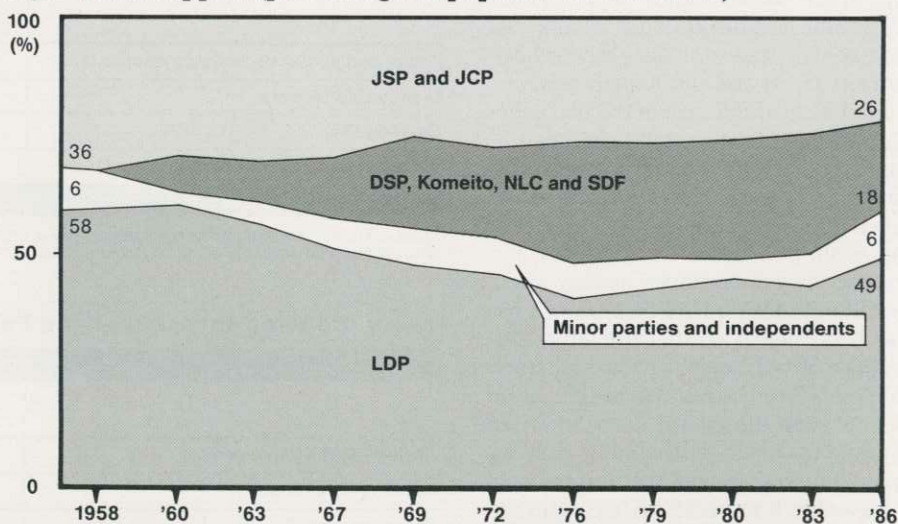
Notes: 1. Numbers show number of candidates fielded; those in parentheses show seats won.  
2. These figures include people who were enrolled after winning election.

up won in 1986—over half of them the leading vote-getters in their districts. This strong showing is indicative of the strength of conservative sentiment.

Finally there is the way changes in the economy are affecting the JSP. Privatization of, for example, the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (NTT) and the Japanese National Railways (JNR) (pending), and other changes have eroded the JSP's base of support in organized labor. Having suffered Komeito and JCP inroads in local elections, JSP is repeating the pattern at the national level. Combined with the splintering of the opposition parties, the fact that the JSP is the leading opposition now counts for little, and the centrist parties have become the leading alternative to the LDP.

As a result, Japan seems to be in for an extended period of conservative (i.e., LDP) rule, and, barring a major scandal, there is a very strong likelihood that the LDP's position will go unchallenged for many years. Yet there are problems. With the urban salariat already feeling overtaxed, the LDP's effort to finance increased government spending by cutting

Fig. 1 Voter Support (percentage of popular vote received)



direct taxation and raising indirect taxation could easily backfire if it is not handled very carefully.

This issue of tax redistribution will be a major test for the LDP. Average urban household income has topped ¥5 million (\$31,250 at the rate of ¥160/\$) a year, and people are now more interested in good health than in prices, more con-

cerned with tax cuts than with welfare. The real test for the LDP in the years ahead will be how it manages to avoid tax-alienating the urban voters while still providing the subsidies needed to win rural votes. The LDP has 304 seats today. How many it has after the next election will depend on how well it handles the economy over the next few years. ●