Japan's Political Follies

By Tatou Takahama

About a year ago, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency commissioned a report from the Rochester Institute of Technology entitled *Japan: 2000*. Widely circulated in both the United States and Japan, this report charged that Japan is not nearly as democratic as the United States and European countries because national policy is made by a handful of elite bureaucrats and politicians.

For those Japanese who believe that Japan was initiated into American democracy after the war, that it has renounced all things military and devoted itself to the pursuit of peace, and that Japan is today the very model of democratic practices, this comment was no doubt a grave affront arousing great ire.

Yet no Japanese launched a frontal refutation to this criticism. There were many who dismissed the report out of hand as the disgruntled ramblings of third-rate academics or as the unchecked blatherings of Japan-bashers, but there were no point-by-point refutations of the report's thesis. Why? Most probably because the report contains more than a grain of truth.

It is instructive here to look at Japanese politics today and how policy decisions are actually made in Japan. There is, for example, such exaggerated respect for the minority opinion that the majority party is reluctant to push a bill through even after it has been fully deliberated in the Diet. There are some parties that refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the process and, continuing to insist that "What's right is right; what's wrong is wrong," refuse to accept laws even after they are passed by the Diet. This is a far cry from Jeffersonian democracy.

When push came to shove in the Gulf, the U.S. Senate approved the use of U.S. ground forces by a narrow margin. Once the decision was made, however, even some of the Democratic senators who had been adamantly opposed to the use of U.S. ground forces quickly fell into line and made passionate speeches about the die having been cast and how they would cooperate fully and pray for a military victory.

The two systems could not be more different, yet there are many Japanese who fail to see these differences.

Despite its obvious failings, there has been virtually no movement to reform Japanese politics in any meaningful way. Making decisions under the guise of an imported democracy, a single conservative party has held the reins of power for decades and the same pattern has persisted for more than 40 years of bills being written by the bureaucracy and passed by a small handful of politicians.

This might have been to the nation's benefit when we had outstanding leaders, but it is just a bunch of old men scratching each other's backs when the leadership is less than outstanding. It is akin to the Odawara consultations of 1590, when even the most extensive deliberations among slow-witted samurai failed to produce a policy worth following.*

Because there are many powerful factions within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), their leaders are all powerful figures (Table 1). Yet it would be disastrous for these people to assume that this means they are all-powerful figures and for them to just decide things willy-nilly in behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing. Nonetheless, that is very much what is happening today. People are cutting deals with little or no regard to the popular weal. In that sense, *Japan: 2000* does not seem all that far off the mark.

Even before Karel van Wolferen, famous as the mother of all Japan bashers, made his splash with *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, Harvard University's Ezra Vogel (fondly remembered in Japan as the author of *Japan as Number One*) was saying much the same thing, albeit not in quite the same words.

Just as van Wolferen wrote that the individual has no influence on Japanese policy-making, and such important questions as Japan's future and who is subservient to whom are decided by a faceless system, Vogel wrote that it is the bureaucrats who work out the details and codify Japanese policy, although the process to that stage is a consensus system reflecting the popular will.

While these two positions may seem to be very different, they actually have much in common in that both indicate that the prime minister and Cabinet do not exercise strong leadership or take responsibility for policy decisions.

Japanese policy toward the Gulf

How long can such a situation last? In 1991—a year that started with the Gulf War and ended with the Soviet Union's collapse—Japan was buffeted by the changing international situation and Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu (thought by many to be the puppet of former Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita) wavered back and forth, unable to provide the leadership the nation needed. Seeking to win passage of three political reform bills approved by the Cabinet, Kaifu hinted that he might dissolve the House of Representatives and call a general election over the issue, but even that came to naught and Kaifu resigned in disgrace. Succeeding him was Kiichi Miyazawa, self-proclaimed standard-bearer of the mainstream conservative cause, who won the Takeshita faction's backing but who seems to be about as inept as Kaifu in getting legislation passed and changes made.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, will go down in Japanese history as the first real test of how Japan

*In April 1590, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi surrounded Odawara Castle, the lord of the castle, Hojo Ujimasa, and his son Ujinao conferred with their retainers about whether to fight or to surrender. The discussions reportedly lasted for 100 days, until Hideyoshi's forces stormed the castle and forced its surrender.

