

J apan's Turning Point and Political Realignment

By Takahashi Yoshikatsu

The July 1993 House of Representatives elections resulted in a dramatic change in Japan's political system. The de facto 38-year single party rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) collapsed and the new Hosokawa government, a non-LDP coalition of seven parties and a parliamentary group, was born. The Hosokawa coalition government temporarily concluded a series of drastic moves for political realignment starting with Hosokawa Morihiro's formation of the Japan New Party (JNP) in May 1992, followed by splits in the LDP and the formation of the Harbinger Party (HP) and the Japan Renewal Party (JRP).

This, however, is only the first round of political realignment. It is believed that a full-fledged realignment will take place after 1994 and the events so far are just the first step. There are two basic reasons for this. An eight-member coalition is far too large to be sustained. Secondly, following a general election based on the proposed single-seat constituency and proportional representation system, created by the political reform bills that passed the lower house on November 18, 1993, the new political map will be very different from the one based on the constituency system, a system more than 70 years old with three to five representatives being elected from each constituency.

We will look at these points in further detail. Regarding the first point, the government coalition includes the Japan

Photo: Kyodo News Service



Table 1
House of Representatives Power Map

Affiliation	January 1, 1993	July 18, 1993
Liberal Democratic Party	274	223
Social Democratic Party	141	70
Japan Renewal Party	—	55
Komeito	46	51
Japan New Party	—	35
Japan Communist Party	16	15
Democratic Socialist Party	13	15
Harbinger Party	—	13
Social Democratic Federation	4	4
Others	3	30
Vacancy	15	—
Total seats	512	511

Social Democratic Party (JSDP), JRP, Komeito, JNP, Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), HP, Social Democratic Federation and one parliamentary group which has seats only in the upper house (Table 1).

A senior Dietman in the opposition LDP once commented that the "Hosokawa government is a glass castle and won't last long. Soon it will fall." Also, the coalition government is called *yamatano orochi*, taken from an old Japanese myth. *Yamatano orochi* is a legendary giant serpent with eight heads and eight tails, utterly fragmented in its thinking and direction.

The eight groupings came together under the common banner of creating a "non-LDP coalition." The major promoter, JRP leader Ozawa Ichiro, persuaded Hosokawa to run for prime minister just after the general election by saying, "The LDP rule will continue forever unless a non-LDP coalition is formed now. Only you can hold a non-LDP government together." Ozawa was formerly a senior member of the now-defunct Takeshita faction, once the LDP's biggest faction, and former secretary-general of the party. When former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei was still influ-

ential, both Ozawa and Hosokawa belonged to his faction and learned his political methods as favored disciples.

Another LDP dissident grouping, however, the Harbinger Party, headed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Takemura Masayoshi and a key person in the current Cabinet, broke away from the LDP stating their determination to stop Tanaka-style money politics. Therefore, the HP's policy and attitudes are quite different from that of JRP, which comes from the LDP mainstream faction of the Tanaka-Takeshita-Kanemaru-Ozawa line.

Then there's the JSDP, the biggest party in the coalition and formerly the main leftist opposition against the LDP since 1955. It opposed the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and the creation of the Self-Defense Force. The party fiercely resisted passage of the PKO Five Principles and the U.N. Peace Cooperation bills, resorting to "slow step tactics" (known as the ox walk) along with the Japan Communist Party in June 1992.

Hosokawa Cabinet members from the JSDP accept the existence of the Self-Defense Force and PKO participation as Cabinet members, but at the same time claim the unconstitutionality of the SDF as senior party members. Thus, they are using double standards for basic constitutional questions in the name of support for the coalition government. Due to this contradiction, some coalition members want to break with the JSDP and instead work with political reform supporters within the LDP.

Komeito, the third largest coalition party after the JSDP and JRP, exercises significant influence in the new government due to Chief Secretary Ichikawa Yuichi's close relationship with Ozawa. Some even speculate that the two parties

may merge to form a new one. Given Komeito's awareness of its inability to expand (its main support comes from the Buddhist sect Sokagakkai), the potential for a JRP-Komeito tie-up should be a major focus in an anticipated political realignment.

Just after the new government took office, the JNP and HP also announced an unofficial "engagement" to begin merger talks. Thus, whether the two parties will consummate this engagement and form yet a newer party is another complicating factor in determining overall political realignment and should be closely watched.

Another question posed by the JRP and Komeito is their emphasis on national sovereignty. As an economic giant, Japan should seek not just to demonstrate international economic cooperation by, for example, opening its rice market but also seek an active role in international politics that would go beyond the traditional framework of the LDP's former foreign policy. In regards to U.N. peacekeeping operations, the constitution should be given a broader interpretation than was in use under the LDP government. These parties would like to transform Japan into being not just an economic power but a political power as well. Given this, the future of the two parties should be watched in relation to Japan's foreign policy and global strategy now that the the LDP's single party rule has ended.

