

Public Distrust of Politics and the New Hashimoto Cabinet

By Matsuyama Yukio

A frustrated people

Spreading public distrust of politics is not an unusual phenomenon in developed nations. After 40 years of following domestic and foreign politics as a journalist I have come to believe that countries whose people vigorously criticize authority are healthier than those whose citizens uniformly idolize their leaders. However, I believe that it is extremely dangerous when the public harbors such intense dissatisfaction and indignation as it has in Japan lately.

On January 11 Hashimoto Ryutaro formed a new government. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* survey conducted immediately afterward, around 61% of those polled supported Prime Minister Hashimoto. This does not necessarily mean that the public is happy with the current political situation. Rather, this figure should be seen as an indication of the public's hope that the new government will do something to halt the occlusion of politics.

Above all, Hashimoto needs to recognize that people feel extremely dissatisfied, disgusted, displeased, disappointed, disillusioned, and disgruntled regarding Nagatacho and Kasumigaseki

(the Japanese equivalent of "inside the Beltway"). This is now the winter of the Japanese discontent.

Why the outcry now?

The people feel that Japan's system of democracy does not accurately reflect popular will. Everyone is irritated that politics is becoming steadily worse especially as Japan is a nation with high educational and living standards, where freedom of speech is guaranteed.

In the general election two and a half years ago, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was unable to sustain its single party majority; and when the government of Hosokawa Morihiro was inaugurated, under an anti-LDP banner, Japanese democracy functioned, however imperfectly. Following scandals that brought down the Hosokawa government all parties (except the Japan Communist Party (JCP)) forfeited their ideals and, in bald-faced lust for power, alliances dissolved as simply as they were made on the basis of personal likes and dislikes.

Politics is not pretty, of course. It is hardly the end of the world when parties realign and policies change unexpectedly in response to changing conditions. However, recent political moves have been much too opportunistic. I think that future generations will undoubtedly look back on this as an unusual time.

After disparaging each other during the election, the LDP and the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) abruptly formed a coalition, without so much as a by your leave from the electorate. If the leaders of an autocracy do as they like without regard to the popular will and a democracy is defined by a political system that attempts to take public opinion into consideration, then one can conclude that Japan is a "pseudo-democracy."

Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once commented, "The Japanese appear to believe that their

country is a democracy, but if you ask me Japan, similar to China, is not a democracy." Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Donald Dore also remarked, "From the standpoint that there is no censorship or that there is political freedom I think that you could say that Japan is a fairly democratic country, but if you look at the relationship between the people and politicians my feeling is that you couldn't call it a democracy." Not a few Japanese would agree with these two statements.

Adverse effects of the LDP-SDPJ coalition

From the outset the LDP joined hands with its longtime foe, the SDPJ, in a desperate bid to return to power. The LDP was accustomed to being in power and after filling the role of an opposition party during the time of the Hosokawa and Hata Tsutomu administrations, it realized that being excluded from governing was a completely infeasible option. As such, the LDP, which held 200 seats in the Lower House, recovered power by a drastic measure. It offered the post of prime minister to the Socialists, who had but 60 seats.

The LDP succeeded in relegating the New Frontier Party, led by Ozawa Ichiro (who had slung mud at the party when he broke away from the LDP), to the opposition. The antipathy that LDP parliamentary members feel toward Ozawa, their former comrade, approximates that of a family feud.

Naturally, no matter how much they want political power, some within the LDP are less than enthusiastic about the coalition with the SDPJ, which is so ideologically different. They also believe that it will be enough to get rid of the SDPJ at the next election, after the LDP obtains a majority. They imagine that, even if a majority is not attained, but they come close, they can eject the SDPJ, split off some of the



Prime Minister Hashimoto announcing his inauguration is shown big as life as pedestrians rush by below.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

New Frontier Party, and form a new conservative alliance along with Shinto-Sakigake (Harbinger Party). It is with that expectation in mind that the LDP does not actively oppose this coalition.

For its part, the SDPJ is aware of the situation, that it is only being used by the LDP until the next election. Even with that knowledge their only recourse is to follow the LDP's lead and maintain the coalition. It is clear that even if they were to insist on standing alone in opposition, they would go nowhere as socialist parties are losing their appeal in advanced capitalist societies. The newly introduced single-member constituency electoral system is markedly disadvantageous to the SDPJ. They joined forces with the LDP because faced with the possibility of being thrown away, they could choose this course that would allow them to savor power.