Table 1 **Balance of Power within the LDP (as of June 30, 1992)**

Factions	House of Representatives	House of Councilors	Total
Takeshita	68	38	106
Miyazawa	61	19	80
Mitsuzuka	58	18	76
Watanabe	49	20	69
Komoto	24	7	31
Kato	7	6	13
Independents	10	5	15
Total	277	113	390

Table 2 **Balance of Power within the Diet (as of June 30, 1992)**

Parties/groups	House of Representatives	House of Councilors	Total
LDP	277	113	390
SDPJ	137	71	208
Komeito	46	20	66
JCP	16	14	30
DSP	13	10	23
United Social Democratic Party	5	–	5
Rengo-Sangiin	–	13	13
San'in Club	–	4	4
Nonaligned	6	5	11
Vacancies	12	2	14
Total	512	252	764

would respond to a blatant breach of international law within the post-Cold War structure.

Throughout the Cold War, Japanese foreign policy had been able to muddle through so long as it echoed U.S. policy. The constraints were very clear, and there were limits to Japanese foreign policy's discretionary leeway, but Japan felt secure in feeling that the U.S. would take care of it so long as it went along with the United States. Even the opposition parties, so publicly critical of Japan's foreign policy subservience to the U.S., were critical in the expectation that their criticism would have no major impact and that Japan would continue to play Sancho Panza to the United States' Don Quixote.

Yet in the Gulf War, even though the U.S. came up with a very specific list of things it wanted Japan to do, this was coupled with repeated declarations that it was ultimately up to Japan to decide what it would and would not do. While there is no telling if this was because Japan was becoming a political force in the international community, or because Japan was too wrapped up in its own internal debate to be subservient to the international debate even though the United States pressured Japan as strongly as ever, the internal Japanese political process provided unprecedented theater for the United States and rest of the international community.

In the spring of 1991, I was giving some lectures in the United States and kept encountering the following four questions from Americans at every stop:

1. World peace will disintegrate into anarchy if we allow this aggression by Saddam Hussein to stand. The Gulf War had to be fought. But Japan only contributed money and did not contribute any people. Why?

2. Japan argues that Constitutional constraints prohibit sending the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) overseas. But if the Constitution is out of touch with reality, why not change it?

3. The Gulf War is not an isolated incident. The whole pattern over the years has been that Japanese are very alert to money-making possibilities but are indifferent at best to working or fighting for the international community. Why?

4. Even in the Gulf, the actual facts of the Japanese contribution aside, the impression that everyone got was that it was too little, too late. Japan is supposed to be an economic power, but nobody knows who makes the policy decisions or how.

In effect, these people were saying basically the same things that van Wolferen and Vogel had said before them.

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and at the request of the United States, the government of Japan looked into what Japan could contribute in terms of both money and people. On October 16, 1990, two months after the invasion, it submitted a United Nations Peace Cooperation Bill to the Diet. This bill centered on logistics support for the U.S.-led multilateral force, but the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and Japanese Communist Party (JCP) loudly announced their undying opposition to sending the SDF overseas and, even though the LDP, Komeito and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) had agreed on creating a special organization separate from the SDF for cooperating with U.N. peacekeeping operations, the bill died after one month of deliberation.

There were three reasons for the bill's demise.

First was that then-Prime Minister Kaifu was unable to make the hard political decisions that were needed. Among the reasons for this wavering were that he was not fully cognizant of the harsh international realities, that he had the same aversion to military affairs found in so many Japanese who were born during the war and educated after it, that he was working from a very weak political base within the party, and that, viewed as a Takeshita puppet, he was unable to exercise strong leadership.

At the same time, the so-called elite bureaucracy was also shown to be unwilling or unable to cope with the new political dynamics that would have been created if the government had been willing to overthrow the old taboos and to upset the applecart of compromises and accommodations that had been built up with the opposition parties to pass the budgets and other legislation.

The second reason was that different groups held power in the upper and lower houses. In the lower house, the House of Representatives, the LDP had a majority of 277 of the total 512 seats. In the House of Councilors, however, the LDP has only 113 of the total 252 seats. As a result, the LDP was unable to move as dynamically as it might have wanted (Table 2).

With the SDPJ popularly viewed as perennially behind the times and with the

middle-of-the-road Komeito and DSP characterizable (as one LDP elder has characterized them) as "forever seeking to survive by cozying up to the LDP and doing its bidding," there is no way that the Diet could muster the will to seriously deliberate this emergency legislation.

