

Reforming the Body Politic

By Takeshi Sasaki

Political reform has been a major issue ever since the Recruit scandal of the late 1980s, and it was Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's failure to get a political reform bill passed in the Diet that ultimately led to his resignation. It is thus worth looking at what the media have had to say about political reform.

The bills that the Kaifu Cabinet submitted to the Diet embodied three main reforms: reforming the system for financing politics, changing from the current multi-representative electoral districts to a dual system of single-representative districts plus broader-area proportional representation, and providing some public financing for political parties.

Eliminating money's corrupting influence was a major theme of these reforms, and the Kaifu Cabinet and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) reformers contended that this could not possibly be done unless the way politics was financed was fundamentally reformed, and that reforming political financing could not be done unless the electoral system was overhauled to dramatically curtail the way campaigning is done.

Corruption-prone

As things now stand, each electoral district elects three to five representatives. If a party wants to win a majority in the Diet, it thus needs to field several candidates in each district, and this leads to elections fought not on policy grounds but on money issues and the question of who can do more for the district's voters. The upshot is that each of the candidates tries to raise as much money as possible, a lot of money is sloshing around unaccounted for, and the LDP factions "adopt" candidates who they then support with additional funding. It is, the LDP reformers say, a system wide open to corruption, and the current electoral system is not only a hotbed of money politics but is also the root of all evil in Japanese politics.

As a result, the reformers argued that it was necessary to move away from the current electoral system focused on the individual and to create a new system that would focus on the parties. At the same time, they argued for concentrating control of the purse strings with the parties and providing some public financing for the parties to make them less dependent on influence seekers. Yet this proposal aroused considerable opposition from those who feared that it would let the LDP monopolize even more seats as well as from those who argued that the changes fail to address the fundamental issue of money in politics. At the same time, there were many people within the LDP who resisted these reforms because they felt that candidates should not have to give up the political and financial organizations they had worked so hard to build up.

There are a number of oddities here. For one, why was the bill submitted to the Diet despite the opposition of strong elements within the LDP? While it is clear that the reformers felt they had a moral imperative to avoid another major scandal, they were also apparently motivated by a belief that reform is needed to restore public trust in politics and enable the government to deal with the pressing issues facing Japan.

Former Chief Cabinet Secretary Masaharu Gotoda has commented (in "Rescuing Politics" in the October *Gendai*) that Japanese politics looks stable on the outside but is actually riddled with structural fatigue and dead-end policies. It is significant that a sizable portion of the LDP argued for political reform not only to wean politics of its addiction to money but also to break the political gridlock.

The need for political leadership and can-do politics is in turn linked to the many ills arising from the fact that Japan is led by the bureaucrats—the latest round of securities scandals being just one illustration of this. Thus the reformers also contended that political reform is essen-



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tial to revitalize the moribund parties and open the way for a possible change of government. It is not enough, they argued, for the opposition to simply complain about all the money that the LDP spends. It is time to do something, and that something is political reform.

Kinds of reform

Even if this is accepted, the question remains what kinds of reforms are needed. Writing in "The New Era" in the October *Next*, Taichi Sakaiya is just as critical of the political status quo as Gotoda is, but is not an advocate of these sweeping reforms. Instead, he writes, Japanese politicians have abdicated their real duty to formulate basic policy and to provide overall coordination and have instead devoted more and more attention to the kinds of minor details that the bureaucrats deal with, with the result that they have become errand boys for the bureaucracies and have gotten tied to the same vested interests that influence the ministries.

Rather than formulating policies and winning elections on the basis of their policy stances, Japan's political parties have become devoted to the individual Diet member's security and peace of

mind and have developed both a seniority system based on how many times the individual Diet member has won reelection and factions to promote not policies but personal interests.

Although Sakaiya is acutely aware of the problems, he believes that single-representative districts are unsuited to the Japanese political tradition and that proportional representation would simply make candidates more beholden to the parties and their special interests. Instead, Sakaiya suggests that the format of Diet debate be reformed to ensure vigorous debate between the government and opposition parties and to encourage more initiative by individual Diet members.