Strong public support

What holds this coalition together, despite its many different political positions and basic policies, is the strong public support for the Hosokawa Cabinet based upon aspirations for political reform and a strong desire, by each coalition party, to remain in power. Public support for the government is shown in every survey conducted by newspapers and broadcasters.

For example, according to the *Asahi Shimbun's* systematic public opinion polls taken since the Tanaka Cabinet, the Hosokawa Cabinet has maintained the strongest support in both its initial and second poll, showing 71% and 70% respectively. Generally, Cabinet support



Farmers across the nation protested the partial liberalization of the rice market, the strongest protests since demonstrators tried to break into the Diet at the time of the 1960 Japan-U.S. security treaty.

declines in the second poll if its initial support reflects high expectations. Helped by his image as a commoner, the Tanaka Cabinet started with a strong support rating of 62%, but this declined sharply in the second poll. The reasons stated for continued support of the Hosokawa Cabinet are: Hosokawa as prime minister, 24%; the government is a coalition, 21%; coalition policies, 17%. This clearly shows strong personal support for the prime minister, and as long as Hosokawa's popularity remains intact, coalition parties cannot easily break away if they want to be successful in the next election (Chart 1).

The next point to discuss is political reform, which is a key issue for the coalition government. Following the last election there were various and complicated moves to re-establish mutual relations between the parties, including the LDP. The decisive idea which ultimately led to the formation of the coalition was that, "A non-LDP government should be formed to promote political reform as a pressing political task. Concerning policy issues, the existing basic policies of the LDP government should be maintained to avoid drastic changes."

The collapse of LDP rule can be explained by: 1) former Prime Minister and LDP leader Miyazawa Kiichi's lack of leadership; 2) internal struggles with-

mistrust of politicians after continual political malfeasance such as the Lockheed scandal; 4) political and financial system fatigue accumulated through long unbroken single party rule; 5) corruption and unfair practices resulting from the complicity of politicians, bureaucracy and industry; and 6) the impact of the collapse of the Cold War and the changing international situation which seeks a new world order.

In summary, the LDP's long grip on power, unprecedented in a country committed to liberalism and parliamentary democracy, deprived the party of an ability to purify itself of political scandals. Voters vented their anger toward this total inability to end systematic corruption, finally toppling the LDP.

Symbols of this discredited political system are former Prime Minister Tanaka and former Deputy Prime Minister and LDP Vice President Kanemaru, who were both arrested on bribery and huge tax evasion charges. Kanemaru, who was the leader of construction and transportation industry-related politicians, clandestinely acted as a fixer in the distribution of public works orders to construction companies according to their political donations, was arrested by the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office in March 1993 and charged with tax-evasion related to more

in the ex-Takeshita faction, triggered by the split between the Ozawa and Hata Tsutomu (current vice prime minister, foreign minister and representative of the JRP) group and the Hashimoto Ryutaro (former LDP secretary-general and minister of finance) and Kajiyama Seiroku (former LDP secretary-general) group;

3) deep public

than ¥1 billion in political donations. So far he has been found guilty of receiving secret political donations of ¥500 million. (When he was arrested Kanemaru reportedly possessed enormous amounts of cash and gold bullion, the total value of which was unknown even to himself.) The amount of secret political donations has been reported by the media at more than ¥2 billion in just the past few years.

In what is known as the Genecon Bribery scandal, several top members of management in major general construction companies (including Kajima, the largest general constructor, posting about ¥2 trillion in orders received in 1992) have been arrested and charged with bribing local and national politicians. Because of a proliferation of similar incidents public opinion and political party slogans came together to make a strong call for political reform. The Hosokawa government was destined to begin as a "political reform government."

How reformable are the reformists?

Political reform advocates are now regarded as good, while those who are cautious or negative about reform are all regarded as conservative villains. However, if examined closely, even among the reformists there are those who talk of reform only to advance their own election campaign or those who are trying to offset their past wrongdoings during the LDP's rule by conspicuously calling for political reform. In many cases, it requires great care for even senior political journalists to determine if their commitment to reform is sincere.

In any case, the Hosokawa coalition government has drawn up four political reform related bills: a bill for change in the public election law to introduce a single-seat constituency system conjoined with proportional representation in the House of Representatives elections; a bill for the formation of a new committee to draw lines for new single-seat constituencies; a bill for the amendment of the political donation regulation law to tighten control over political donations; and a bill to introduce the use

of public money to help finance political parties. These bills passed the lower house on November 18, 1993 and were sent to the House of Councillors where they were still under discussion as of January 10.

With the exception of the Communist Party, which strongly insists on maintaining the current middle constituency system for the lower house, both the coalition government and the opposition LDP agree to, or basically accept, the proposed reform bills, the core of which is the introduction of a single-seat constituency system. However, the bills' passage has been delayed by the determined resistance of many opponents and Diet members with reservations in both the ruling and opposition parties.