LDP policies have contributed immensely to making Japan an economic power, but it is also the LDP that created the hotbed of collusion with the bureaucracy and business interests. It is this same collusion that has given birth to the Lockheed scandal, the Recruit scandal and numerous other scandals over the years. Although the non-LDP parties were able to play on public revulsion at this corruption and to do better than usual in some elections, these election victories were more votes against the LDP than they were votes for these parties' policies. In a very real way, the current imbalance in the Diet is more an expression of voter outrage and a voter attempt to punish the LDP for its transgressions than it is a vote of support for the opposition.

So long as the SDPJ—a party that is still riddled with Marxist-Leninists and that has many members who believe that these Marxist-Leninists are the party's conscience—continued to champion the abrogation of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, to oppose all nuclear power plants, and to argue North Korea's case, it was impossible to hope that the SDPJ would be able to deliberate any serious response to the Gulf War. At the same time, the weaknesses within the LDP made it impossible for that party to play Komeito and the DSP off against each other as they vied to see who could come up with the more reasonable position. Thus the impasse in the Diet was another reason the Japanese response was too little, too late.

And the third reason is that Japanese public opinion seems unalterably wedded to the status quo. This makes it impossible to create a new national consensus to cope with new realities.

A *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* opinion poll conducted 10 days after the start of Operation Desert Storm and reported on January 29, 1991, found that only 47.7% of the respondents supported the U.S.-led multilateral force's use of force. One month later (February 23), this was up to 65.9%. Asked about Japanese financial support for this multilateral force, the 35% support 10 days after the start of Desert Storm was up sharply to 71.9% in the second survey.

While half of the respondents were initially opposed to the government's sending SDF minesweepers to the region (which was done without amending the related law but by simple executive order), support was up to 60% once the minesweepers were deployed. Of course, by the time the minesweepers were sent to the Gulf, the hostilities had already ended and many people may have decided that there was no danger of the SDF's being drawn into a combat situation, but it is much more plausible that the people had accepted the argument that this was justified because Japan gets 70% of its oil imports from the Middle East.

It was in this context that the government embarked on a package of tax increases amounting to $100 per person to finance its total $13 billion contribution to the war effort. With the Diet shilly-shallying until the very last minute, Japanese policy-making took place in a complex web of opinion comprised of requests from the United States and other parties to the conflict, economic interests, deliberations that dragged on and on until everyone was either convinced or exhausted, and other elements.

While there is less urgency to the issue of Japan's personnel contribution to peacekeeping now that the Gulf War has ended, the Diet has recently passed a United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Cooperation Bill with a number of qualifiers such as a freeze on SDF participation in such "military activities" as disarming the warring factions or even collecting abandoned weapons, and this is expected to open the way for an SDF role in Cambodia.

The SDPJ and others who have continued unaltered in their opposition to the bill have seized on remarks by Chinese and Korean government officials and media commentators that sending the SDF overseas would be the first step on the slippery slope toward a Japanese military role overseas and have played this card for all it is worth, but this is just one more illustration of the importance of *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure) in Japanese policy-making.

Of course, *gaiatsu* has also ruled on the other side of the aisle as the LDP has repeatedly tried to get statements by U.N. officials or Cambodian officials calling for the SDF to be sent to Cambodia and has proudly brandished statements by U.S. government officials and lawmakers in support of the bill. It is not only the Japanese political and bureaucratic leadership but even the mass media that are incapable of taking independent initiatives, and this extends well beyond economic affairs to include political and military policy-making as well.

Political reform

Given this morass, political reform and restructuring is a major political litmus test for Prime Minister Miyazawa as he approaches the upper house elections this summer. Yet this is the same issue that brought down former Prime Minister Kaifu, who had been elected because of his squeaky-clean image in the wake of the Recruit scandal, and it is widely regarded as the kiss of death for a politician. (Kaifu had appointed a blue-ribbon panel to study political reform and then submitted legislation to the Diet based on the panel's July 1991 recommendations, but the legislation met with a hail of criticism from LDP and non-LDP Diet members alike before being put out of its misery in the corridors of power.) This is the albatross that Miyazawa carries with him into battle.

The LDP has already agreed to divide this broader issue of political reform into a number of sub-issues—such as the buttressing of political ethics, getting the number of seats in the House of Representatives back to normal, enacting stiffer penalties for violations of the Public Office Election Law, securing fuller disclosure of political funding and reforming Diet procedures—and to start with legislation on the areas where there is broad agreement.

