

Re-forming Japanese Politics

By Susumu Takahashi

Japanese domestic politics in October-November 1992 were focused on the Sagawa scandal. With the revelation that he had accepted a secret \$4 million contribution from the Sagawa people, Shin Kanemaru resigned as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) vice president in late August and then resigned his Diet seat in mid-October. In the wash of revelations, it was also learned that organized crime had been involved in Noboru Takeshita's rise to the prime ministership in 1987. As a result of the firestorm of public protest, the special session of the Diet that opened in late October was quickly dubbed "the Sagawa Diet." Yet even though Takeshita and other figures were called to testify, the Diet failed, as expected, to find a smoking gun or to break any new ground in the case.

Can of worms

Perhaps the distinguishing feature of the Sagawa scandal is that it resulted in the breakup of the Takeshita faction, which had dominated the LDP and hence Japanese politics for over a decade, and upset the political apple cart. Following an open power struggle within the faction, a group held together by former Secretary General Ichiro Ozawa and nominally headed by former Minister of Finance Tsutomu Hata broke off to form its own faction in mid-December. Until then far and away the largest faction within the LDP, the Takeshita faction split into two parts: a largish group led by former LDP Secretary General Keizaburo Obuchi, who has very close ties to Takeshita, and the splinter group around Ozawa and Hata.

As almost everyone has pointed out, the Sagawa scandal is a complex mix of many factors. This is clear, for example, from the essays that have appeared in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper's commentary column. Starting off on October 16, administration expert Jiro Yamaguchi blast-

ed the special-interest representatives in the Diet as "having mastered only the art of using bureaucracy-built systems to manipulate money and power for doling out advantage." A few days later, on October 20, political scientist Muneyuki Shindo looked at the close ties between the underworld of organized crime and the LDP and drew public attention to the unease generated both by the ties themselves and by the LDP's unwillingness to cut them or even to admit that they exist.

The next day, October 21, political commentator Kenzo Uchida wrote a scathing criticism of the LDP factions—factions that had once spearheaded lofty public debate over policy issues and are now reduced to "a pack of petty squabblers addicted to the perks of power and engaged in private bickering in a naked display of power lust."

Yet it is not enough to say that the Sagawa scandal represents an explosive mix of many diverse elements. There are also important structural considerations. The Japanese political scene is changing, and the old politics are no longer suited to the new realities.

Speaking as part of a panel discussion on "The No-holds-barred War in the LDP" (in the October 27 *Ekonomisuto*), Michitoshi Takabatake, a political scientist specializing in the analysis of election returns, said that voter behavior is changing. Characterizing the Takeshita faction as "a group of power junkies held together by money and power, authority and position," he said that this has drawn such criticism even from within the conservative camp, especially in the outlying areas, that the faction is finding it difficult to win elections. This is, Takabatake argues, a very important point in considering the changing Japanese political climate. The election process is changing, and voters are no longer willing to be bought by the old (Kakuei) Tanaka-Kanemaru pork-barrel approach.

It has also been argued that the public outcry over the Sagawa scandal differs

from past public outcries over political scandals. Commentator Takashi Tachibana has remarked on this in "Waking up the Prosecutor's Office" (in the December *Bungei Shunju*) saying that the people see this Sagawa scandal as symbolic of all that is wrong with Japanese politics—of the fact that politics has been corrupt for so long, that the Public Prosecutor's Office has been unable to do anything about it for so long, and that money has become institutionalized as the dominant force in politics, with politicians voicing insincere pieties about the desirability of political reform while a single faction dominates politics in a travesty of democracy. Looking at this, Tachibana attributes much of this corruption to the fact that a single party has governed Japan unchecked for decades and concludes that the political structure needs to be reformed so that we can have a meaningful change of government and entrenched politicians can be dislodged.

Political reform

As *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper senior writer Keizo Nakamura has written in "Groundswell of Populism" (in the October 27 *Ekonomisuto*), unlike in the past, this current outburst of public anger was not orchestrated by the business community, labor unions or other vested interests but started spontaneously and in many different places at once. In this alone, it is markedly different from the uproar during the Recruit scandal. Nakamura has suggested that this groundswell of popular criticism unleashed by the Sagawa scandal may well be a different strain of the same distrust of vested interests that is reshaping politics in the other industrial countries.

With this crisis as a result of such non-policy aspects, what is to become of Japanese politics? Takeshi Sasaki offers one diagnosis in the *Asahi Shimbun's* October 22 commentary column when he notes that the governing and opposition



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In response to the recent shift in the political climate, several new political organizations, including a "Sirius" study group and the "Heisei Restoration" group, have been formed.

parties seem decidedly unenthusiastic about getting to the heart of the Sagawa scandal—that both the ruling LDP and the opposition parties are primarily concerned with covering their asses and there are very few people who are willing to stake out bold programs for political reform. In effect, he sees the national politicians' apathy and declares Tokyo politics moribund.

One of the things setting the Sagawa scandal apart from previous scandals is that the call for political reform has come, complete with specific prescriptions on what needs to be done, not from professional politicians but from the general public. One of the most remarkable sets of policy recommendations here was the "Resolving the Crisis in Japanese Politics" submitted by the Committee for the Promotion of Political Reforms chaired by Masao Kamei (and carried in the December *Chuo Koron*).

This report includes a statement of the crisis in Japanese politics and recommendations on reforming campaign financing and exorcising the pervasive corruption. Underlying the entire report is a call to restore politics to its rightful stature. According to the committee, the very term "politics" has a certain unsavory taint to it in Japan, and we first need to burnish politics' image. And to do this, we need to look at what politics should be and what we expect of the political process.

Following up on this, the report reexamines the way the system works and how things are done and calls for radical reform of many of today's institutions and practices. The world is changing, and just because something might have worked in the past is no assurance that it is right for the future. This part of the report is particularly significant in that it is more than just calling for Japan to change in response to the changing domestic and in-

ternational situation—it is calling for the development of new systems and new practices that will enable us to create a better future for our children.

This same farsighted perspective is also on display in Naoki Tanaka's "Wanted: A New Basic Economic Law to Fix the Compound Recession" (also in the December *Chuo Koron*). In it, Tanaka calls for a new Basic Economic Law that would reassess the present fiscal policy practices and reform them in line with the clearly stated intent of "minimizing economic fluctuation in Japan so that it does not spark or exacerbate global economic turmoil" and "adjusting Japan's fiscal policy scale so as to contribute to restoring the global balance between savings and investment." These proposals do not fit the old conservative-liberal matrix.

New dichotomy

Even in politics itself, there are moves afoot to effect a political restructuring that transcends the old conservative-liberal categories. The formation of the Hata-Ozawa "Forum 21" faction in the LDP is widely portrayed as one such move, and United Social Democratic Party President Satsuki Eda has formed a "Sirius" study group for restructuring on the other side of the aisle.

As part of his program, Eda is calling for legalizing the Self-Defense Forces and enacting a Basic Security Law that would, by setting the policy boundaries for the SDF and the defense establishment, keep Japan from developing into a major military power.

In addition to these two organizations, dissident politician Morihiro Hosokawa has recently founded a Japan New Party and management consultant Ken'ichi Ohmae a "Heisei Restoration" party, both of them calling for political reform. The old dichotomy between conservative and liberal has now been joined by a new dichotomy between the old guard and the new reformists.

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