

# Challenges Facing the Coalition Government

By Takahashi Susumu

Four months have passed since the inauguration of the Hosokawa coalition government. An August 12 *Mainichi Shimbun* opinion poll showed a popular support rating of 75%; later polls have also revealed similar results, making the popularity of this Cabinet the highest on record. What should we make of this popularity? How should we feel about the administration of this coalition government, once ridiculed as "a piece of glasswork?" What are some of the policy issues this government has set as its priorities?

To begin, as a coalition the Hosokawa government has two unique features. This is the first non-Liberal Democratic Party Cabinet since the LDP began its lengthy and uninterrupted rule in 1955. In this sense, the new Cabinet takes on the important job of effecting changes in the government. Given that it is a coalition of seven parties and one grouping, normally it would have taken at least one month to form a government. In this case, however, the formation of the new coalition government was completed in a very short time. What's more, given this great moral cause behind the new Cabinet, it is believed that there would be many internal divisions among the ruling parties. Secondly, the Cabinet, which was formed from such politically varied parties as Shinseitō and the Social Democratic Party, embraces the meaning of a "coalition Cabinet" in the truest sense. While the policy of the new government remains vague, the coalition does provide people with a sense of security.

Not being accustomed to coalition politics, many, including the media, have been quick to criticize the government. In the September issue of *Sekai*, Shinohara Hajime, an authority on the topic of coalition politics, dealt with the overall transition of the political system in his masterpiece "Possibilities and Unrest in the Political Switch Over." Let's take a close look at his theory.

The first point Shinohara emphasizes is that the coalition government has been formed with the basic principle of "a consensus within a disagreement." That is, "While the seven parties do not agree on basic policies, with a certain goal or predetermined objective, they have agreed to form an alliance." The second point is that one can't help but watch closely the policy orientation of the coalition government—not only has political reform been made a focal point, other concrete policies should also be carefully examined.

Furthermore, Shinohara points to the fact that, because policy-structure based politics (politicians having opposing opinions and difficulty reaching an agreement) is new to Japan, there is a tendency for those in political circles and the mass media to exaggerate internal differences. The important thing though, is that "... while debating different ideas, people should look for possibilities that allow for a consensus." As Shinohara has stressed, because Japan had become so accustomed to the extended single-party rule of the LDP, there is a need to adapt to the "new thinking" being established by coalition politics as soon as possible.

The pressing issue confronting the Hosokawa Cabinet is political reform, which Hosokawa vows "to realize before the year is over." However, as "a Cabinet formed from a change in the government," can the issues special to the Hosokawa government end merely in political reform? According to the opinion poll mentioned earlier, the widespread popularity expressed toward this government lies in Hosokawa's "new policy."

In an interview entitled "Reading the Direction of Japan's Politics Under the Hosokawa Coalition" (*Ekonomisuto*, August 17/24), Yakushiji Taizo writes that in the international sense it is important for Japan to develop a new ideology in response to the changes in domestic politics and in the economic

system. In particular, he said it is crucial that the government come up with clear proposals that elucidate the "... specific gains which will benefit the prosperity of Japan as well as the conditions of its workers, including the issue of housing." If the Hosokawa government were to take the initiative in the post-'55 system, as Yakushiji suggests, it must carry out drastic policy reforms which could be continued by the LDP should it take over after the Hosokawa coalition.

Referring to this point in the article "Sunday Interview—The Inauguration of a New Government and Its Future" (August 22, *Mainichi Shimbun*), even Takabatake Michitoshi, who has been rather critical of the new coalition, has written that if Hosokawa wants to make his government a real government, the coalition's policies must be clearly expressed as to differentiate them from the LDP. In particular, "... in order to break the power basis of the LDP, if it can manage to abolish the cozy structure of the political circles, then it will really change Japan's history." He suggested that if the Hosokawa government can implement all that, it will be a milestone in history.

