

Shaping a New Era

By Takeshi Sasaki

The Kaifu administration is readying an ambitious package of political reform measures embracing both the election system and political financing, and has convened a Special Session of the Diet specifically to deal with these issues. These political reform bills derive from the Recruit scandal two years ago and are intended to make Japanese politics a less expensive, less money-grubbing calling. However, love of money is not the only criticism, and Japanese politics is also criticized for its lethargy and lack of leadership. Not long ago, for example, the business community and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were at odds over whether Japanese politicians had any principles and ideals at all.

Giving voice to the business community's criticism is Toshiaki Yamaguchi's "When Will Politicians Put Their Occupation Mentality Behind Them and Grow Up?" in the July *Asahi Monthly*. Vice chairman of Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives), Yamaguchi leads off with the statement that Japanese politicians have yet to outgrow their occupation mentality and builds from there. Among the many charges that he marshals in support of his thesis are that Japanese politicians still believe they can attain "peace in one country," still quest after the holy grail of economic growth, and still think of Japan primarily as a poor little country devoid of natural resources.

When these people talk about partnership with the United States, they are really thinking of diplomatic subservience to the United States so that Japan will be free to pursue its economic objectives. When they speak of world peace, it is a peace that they are neither prepared nor able to contribute to. Having little sense of the real crisis in international relations and having developed a purely reactive mindset, these politicians do not know what they want to do and simply sit wringing their hands. Little wonder that Japan comes across internationally as

a nation devoid of either ideals or initiative and that Japanese politicians are so scorned.

Arguing that the political environment needs to be altered so that politicians can set clear goals for themselves and dedicate themselves to these ideals, Yamaguchi is eloquent on the need for political reform to attract better people to politics and to develop world-class leaders. In many ways, Yamaguchi is sounding the alarm about an all-pervasive structural cancer in the Japanese body politic.

Political reform

Echoing these themes from a somewhat different perspective is Kimihiro Masamura's "Postwar Japanese Political and Administrative Systems" in the June 8 *Toyo Keizai*. In this essay, Masamura analyzes the dynamics between Japan's economic performance and its political and administrative systems and hypothesizes that the systems have performed admirably in dealing with certain problems under certain circumstances but have been fatally flawed in dealing with other problems under other circumstances.

After looking at numerous instances, he concludes that Japan's political and administrative systems have served the country well in making the policy adaptations forced on it by domestic and international change but have been virtual failures in terms of creating new conditions based on any broader, long-term perspective. Good at tactical adaptations, Japan has a history of failure in selecting its strategic directions.

Today, when very long-term strategic visions are needed, politicians are more reluctant than ever to speak of strategic vision. The opposition has atrophied, the ruling party is a gaggle of special interests, and it is impossible to hope for either analysis or foresight from our political leaders. The administrative bureaucracy has likewise ossified, and politics has



Former leader of the Social Democratic Party of Japan Doi (left) with her successor Tanabe. The party is being urged to review its traditional policies.

Photo: Mainichi Shimbun

been more cause than cure of this condition as the various deliberative bodies have degenerated into ceremonial rubber stamps. Masamura declares that political reform is needed to escape this wretched condition and emphasizes the importance of electoral reform as the first step in this long process.

As such, Masamura's thesis looks at the present crisis in Japan's political and administrative systems and declares political reform both reasonable and essential. Every politician and political party trembles at the idea of electoral reform, but it is on today's agenda precisely because there is such a strong sense of political crisis in the land.

One other subject of special interest for Japanese political pundits is the Social Democratic Party of Japan, as discussed in Satsuki Eda's "Why the SDPJ Should Disband" in the June *Gendai* and Akira Yamagishi's "To the Defeated SDPJ" in the June *Bungei Shunju*. Both articles say that the party needs to review and revamp its traditional policies on such issues as the security treaty and defense and should not be afraid to split if that is what it takes for a revival.

Eda, himself leader of the small United Social Democratic Party, argues that Japan needs a new regrouping of its social democratic forces and that this new alliance should be joined under the banner of representing consumers and ordinary people as opposed to the LDP's championing of business and other vested interests. Nor is Eda alone in advocating this regrouping. This crisis of the opposition is but one facet of the more general crisis afflicting all of Japanese politics, and there are some observers who expect the

political realignment to entail a split of the conservative ruling party as well. The political reforms proposed by Prime Minister Kaifu are intended to create conditions more conducive to a two-party system, and while there is considerable disagreement on how they will work in practice, everyone is agreed that they will have a major impact on the way politics is organized in Japan.