Luckily for the LDP, even though Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi hailed from the left wing he was more of a pragmatist than anyone could have foreseen with his about-face on former Socialist policies on the Self-Defense Forces, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, consumption taxes, the national anthem, the flag, and other issues, eliminating most of the differences with LDP policies. Nobody had envisioned that the post of prime minister could change the person himself to such an extent.

The unfortunate aspect for SDPJ supporters and for Japanese politics as a whole was that they did all the yielding and compromising while the LDP hardly made any concessions. Each time Prime Minister Murayama was faced with the predicament of making a bitter choice between idealism and pragmatism the flame of Socialist ideals dimmed a bit more.

Undoubtedly, the LDP had hardly planned that far ahead, but they did end up hitting the bull's eye when they made Murayama prime minister. Stiff SDPJ resistance would have prevented an LDP-only government from doing as it pleased, but they managed quite well through a Socialist prime minister.

The only events that had a Socialist air about them during the time of the

Murayama cabinet were the declaration of a frank apology to neighboring countries on last year's August 15 anniversary of the end of World War II, the resolution of the Minamata Disease problem, and the lack of scandals related to money or women.

Public fed up with official transgressions

The LDP-SDPJ coalition government ended up with only the Socialists switching course while the inherent nature of the LDP changed hardly at all. That the Socialists moved from impractical idealism to pragmatism itself was a phenomenon to be welcomed, but the political world's overall shift to conservatism and the loss of contention would have to be described as a negative.

It would have been one thing if the Socialists had thoroughly exhausted the debate within the party and voluntarily undertaken their tremendous policy shifts prior to taking power, as the SPD did in the former West Germany, but in the Socialists' case the problem was that Murayama made abrupt and unilateral decisions after joining the government so that a joint front could be maintained with the LDP.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once noted, "Japan can move without philosophical conviction." After seeing the SDPJ's recent series of "aphilosophical," situation-based moves he would undoubtedly have even more confidence in his theory's veracity.

Murayama ended up fanning the public's distrust for politics when he did not apologize to the people or even offer an acceptable explanation for the Socialists' utter disregard of promises they had made in the previous general election. This will only result in no-one believing what politicians promise in the next election. Japanese democracy treats the importance of words, particularly pledges, made during an election much too lightly. The unprecedentedly low voter turnout for last year's Upper House election could be interpreted as a reflection of public disgust.

The LDP and SDPJ coalition was not created through a Hegelian dialectic

grouping (Aufheben) of "thesis" and "antithesis." It would be more appropriate to say that the LDP had in fact absorbed the SDPJ, giving birth to another LDP faction, the "SDPJ faction" (and the "Sakigake faction"). This was clearly apparent from the posts assigned to each faction when the Hashimoto cabinet was formed. The "Socialist faction" was allocated six posts and the "Sakigake faction" two.

The disgraceful appearance of SDPJ Diet members as they competed for cabinet posts was no different than the LDP and for people in the reform camp who had toiled in labor, agricultural, and citizens' movements for years. It undoubtedly appeared more a deplorable event than something to rejoice over. It seems that "living by one's principles," "adhering to one's policies," and such have become obsolete phrases.

Nation's welfare given no thought in formation of cabinet

The formation of the Hashimoto cabinet disregarded the principle of the right person for the right job even more so than when the LDP had ruled on its own. Citizens were disappointed by the status quo manner in which the old cabinet was tossed out and appointments made simply based on faction.

The new government faces a mountain of thorny problems, including the Okinawa question, economic recovery, strained public finances, financial system instability, and the Aum cult. Faced with these conditions, there were probably not a few people who felt uneasy to see Ikeda Yukihiko—who has no experience in foreign policy—appointed foreign minister, Kubo Wataru—a financial neophyte—named finance minister, and Nagao Ritsuko—untried in the legal arena—tapped for justice minister. These appointments were clearly not made with the public good in mind. This was a government created of the politicians, by the politicians, and for the politicians; a reversion to before the Hosokawa administration.

Many of the nation's people were also

disillusioned that an old-style pol, Kajiyama Seiroku, had been brought in to serve as chief cabinet secretary, the cabinet spokesman. The tremendous behind-the-scenes influence wielded by former Prime Ministers Nakasone Yasuhiro and Takeshita Noboru during the selection of the cabinet also yielded the impression that the hands of time were racing backward. Talk of "clean, new politics" is nonsense.

