

Stuck in the Present

By Susumu Takahashi

Looking over the Japanese media for June and July, there were three main stories that got most of the attention: (i) the PKO law passed by the Diet on June 15, (ii) the July 26 House of Councillors election and the accompanying debate over political reform, and (iii) the slumping economy and the Economic Council's "Sharing a Better Quality of Life around the Globe" five-year economic plan announced in late June.

PKO Law

The PKO law was fiercely debated for over a year and a half, with special attention to its implications for the Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9. Yet despite the time spent, the issues were not fully aired and there are many questions that still stick in people's throats.

The first is that of what kind of peacekeeping operations are envisioned under this PKO law. In "The PKO Law's Reincarnation" in the July *Sekai*, Tetsuo Maeda suggests that the law itself is premised on the older type of peacekeeping operations and is unsuited to emerging realities. As Maeda tells it, the peacekeeping operations envisioned for Cambodia entail repatriating refugees, supervising elections, reconstruction and the whole range of things needed to get the country back on its feet after a long and bloody war.

Because this is a departure from the traditional peacekeeping operations, the law should not have been drawn up assuming the traditional peacekeeping operations but should have anticipated the need to remove the causes of conflict and to establish the foundations for a post-conflict civil society. Rather than just looking at what has been done in the past, the law needed to consider what might be done in the future and how Japan could best cooperate with these kinds of United Nations programs.

The second major point that has been made about the PKO law is to ask what

impact Japan's political decision to take part in U.N. peacekeeping operations—including as it does the dispatch of Japanese troops overseas—will have on the international climate in East Asia. Most of the commentators here have pointed to Japan's failure to come to terms yet with its past, and some have added that Japanese actions are bound to have an impact in East Asia, since the political situation there is in such a state of flux and the balance so precarious in the wake of the Cold War's end.

Several people have pointed to the relationship between the peacekeeping operations and the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Motofumi Asai (in his essay "The LDP Strives to Inure the People" in the June 30 *Ekonomisuto*), for example, argues that the Security Treaty was a Cold War product designed to be effective in resisting the Soviet Union in the Far East and that the LDP conceived the PKO law as a way to transcend the Security Treaty's limitations now that the Cold War has ended and the treaty's future is uncertain.

There has been nothing from the government or the LDP on this point. Despite all of the time spent debating the PKO law, Japanese foreign policy and action principles for the post-Cold War era are still undefined. The law might have been passed, but these issues still need to be discussed.

Election focus

Of course, the deliberations over the PKO law also had a major impact on Japanese domestic politics. Aside from peacekeeping operations themselves, the means chosen by the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and others to express their opposition in the Diet seemed to raise serious questions about Japanese postwar parliamentary democracy, and it was expected that the half of the upper house seats up for grabs on July 26 would be contested primarily over the PKO law.

When the votes were counted, how-

ever, the LDP emerged the strong winner in an election that saw a turnout of only 50.72% of the eligible voters. Most commentators have interpreted this very low turnout as indicative of a general disgust with the whole of Japanese politics.

The SDPJ is the first target. Eiji Tomimori (in "Can Makoto Tanabe become another Kantaro Suzuki?" in the July *Monthly Asahi*) notes that the West European socialist parties have managed to change their stripes and to take the reins of government and asks why the Japanese SDPJ is so insistent about hanging on to its destructive left wing. Answering his own question, he speculates that the party still feels guilty about having cooperated with the government during the war, sees itself in competition with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), and is dependent on leftist union support. In addition, he accuses the party of having a purist streak that insists on theoretical purity distinguishing between black and white.

While the SDPJ had long been the popular party of choice for checking LDP excesses, its long years in the political wilderness have meant that it has become lethargic and lazy in its ways, that it has lost access to information, and that a new generation is taking over the party without their elders' hang-ups—such that the anti-LDP mantle has fallen to the JCP.

Any discussion of the problems besetting the SDPJ inevitably raises questions about the one-party control that the LDP has maintained ever since the Liberal and Democratic parties merged in 1955. Not surprisingly, there has been a furious deluge of articles recently on political reform and Morihiro Hosokawa's Japan New Party, all of which lend weight to the popular expectations for political reform. Within this, Ken'ichi Koyama's "Japanese Political Issues" (in the July *Bungei Shunju*) argues that the established parties are still mired in the past even though the political stage and the focus of political debate have both changed.



Photo: Nihon Keizai Shinbun

The newly formed Japan New Party, presenting an image of a new idealism pressing for political reform, won four seats in the House of Councillors election in July.

Citing the conservative/reformist dichotomy, the debate over whether or not to amend the Constitution, and the divide over the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty vs. unarmed neutrality as the three great issues that brought the LDP to lasting power, he says that these were not substantive political issues but were only red herrings raised to hide the LDP reality of a political machine in which money buys votes, the vested interests share in the spoils, and the politicians, bureaucrats and business have joined together in a triple alliance to enhance their grip on power. This, he says, is the reality of the show played out by reformers and conservatives.

With the end of the Cold War and the shift to a post-industrial society, politics has entered on an entirely new phase where, Koyama says, the real debate will be between opening Japan to the world or expelling foreign influences, between drafting a new Constitution that will make Japan truly part of the world or maintaining the present Constitution (albeit with some amendments) and keeping Japan isolated from internation-

al trends, between centralization and decentralization, between putting the priority on industry and putting the priority on people, and between idealism and pragmatism.

With special reference to pragmatism, he says that the term "pragmatism" has been coopted by the old establishment to describe its politics of expediency and that we need a new idealism, even if it be called naively idealistic, to combat the establishment's expediency. As part of this effort for political reform, he advocates reforming the House of Councillors, forming new parties, and breaking up the existing parties to disperse control. Riding the crest of this call for political reform, the Japan New Party garnered four seats despite the low voter turnout.

Economic directions

The Japanese economy is in serious trouble, as seen in the stock market's collapse, and there was considerable talk of new policies to arrest its slide. The official discount rate, for example, was lowered on July 27. Yet that was not enough, and

there is talk of having to reform the entire economic system. In part, this debate was stimulated by the Economic Council's new five-year plan released in late June.

Looking at the council's "Sharing a Better Quality of Life around the Globe," the economist Hiroko Ota has pointed to the disparity between its very clear statement of goals and the very vague means that it proposes for their attainment. Other people on the same panel discussion (reported in the July 28 *Ekonomisuto* as "Missing a Chance for Prosperity?") have agreed that the problem is not with what the council wants to do but with whether or not it is doable.

Interestingly enough, this question of doability has also raised new criticism leveled at the Ministry of Finance, so long the central power in the Japanese economy. In "Death Knell for the Ministry of Finance" (August *Bungei Shunju*), Sei-ichiro Saito says that the ministry was pivotal for the Japanese economy's postwar success but that its vast powers show signs of slipping away.

Specifically, he blames the ministry for having been part of the worst speculative excesses over the past few years by increasing public spending too far and too fast, by pushing for lower interest rates, and by playing the markets by privatizing NTT and selling shares to a frenzied public. While these were bad enough, Saito also blames the ministry for letting its preoccupation with reducing budgetary rigidity get in the way of other policies. In conclusion, Saito says Japan needs to consider instituting a whole new fiscal and administrative structure—including breaking the ministry up and restructuring its functions.

This article was typical of the many arguing that Japanese systems need to be radically overhauled. Yet despite the clamor, there has been zilch progress on reform. Inertia is clearly the stronger force, at least for now. Thus the question for Japan is not so much what to do but how to get off dead center and do anything at all.

Susumu Takahashi is professor of political science at the Faculty of Law, the University of Tokyo.