Japanese-Soviet relations

Looking further afield, the media have made much of Soviet President Gorbachev's visit to Japan. In fact, the lack of progress on the territorial problem has given rise to three different interpretations. First is that Japanese-Soviet relations will necessarily continue to be cool so long as the territorial issue remains unresolved and that Japan has no choice but to bide its time until the Soviet position changes. This interpretation sees the territorial issue as paramount and is unwilling to even discuss the possibility of assistance for the Soviet Union until the disputed territories are back in Japanese hands. Sitting pat and waiting for Soviet concessions, these people are uninterested in what happens in the Soviet Union and seem to accept the continued existence of Cold War thought patterns.

The second interpretation is that Japanese-Soviet relations have a breadth and depth far transcending the territorial issue and that Japan should continue to seek incremental progress on the territorial issue as it moves ahead with closer economic and cultural ties.

And the third interpretation says that what happens within the Soviet Union is of global importance and that Japan should be willing to separate its territorial interests from this broader international quandary. Unless Japan is able to separate the two questions, these people argue, it runs the risk of being so obsessed with territorial progress that it makes excessive commitments to the Soviet Union or, at the other extreme, that it loses sight of global imperatives and ends up being ostracized by the international community.

Each of these interpretations is valid to

a point because each focuses on a different level of Japan's relations with the Soviet Union. On the first level are the simple bilateral relations, including the territorial issue. It is this level that the first interpretation stresses. At the second level is the question of the Soviet Union as a global issue of the kind that was discussed at the recent London Summit. And third is the relationship in the context of what kind of world we want to create in the Far East.

All three of these levels need to be considered in Japan's relations with the Soviet Union, but the tendency until now has been to give the priority to the purely bilateral relationship. The London Summit pressed Japan to consider relations with the Soviet Union in a more global context, but the ability to formulate policy at the third level seems to be prerequisite to any global overview, and Japan has yet to come up with any vision of how it and the Soviet Union fit into the Far East of the future. This will be one of the major issues in the years ahead.

Global economics

The U.S. Congress's giving the Bush administration "fast track" authorization to negotiate on trade seems to have breathed new life into the GATT Uruguay Round. Yet there are portents of bloc-ism as seen in "Coming Soon: An Era of Neo-bloc-ism?" in the June 11 *Ekonomisuto*. In fact, this possibility figured prominently in this year's *White Paper on International Trade*, and there are many voices warning about the coming crisis threatening the principle of non-discriminatory trade.

There is especially strong interest in the negotiations for a free trade agreement between the United States and Mexico, and there has been considerable speculation about whether U.S. trade policy is really grounded in the GATT ideal of free and non-discriminatory multilateral trade or whether it now prefers regional groupings.

It is within this context that increasing attention is being paid to the East Asian Economic Group concept proposed by Malaysia. Jun Onozawa's "The Mahathir

Plan: Seeking a Voice for East Asia" in the June 11 *Ekonomisuto*, for example, speculates that the eddies of history are such that Japan will have to affiliate with this Mahathir plan. In support of his argument, Onozawa says that Japan and the Asian NIEs have sharply stepped up their investments in this region since the 1985 Plaza Accord and that the intraregional economic interdependence is increasing as a result. In that East Asia has now developed into a formidable market and has begun to correct its overdependence on the American market, we are already seeing the creation of an East Asian economic sphere, Mahathir plan or not.

It should be noted here that most observers see this Mahathir plan not as a scheme for instant implementation but as an indication of Asian anxiety at American and European trade policies and an attempt to ensure that Asia has a greater voice in world trade councils. Of course, there are also those such as Tasuku Takagaki ("An Asian Bulwark against Global Bloc-ism" in the June 29 *Toyo Keizai*) who are sharply critical of even this limited concept.

Gradually, Japanese political debate is being weaned of its fixation on the United States and is turning toward Asia. While the many reasons for this defy easy summary, one ironic strain that is evident is a desire to build closer relations with Asia as a bargaining chip in the face of heightened tensions with the United States. Nevertheless, Japan still has only limited political and military influence within Asia, and most observers appear agreed on the need for Japan and the United States to work in partnership to create the new world order.

Yet as the Japan-U.S. relationship becomes more than a purely bilateral relationship and comes to include all of Asia as well, there is heightened potential not only for new realms of cooperation but also for new realms of tension and friction. Indeed, the future of the Japan-U.S. relationship is likely to hinge on how well the partnership functions in this new era. ■

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