By and large, former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and his cronies had immersed politics in money, making the phrase "political reform" the name of the game in Nagatacho for the past four or five years. Former LDP Vice President Kanemaru Shin, a central figure in the Tanaka faction during that period, later arrested by the public prosecutor's office, is the only one to have disappeared from the political arena. Takeshita still wields covert influence. So do Prime Minister Hashimoto, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kajiyama, LDP Vice President Obuchi Keizo. Opposition New Frontier Party President Ozawa Ichiro and former party president Hata were once influential figures in the Tanaka faction and are still active in the present political forefront.

Doubtless, not a few citizens have the vague impression that the right approach to political reform is to begin by eliminating those connected to political corruption. The actual state of affairs, similar to the post-war period when those responsible for starting and losing the war waved the banner of democratic politics, is an illustration of the Japanese people's historical amnesia, or their extraordinarily tolerant disposition toward past mistakes.

As if in parallel with distrust of politics, distrust of the bureaucracy is on the rise. In Japan it was once said that there was no need to worry because even if politicians were third-rate, bureaucrats were first-class, but the quality of the bureaucracy has declined lately and this has begun to diminish Japan's image abroad. Starting with the Finance Ministry, there has rarely been a time when bureaucratic scandals and ineptitude have been given such play in the media. In particular, the public is irate

that \$50 in taxes from every person in Japan, including babies, is going to be diverted to clean up the *jusen* (home mortgage corporations).

From the outset, Japanese have always had a weak perception of their role as taxpayers and, conversely, a strong perception of bureaucrats as rulers. Politicians tend to curry the favor of bureaucrats who would try to control them. On this point Japan is very different from the U.S., because most officials above the rank of assistant vice minister are political appointees.

If the Socialists were truly in opposition they would harshly criticize the LDP's overly cozy relations with the bureaucracy, pushing for administrative reform and eradication of official corruption, but now that they have shifted to the seat of power they have inadvertently adopted a posture of defending the bureaucracy. Even if this were not the case, Japanese dislike confrontation and are prone to turn to collusion. In the sense that politics requires tension, I miss the former political arrangement, when the LDP and SDPJ were always at each other's throats. Whether the reduction of U.S. military bases in Okinawa, welfare for the elderly, the difficulties that university students are experiencing in securing employment, or other issues, if the Socialists were in opposition the weak would have a stronger voice in the Diet and this would be reflected in politics and government.

An era of no choice

When the single-member constituency electoral system was enacted two years ago, the overriding majority of those who supported it envisioned an arrangement under which liberal parties (except the JCP) would confront conservative groups over policy issues. In other words, one side would be the hawkish, conservative LDP factions and the other would be a united front composed of LDP doves along with the Komeito, Social Democrats, United Social Democratic Party, Sakigake, and the newly pragmatic Socialists. Similar to the two major party systems in the U.S., UK, Canada, Germany, and France, the

two sides would battle over foreign policy strategies and economic policy.

However, Kaifu Toshiki and other LDP doves merged with the New Frontier Party of Ozawa Ichiro, who has a slightly hawkish tinge, while on the other hand the LDP hawk factions joined with the SDPJ. This admixture of hawks and doves has left voters bewildered over just what the criteria for their votes should be.

In the next election people will doubtlessly seek the lesser evil—not who they actively like, but who will be less harmful—when they cast their votes. It has long been said that the U.S. presidential election is one of no choice. Elections in Japan, too, have come to be characterized by a lack of choice.

As in the U.S., capable people who would be suited for politics have become scarce on the individual level, too. The joke has it that a look at the lineup of postwar politicians proves that Darwin's theory of evolution was wrong. The present political environment, in both the U.S. and Japan, talented lawyers, academicians, or journalists can hardly be inclined to stand for election. The nearly 40% of so-called "second generation" LDP Diet members is emblematic of the hereditary nature of political employment and politics has also ended up as a repository for former high-ranking bureaucrats.

The late French author Romain Rolland said, "A people that scorns politics will only have politics that merit scorn." In Japan a vicious cycle of unappealing politics and poor-quality politicians has clearly begun.

The other day a couple of friends came over to our house for a visit with their son, who is around three years old. Because he is very clever and sociable I offered the praise that he might make a good politician someday, at which his young mother grimaced and said, "Don't wish bad luck on him!" In Japan's version of democracy politics is no longer a respected profession. ■

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