

Reading the July Elections

By Takahashi Susumu

Dramatic changes are underway in Japanese politics. After 38 years of uninterrupted one-party rule, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost its Diet majority and a new eight-part coalition government led by Hosokawa Morihiro has been inaugurated. However, the changes have apparently been too fast for even media commentators, and no in-depth analysis of the new government has appeared as of this writing.

Consequently, this column will focus on the July 18 general election. Looking at the results, this lower house election witnessed the emergence of three new parties (Japan Renewal Party [JRP], Harbinger Party and the Japan New Party [JNP]), saw the crippled LDP maintain the number of seats it held before the election, and saw the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) take a drubbing. Yet it was not the different parties' ups and downs, but rather the evident changes in Japan's political culture that made this election significant.

The first point of discussion is how one defines the conservative cause. Mainstream thinking is to see the JRP, the Harbinger Party, and the JNP as new conservative parties and hence to add their winnings to the LDP's and to say that the election yielded major gains for the conservative camp. This analysis concludes that the election marks the start of a new era of conservative government. For example, Kabashima Ikuo writes (in "A New Conservative Era" in the July 20 *Mainichi* newspaper), "Until now, conservative voters disgruntled with the LDP had only a Hobson's choice of voting for the SDPJ or not voting at all, but the new conservative parties' emergence has given voters another option ..." and marks the start of a new conservative era. By contrast, the conservative split is emphasized by Takahata Michitoshi, who wrote in "The New Party Phenomenon" (in the

August 3 *Ekonomisuto*) that, while the total number of conservative seats obtained by adding the JRP and Harbinger Party to the LDP is about the same as the LDP had after the 1986 election (when elections were held for both houses simultaneously), this total number is not as important as the fact that the conservative camp is no longer a single party, but split into several different entities.

Also commenting was Ishikawa Masumi, who stressed in "What It All Means" (*Asahi* newspaper, July 23) that the total conservative strength, as indicated by combining the LDP, JRP, and Harbinger totals, is still less than it was before the election, but not significantly so. It can be surmised that the conservative camp has succeeded in avoiding punishment in the short term despite harsh criticism over widespread corruption.

As seen, the July 18 election marked a blurring of the conservative definition and the emergence of harder-to-categorize parties. What is the difference between the old conservatives and the new conservatives? And given these differences, are we justified in lumping the new conservative parties together with the LDP, or should they be considered a separate political force? These are among the questions that will be debated in the months and years ahead. And in the same light, might it be that we have also seen the emergence of a center-right force sig-



Political reform was the slogan for the July lower house elections. Will Prime Minister Hosokawa be successful in carrying out the promises of the new coalition government?

nificantly different from the old right?

The reformists' abysmal showing is the second focus in any discussion of the election. The election was particularly disastrous for the SDPJ. How are we to understand this? According to Ishikawa (op. cit.), the SDPJ's very strong showing in the 1990 election was an aberration and this year's results are nothing more than a continuation of the gradual decline that has persisted since 1969. This year's showing was not a one-time fluke, he says, but has its roots deep within the party.

Among the various factors, Kyougoku Jun'ichi (speaking on a panel discussion reported in the July 20 *Mainichi*) has cited that the SDPJ has been closely identified with the

generation that was 20 or so at the end of the Second World War, and it has faded into irrelevance as that generation has grown older and passed the reins to younger people.

He continued on the theme stating that many people within the party accepted the idea that they were fated to be forever in the opposition and thus went on the defensive, spending more time trying to preserve the party's status as an opposition force than they did trying to move into the corridors of real power; the party was overly attentive to the wants of the big labor unions and did not pay enough attention to the needs of urban consumers; and the SDPJ was very much a romanticists' party (the difference being that the romanticist assumes that anyone who is not his friend is his enemy and the politician assumes that anyone who is not his enemy is his friend) and was not able to outgrow this naivete.

Takahata, however, sees the cause of the party's decline in the policy shifts that it and Japan Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) underwent. In both the 1989 upper house election and the 1990 lower house election, the party was conspicuously successful in putting together a Rooseveltian democratic coalition infused with massive support from female voters and urban activists battling for consumer, environmental, and other causes. By contrast, the party wrote its own death warrant this year when it jettisoned these women and urban-activist voters and returned to its traditional dependence upon the support of organized labor.

The SDPJ has more than enough problems to keep it busy. In addition to structural and policy problems, it also faces a new and unpredictable future as the new parties' emergence has turned the competition away from the old conservative-reformist battle to a new battle among unknown forces on unknown terrain. Just as the center-right forces seem to be very real and capture the public's imagination, the center-left forces that should provide the countervailing pressure seems stuck in the quicksand of tradition.

Voter turnout is the third issue of the election. With the split in the LDP and the possibility that we could see a non-LDP government elected, the media made heavy weather of the election's history-making potential and mounted a major push to get out the vote. Yet the result was only a 67.3% turnout—the lowest in Japan's postwar history. Of course, Japan is not the only industrial country plagued by declining voter turnout, and numerous studies have been done to determine why people do not vote. In the July 18 election, Ishikawa argues, voter support was down across the board for the LDP, SDPJ, Komeito, the Communist Party, and Japan Democratic Socialist Party and this decline is almost equal to the decline in voter turnout. In effect, people have been put off by the established parties and, rather than switching allegiance to yet-another party, simply washed their hands of the whole affair and stayed home on election day.

The June 27 election for the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly also set a new record for voter non-turnout—only 51.4% of the voters bothered to go to the polls. Kobayashi Yoshiaki's analysis of the Tokyo election (in "Tokyo Voters Consider Political Reform" in the July 13 *Ekonomisuto*) focused on the widespread distrust of politics and says this has been generalized from a distrust of the party in power to a lack of confidence in all established parties. Hence there appears to be doubts of indirect democracy itself as people have come to believe that politicians are only looking out for themselves and are incapable of representing the voters' will. This same distrust, he says, was a factor in the JNP's spectacular success in the Tokyo election.

I am sure there will be more discussion of political distrust and low voter turnout. In light of research that has been done in other countries, Japan's situation is one not only of people who stay home because they are politically apathetic but also voters very interested in politics who also abstain. Electors are becoming more and more fickle and throw their support or non-

support (including abstaining) to different parties with every election. With all of this, it seems certain that the old pattern of voter support for the five established parties has started to shift.

Finally, a few words are in order about the coalition government. The election resulted in a multi-party (nine parties) system, making it almost inevitable that a coalition would have had to be formed. During the campaign itself, the LDP criticized coalitions as inherently unstable and subject to all manner of failings. Yet as pointed out many years ago in *Coalition Government* (edited by Shinohara Hajime and published by Iwanami in 1984) and elsewhere, this is sheer scare-mongering.

There are a number of Western countries that have enjoyed very stable coalition governments. Just as a coalition government is a power struggle among coalition partners seeking to optimize their interests, it is also a process of policy consensus and agreement. The trial now facing Japanese parties as they try to make their coalition work is whether or not the different parties can actually formulate viable policies. Traditionally, what has passed for policy at Japanese political parties has been more a jumble of statements of basic principles, slogans, and quick-fix remedies. There has been no clear delineation among short-, medium-, and long-term ends; nor has there been any clear statement of the means for attaining these ends. Thus it may well be that the need for policy formulation and implementation will be the toughest hurdle for the coalition parties.

Yet like it or not, it is clear from the election results that Japan has started a new experiment with the unknown chemistry of coalition government. The old assumptions have come unstuck and, as political commentator Hayazaka Shigezo has aptly observed, "Politicians are floundering, adrift in the weightless dim."

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