## The new conservatives

In addition, in discussions of the post-'55 system, the theory of "a general swing toward the right" is likely to become a keyword. Of course, the criteria used to formulate this position varies from individual to individual. Nevertheless, many people see a trend where the traditional reformist groups have declined in both influence and numbers and that the forces which seek to defend the constitution in the Diet can no longer be sustained. In addition, we should pay close attention to the viewpoint which warns that the decline in the defenders of the constitution comes as a price paid for the change in the government. Yet one gets the feeling that the "general swing to the right" theory is a view that stems from within the

framework of the '55 system.

Let's look at the recent changes in Japan's politics from a different angle. According to Otake Hideo's article, "The Meaning of the Change From the '55 System" (August 19, "Rondan," *Asahi Shimbun*), the opposing criterion of the post-1955 system could very well be between the new conservatism and the new social democracy. The new conservatives who strongly advocate deregulation, liberalization of education, international contribution including those toward the cause of humanity, and strong leadership, have been in direct opposition to the mainstream LDP which is in favor of defending the constitution and a brand of politics that induces profits. The new conservatives are also in opposition to the socialists who work together with the LDP behind the scenes. It is believed that many of the new party formations belong to this faction.

Meanwhile, there are signs of conflicts within the new parties themselves said to involve the demands of the urban middle class looking for a new style of political participation. It is believed this demand is the very task needed to be carried out by the opponents of the new conservatives. To do this, Otake believes that the "... building of a new vision for the future of Japan ..." is something indispensable. While within political circles one can expect to see more complex changing of alliances, Otake's theory that there are new possibilities for matches in ideologies is indeed very interesting.

Related to this issue is the reorganization of the political world with the changes in the political party system. Many critics believe that the current political party system is merely something transitional and that eventually, the system will go back to a two-party system or a sensible, multi-party system.

Perhaps more often than not critics think that Japan will go back to a "sensible, multi-party system." For example, Sasaki Takeshi wrote, "Overall, the prospect for the future is a sensible, not so numerous multi-party system" ("Sunday Debate," *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 22). Meanwhile, Ken'ichi Koyama, in his article "The Evolution



In his opening address Prime Minister Hosokawa indicated his intention to focus his administration's attention on three reforms—political, administrative, and economic—but has this filtered down to Nagatacho?

Theory of the Creation of Three Parties" (September *Shokun*), also is critical of a two-party system. According to him, following certain reforms in the political party system, one can expect to see three possible scenarios: 1) a revival in the system where one party has predominance over other parties; 2) a change to a two-party system where the parties can alternate with each other; and 3) a switch to a coalition system of multi-parties. Among these possibilities, what Koyama believes to be most likely, and which he personally wishes to see happen, is the multi-party system. His reasoning is, "Given that our maturing society is such where pluralization, the information age and internationalization are now the norm, it is only fair that we should go in the direction of maximizing the opportunity to choose from among parties and politicians. In this sense, it is likely that a new multi-party coalition system will be maintained." Koyama is of the opinion that after this multi-party coalition era, a new and unique "three-party system" will eventually be created.

Shinohara Hajime, in his essay mentioned earlier, also proposed a three-party system. To Shinohara, the system where one party is predominant is now being dismantled. In the organization process that is to come, what looks more possible to him is the establish-

ment of a "sensible, multi-party system." That is to say with the "general swing toward the right," the liberal force, which the Japan New Party and Sakigake are spearheading, is sure to break up the conservative camp. What's more, the mainstream social democratic faction which strives to preserve a democratic spirit in the postwar and post-constitution Japan is here to stay as a constant force. Given this, Shinohara says it is possible to nurture a "sensible, multi-party system" in which we will witness "... the coexistence of conservatives, liberals and a social democratic faction within very distinct boundaries."

When deliberation on the political reform bill began in the Diet, Japan was moving ahead with the reorganization of its political circles. At that time, the Social Democratic Party was confused as to where they were going and changed their chairman in a way that most people didn't understand. This blurred the ideology and power of the social democrats. In view of the fact that until now, in Japan, there has never been a social democracy in the liberal, Western sense, rather than reconstructing their ideology, it is more appropriate that they create a new one.

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