Yet just as before, there is strong opposition from within the LDP to reducing the number of lower house seats or to switching to single-representative constituencies, since that would imperil some of their own seats, and it very much looks like the changes in the number of seats will end up being a near-cosmetic juggling that simply eliminates 10 seats and creates nine new ones.

If that is the best they can do on reapportionment, what is the outlook for decisive action on political morality and political funding? The Recruit scandal and the other scandals that have been unfolding recently have induced an extreme cynicism among the people, and voters have started to believe that money is the politicians' one and only preoccupation and that politicians who have collected massive contributions for political purposes then turn around and use this money for private gain.

The main question on political funding is whether or not proper books can be kept and disclosure made so that the flow of money is clear for all to see. This does not mean the ritualistic asset disclosures we now have for new Cabinet members but means an effort to lay the basis for forward-looking reforms that would have real teeth, including asset disclosure for all Diet members, disenfranchisement for Diet members who misappropriate political funds, and expulsion from the Diet for errant members.

With the gross violations that exist today of the basic democratic policy of one person one vote, and with a number of Supreme Court decisions that elections were unconstitutional because of these gross disparities in representation, it is imperative that the disparities be rectified as quickly as possible. The consensus seems to be that 1-to-2 is the maximum allowable disparity, but it has proved impossible to get agreement among the LDP and non-LDP parties and it may well be that Japan will have to settle for second-best. Even so, there is some question about whether or not the Miyazawa administration will be able to initiate the two-step process that is needed (moving first to a disparity of 1-to-2.5 or less and then adjusting that to 1-to-2 or less). Anything is possible, but, given Miyazawa's record to date, I would not hold my breath.

Starting with a 40% approval rating right after taking office in November 1991, the Miyazawa administration has seen its standing slip to 32% this February and 21% in March, and its seeming lack of enthusiasm for political reform is counted as a major factor in this slippage.

Little hope for change

There is much talk in Japanese political circles about "realignment," and this buzzword has become especially popular in connection with the upcoming upper house elections. Very simply, if the LDP manages to lose the election, there are bound to be people within the party who will argue that it is time to put an end to the one-party rule that has prevailed since 1955 and to form a coalition government—even if it means splitting the party. (There was a brief period when the LDP was technically in coalition with the New Liberal Club in 1983, which had splintered off from the LDP, but the NLC was so small and was so basically LDP-ish to start with that this fling is commonly forgotten.)

Shin Kanemaru, LDP vice president and head of the Takeshita faction, is said to be a major advocate of such realignment, and other leaders have also made a number of public statements indicating that they favor realignment. Within this, it should be noted that the kind of realignment that Kanemaru favors is not so much to revitalize a stagnant political process as it is to respond to the more urgent expediency of what to do if the LDP loses the July election.

If Komeito and the DSP pick up seats in the election, it is conceivable that we could see a conservative-centrist coalition bringing the more flexible elements of the LDP together with Komeito and DSP politicians.

If, on the other hand, Komeito and the DSP also do badly in the election and the three-party combination still lacks the 127 seats needed for a majority in the upper house, it is even possible that the Rengo-Sangiin, a new upper house group affiliated with the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), could be co-opted into a four-way conservative-centrist coalition with the LDP, Komeito and the DSP. There is also the off chance that part of the LDP could join with the SDPJ right wing to form a grand-alliance coalition government.

Yet the political realignment being bandied about at present does not envision the kind of sweeping realignment that would impact any of the parties' basic policies or would mean any change in their fundamental positions on such questions as rewriting the Japanese Constitution or renegotiating the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, positions that have been set in stone for the last 40 years. Instead, it is simply a matter of juggling affiliations until the numbers come out right—the very sort of irresponsible calculus that politicians are good at.

Even so, incumbent Prime Minister Miyazawa, former Prime Ministers Takeshita and Nakasone and many other LDP power brokers are cool to the realignment idea, and Nakasone is on record as having said that, "The LDP has fought long and hard for liberal democracy. There is talk of political realignment, but I would not want to realign if it meant giving up our principles."

I do not see any hope for realignment so long as there is no change in the election system—a system that makes it possible for individual LDP Diet members to have their own organizations and to serve their constituents not as LDP Diet members but as individual Diet members.

Nor do I see any reason why the LDP would break up and part of it form a new party with the dissident right wing of the SDPJ unless the LDP had a falling out over whether to rewrite the Constitution or to pretend to be observing it while they reinterpret it to death, whether to abrogate the Security Treaty or to stay within the U.S. security matrix, or some other basic issues of national policy.

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