

Transformation of the Social Democratic Party

By Maeda Ichiro

The Social Democratic Party of Japan was formed on November 2, 1945, the year of defeat stemming from the Second World War. Although the party is expecting to celebrate its 50th anniversary this year, since its inception it has remained in opposition, except for three brief episodes—two immediately after its formation, and one from 1993 to today.

This situation is mainly due to the SDPJ's inability to respond aptly to both domestic and international changes, as well as to its stubborn attachment to its founding program, both of which have trapped the party.

However, in 1994, after 47 years of standing on the sidelines, the party abruptly reversed its long-held positions when power unexpectedly fell into its hands. A Copernican revolution, so to speak. This quick and almost complete turn about has exacerbated inherent contradictions in the party. As a result, general viewers now expect the SDPJ to face a tough battle in coming elections, including the upper house and nationwide local elections scheduled for this year, as well as the next general election for the lower house. Where is the SDPJ going? The party is turning a major corner.

Historic steps

The SDPJ's formation preceded that of other parties amid the postwar confusion. The party was, and still is, a united front of numerous proletarian parties and peasant unions which had repeated meeting and parting of ways prior to the war.

The original platform of the SDPJ can be simplified as politically democratic, economically socialistic, and internationally pacifistic. "Trio codes" as old cadres say. The party, of course, committed itself to socialist revolution and yearned for rebuilding a new Japan. This being said, however, it consisted of individuals with various ideologies, and

was doomed to perennial in-fighting from the beginning.

This prevented the party from developing more citizen-based politics and from carefully analyzing and responding to the drastically changing world. Despite this, in the first general election under the new Constitution of 1947, the party unexpectedly won the largest number of seats and the Katayama Cabinet was born.

However, due to inadequate preparations and internal disagreements the first SDPJ Cabinet was unstable, and to the disappointment of the population soon toppled. The party participated in the succeeding Ashida Cabinet led by the Democratic Party, a conservative party (later to merge with another conservative party to form the Liberal Democratic Party), but thereafter had remained outside the government for 44 years.

Throughout this period, the SDPJ continued to fight against conservative governments centering on diplomatic issues, including conclusions of peace treaties and the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, repatriation of the Okinawa Islands, and the conclusion and revisions of the Japan-U.S. Security Pact, but could not obtain sufficient support from the population. Moreover, the party was polarized into left wing and right wing which led to several splits. Due to repeated splits and fusions, the party gradually lost its strength.

The background to the SDPJ's constant internal fights stemmed from the international pressure of the Cold War. Against the predominantly pro-U.S. policies of the conservatives, the SDPJ took the side of the USSR.

Despite being mostly aloof from the population, the SDPJ has been successful in maintaining a certain degree of support so far. This is due to popular expectations that the party would check

the money-driven corrupt politics of the ruling conservatives as well as to act, in defense of the pacifist Constitution, as a certain brake to a military build-up.

Merits and demerits

Often described as "100 million all penitent," Japan's defeat in the Second World War made it reflect on its past militarism when postwar reconstruction began. Under the new Constitution, even though handed down by the U.S. occupying forces, implementation of the political, economic and social transformations went smoothly.

As the Cold War unfolded, the U.S. government pushed Japan to re-arm. The Yoshida Cabinet, placing priority on rebuilding the economy, strongly resisted U.S. demands. At this juncture, the SDPJ's position against rearmament and in favor of neutralism served as a shield for the government to fend off U.S. demands.

The rights of workers and farmers were expanded after the war, and the SDPJ supported labor movements, forming a solid block centered on Sohyo (the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan).

Japan's pursuit for a non-nuclear armament policy facilitated economic rebuilding and a level of high growth was soon reached. Accordingly, unions tried to push their wages up to European standards through *shunto* (spring offensive) struggles, with the SDPJ providing full support. The current income standard of Japan, which ranks among the highest in the world, though to some extent due to a stronger yen, is in great part the result of the efforts of the SDPJ.

Further, as pollution problems and environmental destruction accompanied rapid economic development, the SDPJ successfully pressured the government into implementing measures for improvement. Also to be noted is its role in securing safety measures in the



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With the advent of the Murayama government, the SDPJ has abruptly shifted its policies, recognizing that the current Self-Defense Forces fall within the framework of the Constitution and accepting a force with the minimum capabilities necessary, in line with the theme of demilitarization.

development of nuclear power.

Another positive aspect of the SDPJ's policies was the leading role they took in social security and welfare programs. The SDPJ expanded its voting base into those socially less advantaged and neglected sectors of society. This led to a realization of a relatively egalitarian society, with much lower income gaps among the population than that of foreign countries. Pension and medicare systems, while if not completely adequate, have been firmly established. As is often pointed out, Japan has implemented policies more socialistic than any real socialist country in the world, to which even Mikhail Gorbachev took off his hat.

On the negative side, however, the SDPJ has been tainted with an image of opposing everything and only finding fault with the government. The party

has been criticized for its "politics of parliamentary strategies," that is to practice double standards, behind-the-curtain deals, and conspiracies. Actually, the party did not engage in the work necessary to rectify or change the course of political developments, and, as the major opposition party, only presented strong and splendid arguments representing the frustrated population.