The LDP's reformers are also enthusiastic about Diet reform, and they are moving ahead with plans for live television broadcasts patterned after the U.S. C-Span network. However, the Japanese Diet is a hotbed of lethargy not only because of the way debate is conducted but even more because there is little prospect of a change of government and the LDP-bureaucracy coalition makes sure that everyone plays by the script.

Thus, revitalizing the Diet demands not minor tinkering but a major overhaul, including the breakup of today's political parties and a new political realignment. This is the argument that election reforms are needed to redefine the relationship among politicians, the parties and the people and to instill a new sense of creative tension in Japanese politics.

Even among those who recognize the need for election reform, there is a sharp split between those who advocate single-representative districts and those who want proportional representation after the German model. Perhaps the best discussion of this issue was found in Masumi Ishikawa and Masayuki Fukuoka's "Single-representative Districts or Proportional Representation" in the September *Sekai*.

After agreeing that either system would mean greater attention to policies and parties, the two went into a long discussion of the linkage between the electoral system and the likelihood of a change of government. Ishikawa said that adopting the LDP plan would give the

LDP 400 seats in the lower house and that it would be able to maintain its overwhelming majority without splintering but that proportional representation would lead to a coalition among the LDP, Komeito and the Democratic Socialists.

In rebuttal, Fukuoka contended that the Komeito and Democratic Socialist parties' having more clout is not the same as the electorate's having more clout and that single-representative districts hold out more promise that challengers will win and that the parties and incumbents alike will be roused from their present complacency. While Ishikawa offers no resistance to the idea of a coalition government, Fukuoka argues that the only meaningful change in government is one where a single opposition party replaces the government party.

Sickness of LDP

The political transition from Kaifu to Miyazawa revealed anew just how sick the LDP is. To start with, Kaifu's fall from grace was a clear demonstration that people with no official position—people whose only claim to authority is that they head the largest faction within the LDP—can depose an incumbent prime minister. Little wonder *Time* called it a coup d'état. And the same LDP power structure was on display in the selection of Miyazawa to succeed Kaifu.

As pointed out by Kichitaro Katsuta (in "Beware the Dual Structure of Japanese Power" in the November *Bungei Shunju*), one would normally expect the person with the most power to be sitting at the prime minister's desk, but Japan now has a chronic dual power structure in which the people with the real power want to stay behind the scenes and pull the strings. With Miyazawa unable to exercise leadership and the opposition parties unable to provide a viable alternative, it is little wonder that the reformers claim Japanese politics is fraught with structural defects.

With the failure to enact political and electoral reform, hopes have thus turned to political realignment to provide the necessary breakthrough. The most vocal advocates of realignment are Shin Kane-

maru, who heads the Takeshita faction within the LDP, and Akira Yamagishi, who heads the national Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC) in the opposition camp. Both are calling for a reshuffling of political affiliations to restructure the existing parties.

In contrast, Ken'ichi Ohmae would abandon the existing parties and start over again, as argued in his "Announcing the Formation of a Consumers' Party" in the November *Gendai*. As Ohmae sees it, the LDP has been neither liberal nor democratic but has instead sought to consolidate power at the center and to crimp innovative businesses.

While that was acceptable in the early postwar years when Japan was a developing country, that historical mission has ended and the LDP is now the party of gridlock. On the other side of the aisle, the Social Democratic Party has been fairly successful in creating an egalitarian society and in checking capitalism's worst excesses. Yet both are inadequate to meet the current needs, and Ohmae advocates the formation of a new political party to reflect consumer concerns and to counter the government-industrial complex. As envisioned by Ohmae, the party would encourage decentralization of authority, would openly advocate consumer needs and would seek to have Japan less at odds with the rest of the world.

Ohmae's claim that Japan's postwar parties have outlived their usefulness is bound to ring true for many Japanese—especially when they see these parties simply reacting to foreign pressure and unable to formulate any new vision of a brighter future that would unite the nation. At the same time, the end of the Cold War has made the old ideological divisions irrelevant, thereby further exacerbating the parties' confusion. Indeed, it may be the LDP reformers who empathize most with Ohmae's thesis. Hopefully, there will also be empathizers among the opposition parties, for only then will political reform develop a new momentum and vitality. ■

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