The political reform bills that passed the lower house contain the following major points:

1) Reducing the total number of seats in the lower house by 11 to 500, which then will be divided into single constituency seats of 274 and 226 proportional representation seats. The voters cast one vote for each.

2) Entirely banning donations by corporations and organizations to individual politicians and their support organization to prevent corruption.

3) To prevent bribery and violations of the election law, politicians are responsible for the misconduct of not only themselves, their relatives and financial managers but also for their secretaries who are sentenced to prison, with violations resulting in the nullification of an election victory. Also, a bribery conviction with probation will result in the suspension of a politician's civil rights.

4) In exchange for tougher enforcement of the regulations on political

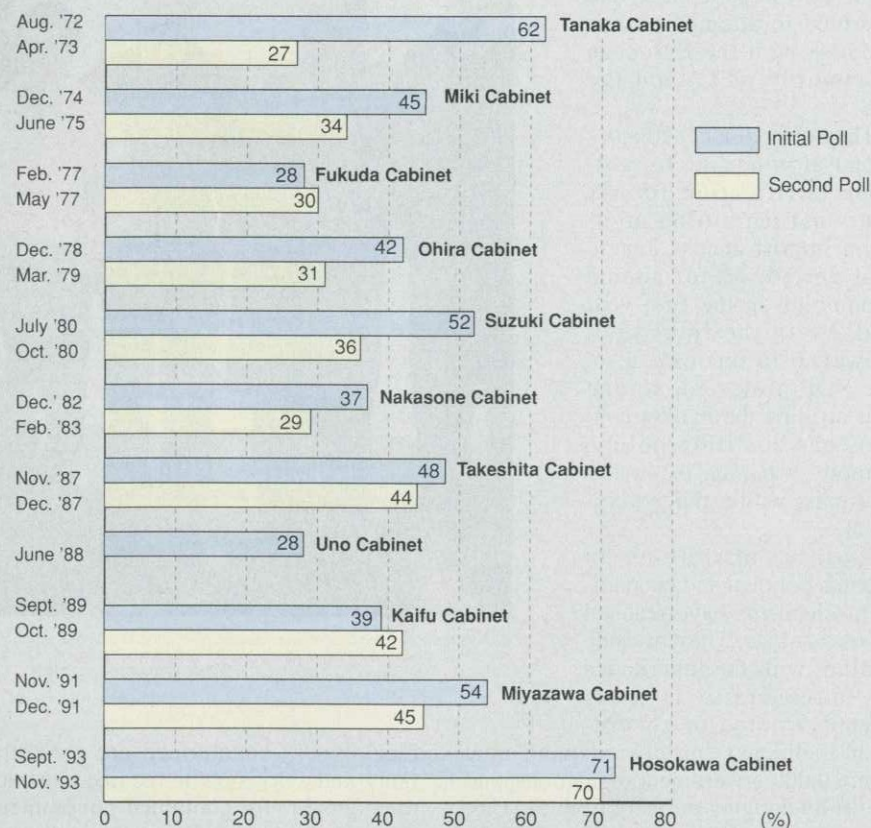
donations and the guilt-by-association system, the state will provide an annual subsidy for each political party totaling ¥30.9 billion (¥250 per capita) according to their proportional number of seats in the parliament.

The effect of the new constituency system on each party's seats can be predicted as follows based on the results of the last general election in July 1993. If the seven coalition parties can continue to cooperate in the election, setting a single united candidate in every small constituency, the seven parties will win 300 to 320 out of 500 seats. The LDP and JCP will lose heavily and possibly lose all of their seats in Tokyo.

On the other hand, if the seven coalition parties fail to jointly select their candidates and instead separately set up candidates within the single-seat constituency area, the LDP would win a strong majority of 280 to 305 seats. The first prediction, however, assumes that Hosokawa's popularity remains high, sound progress in countermeasures against other problems such as the recession, unemployment, inflation and international economic friction occurs, and the coalition still holds together.

The next general election based on the proposed new system will be held at the earliest in June 1994 when the division of the single-seat constituency is established. By that time, given possible difficulties in selecting official candidates, the current coalition that includes both conservatives and leftists could fall apart. Also the LDP could split with the new groups fighting among themselves. It is hard to predict how these developments could affect overall political realignment in Japan. Whether future Japanese politics will take the form of a two party system or a moderate multi-party system of three to five parties as Prime Minister Hosokawa expects is unlikely to be settled until after two or three general elections. The bottom line is that Japanese politics will likely continue to experience drastic change until the very end of this century.

Chart 1
Support for the Government: Initial and Second Polls



Source: Asahi Shimbun Survey (Only one survey was conducted for the Uno Cabinet.)

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