When questioned by a senior Japanese politician, "What is the essence of opposition parties?", Harold Wilson, former leader of the British Labour Party and once prime minister, replied "First, to attack the government as representatives of the population, and second, say only what is attainable in the event of coming to power."

How does this apply to the SDPJ? As far as attacking the government, the party once was a reasonable player, but

nowadays, to my regret, it appears to be loosing the ability to offer constructive alternative ideas.

Also, the party does not seem to have been prepared enough to assume government seats and has paid the price since coming to power. Because of the tremendous gap between the party's policies before and after coming to power, opposition parties have condemned the SDPJ as a betrayer to its own election pledges.

For example, when a bill which would allow overseas participation of the Self-Defense Forces in U.N. Peacekeeping Operations was discussed in the Diet in 1992, the SDPJ firmly opposed the bill on the grounds that the existence of the SDF was, the party believed, unconstitutional. In this vein the party resisted passage of the bill using the comically obsolete strategy of

the "ox walk"—intentionally slow walking to delay the process of voting—in both the upper and lower houses. Then, after passage of the bill, the party resigned in total from the Diet, submitting resignations from of all its members to the chairman. But they did not leave the chambers. People were amazed by this impudent behavior. Unanimous resignations could have been an effective tactic if real action had followed, but what they did was just a token action. Moreover, if the party took voter confidence seriously, such an easy-going strategy would not have been taken.

Now with its leader Murayama Tomiichi heading the coalition government, the SDPJ voted in favor of sending the Self-Defense Forces to Zaire, Africa, in the name of humanitarian aid. The troops are even equipped with tanks with machine guns. This is just one of many examples of the SDPJ's inconsistency.

In addition, the SDPJ criticized the LDP and repeatedly denied the possibility of entering into a coalition with it. Nevertheless, when offered the position of prime minister, the SDPJ easily revoked previous statements, and has been sharing Cabinet seats with the past enemy. Also, in the former Hosokawa Cabinet, SDPJ ministers unanimously stated, "The existing form of the Self-Defense Forces is in violation of the Constitution." However, this has been easily turned into "The Self-Defense Forces are within the framework of the Constitution" just after party leader Murayama became prime minister. To be sure, the nature of the SDF had not changed in the interval. This is the real nature of the party championing the Constitution.

Five years ago, the SDPJ fought the 1989 upper house elections with a pledge to abolish the newly introduced consumption tax. The campaign drew large support from the population and resulted in the first ever opposition-dominated upper house. Now, however, the SDPJ has gone so far as to approve a raise in the consumption tax in return for a major income tax cut introduced as an economic stimulus measure. In

February 1994, when then-Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro announced his "national welfare tax" scheme, which in reality was a raise in the consumption tax from 3% to 7%, the SDPJ, despite being a part of the ruling coalition, fiercely opposed it, setting up a placard in front of party headquarters reading "Headquarters of the Anti-consumption Tax Hike Movement." This was only a little more than six months before the party accepted raising the tax. Is this the attitude of a responsible party?

In all, there is more than enough evidence to criticize SDPJ's policies as short-sighted and opportunistic reflecting the SDPJ's persisting easy-going mood as an opposition party. The party has yet to completely understand the responsibilities of being a ruling party. Upon the start of the Murayama Cabinet, the party finally took steps toward cleaning up its contradictions and is now undertaking drastic changes in its basic policies.

Background of the transformation

Under the Murayama Cabinet, the SDPJ has switched its stance from negative to positive, regarding issues such as the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, the SDF and nuclear power. In this respect, the September 1994 SDPJ conference carries an historical importance equivalent to the 1959 Bard Godesberg Conference of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. However, there is a 35 year time gap between the two. The SDPJ has waited too late.

Several factors can be attributed to the changes. First, forming a coalition government headed by the SDPJ leader required adjustments to the SDPJ's policies, otherwise huge gaps among the coalition members would easily have brought the coalition down. Second, the end of the Cold War and the ensuing changes in the international environment put an end to ideology based politics. Third, the SDPJ has been losing support among unions and the general public demanding more realistic policies. Fourth, the party, now experienc-

ing the delicious taste of power, has decided that the way to maintain power amid major political realignments is to narrow policy differences so that it can form coalitions with other parties.

Ironically, the party has lost its individuality by shifting its policies closer to other parties. Also, it left local SDPJ members, who had been promoting anti-nuclear and anti-U.S. struggles faithfully following the party's policies, at a loss. These have done much harm to the solidarity of the party organization and the party is quickly losing its centripetal force.

Conclusion

Current major concerns of the SDPJ Diet members are their survival in the next general election after a scheduled introduction—under the disguise of political reform—of an electoral system of small constituencies with proportional representation replacing current medium constituencies.

The SDPJ used to play a certain role of its own in national politics, for example, proposing progressive social welfare programs, which the ruling conservative government had to implement a few years later. The drastic policy shift, however, put the party on the same line with other parties, and the party is now on the verge of being swept away by wild tides of ongoing political realignment. Frustrations and fears of SDPJ Diet members are piling up.

As a result, the left wing of the party, which sticks to maintaining the Murayama government, is emphasizing cooperation with the LDP, while the right wing has begun probing ways to form a third political force through dissolving the SDPJ and assembling existing social democrats and liberals together.

This could lead to an eventual split of the party. If so, the Murayama government will inevitably collapse. The historical task of the SDPJ seems to be drawing near to the end. ■

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