

# Reform Follows Refunction?

By Takahashi Susumu

April was a month of turmoil in Japanese politics. On April 8, Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro abruptly announced his resignation. This was followed by weeks of jockeying as the ruling coalition parties sought to agree on a successor and a set of policies for the post-Hosokawa government. During this period, former Foreign Minister Watanabe Michio announced on April 17 that he was bolting the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and then about-faced on April 19 to say that he was staying in the LDP after all. On April 22, all parties and groupings in the coalition, except the Harbinger Party, finally agreed on a platform and cooperated to elect Hata Tsutomu as prime minister on April 25. Yet no sooner was Hata elected than the Kaishin (Reformation) alliance was formed within the coalition, leading the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) to charge betrayal and walk out of the coalition on April 26. As a result, Prime Minister Hata's was a minority government when he finally appointed his Cabinet on April 28.

Looking back over the month, the question inevitably arises as to what underlying currents generated and accelerated this situation. On this, there is broad agreement that the main impetus has come from Ozawa Ichiro as part of his effort to reshuffle the political deck and to form a new conservative party. In effect, his is an attempt to use the single-representative constituency system mandated by the new election system to forge a new conservative coalition. Aside from Ozawa's own Japan Renewal Party (JRP), the first people to sign on for this campaign were elements of the Japan New Party (JNP) led by Hosokawa, soon joined by the Komeito party and a handful of defectors from the LDP. Indeed, this is the ideological heart of the ruling coalition, and this is the group that formed the Kaishin alliance. Although Kaishin is still only a administrative alliance for Diet purposes, there is every expectation that the

member parties would like for it to grow into a multi-party political bloc.

Many people have argued that the JRP's leaving the LDP last June was the first act in the political restructuring process and that the election of Hata as prime minister backed only by the Kaishin alliance was the second. Given that, what lies ahead?

## Alternative scenarios

Although things are still very murky, the most likely scenario calls for the emergence of a tripartite system of a conservative party based on the old LDP, a new conservative (or middle-right) bloc centered on the Kaishin alliance, and a middle-of-the-road group led by the SDPJ and the Harbinger Party.

There is no hard data available on how much support each of these groups would garner, but massaging the various opinion poll results indicates that voter support is roughly 25% for the LDP group, 20% for the JRP-led Kaishin group, and 17% for the SDPJ-Harbinger group—with another 25% to 30% not supporting any of the three groups.

That said, it should be remembered that these three blocs are only just now starting to emerge and, since this is shaping up as an ideological clash between the JRP and the Harbinger Party, it is impossible to tell yet how things will gel. Both of these parties have clearly enunciated policy orientations, and they have thus eclipsed the broader-based, less-defined LDP and SDPJ. Accordingly, there appears to be two possibilities for the older parties.

The first is for the LDP and SDPJ to undertake sweeping reforms and stake out independent courses in line with explicit policy orientations. There are, however, problems with this approach in that both the LDP and the SDPJ harbor sharp ideological differences within their memberships, such that an effort to make their stances on the various issues facing Japan more explicit could well

undercut the facade of party unity and lead to massive defections. As a result, the LDP and the SDPJ have seemingly decided in the short-term that it is safer for them to simply define themselves as anti-JRP without going into detail, and have raised the anti-JRP banner with Hata's appointment of a JRP-dominated Cabinet.

There is a second possibility: that the LDP and SDPJ forego any meaningful reengineering and try to muddle through. Yet this short-term, risk-free option carries the long-term risk that they might be considered irrelevant to the real action (the struggle between the JRP and the Harbinger Party), that members might defect from such rudderless parties, and that they might be doomed to the backwaters of history. In this case, the LDP would lose members to the JRP and the Harbinger Party alike, and the SDPJ would see many of its members form a new party—thus leading to the possibility that Japanese politics would come to be dominated by LDP remnants, the parties clustered around the JRP, and the new group formed by SDPJ defectors. If the LDP remnants were middle-right, they could eventually be absorbed by the Harbinger Party to form a new party (or political alliance) in competition with the JRP-led bloc.

Even though it is impossible to predict the political future with any certainty, this is the most likely set of scenarios as of this writing.

## The reform process

The electoral reform bills have passed the Diet, but there is still a lot that has to be done for political reform. It is thus worth looking at some of the commentaries on this issue.

The first set deals with how the political parties are supposed to function in this new environment. There has been an endless stream of comments concerning political reform and political realignment, but these have come from

political leaders and the parties' perspective. Few have dealt with the relationship between the parties and the voters, nor have they asked what the implications are for how the parties should be structured and how they should act.

One of the exceptions was R. C. Angel and Ando Hiroshi's "Interim Report on the Hosokawa Reforms" (in the April *Sekai*). This not only has a very interesting analysis of Hosokawa and his policies but enumerates a number of leadership prerequisites essential to reform, one using the process of creating a new party to strengthen the identification between the political leadership and the people. Specifically, this is a call for politicians to stop relying on local groups of business or labor supporters and to create broad-based citizen networks of shared community values not beholden to special interests. This is an important issue, and one that should get more attention.

The second set concerns politicians themselves. Kurihara Akira, for example, writes in "This Road Leads to an Authoritarian State" (in the February 15 *Ekonomisuto*) that the recent electoral reforms will produce a highly centralized state with authority concentrated in a few big parties, just as Ozawa intended. This, he says, runs directly counter to the recent trend for politicians to distance themselves from the parties and to establish their own political identities as independent operators.

This individualization and personalization of the political process is consistent with the individualization of society, and it should be the basis for building a decentralized state of autonomous partnerships. For politics, this has to include loophole-free anti-corruption regulations, open and fair criteria for selecting candidates and for deciding the order of listing on proportional representation slates, cross-party networks of independent-minded politicians, non-partisan work on drawing up policies and national directions, and efforts to elevate the civic-mindedness fostered



This scene from a session of the upper house mirrors numerous critical opinions, such as "Their policy decisions are hard to understand."; "There is no stability."; "Will the government be dissolved after the budget is passed?", that are heard regarding the Hata minority coalition.

by years of grassroots activism into a new political consciousness. Kurihara's article is significant in focusing on the parties and the people—a focus that has typically been neglected in the preoccupation with the game of power politics being played out in Nagatacho—and it is hoped that his analysis will spark a long and serious round of discussion on how politics relates to the people it ostensibly serves.

Finally, there were a number of articles calling for an end to the political maneuvering and the power game that has distracted Nagatacho from its more serious work. Senior staff writer Hayano Toru notes in "Playing the Power Game to Excess" (in the April 29 *Asahi Shimbun*) that the coalition slipped to minority status as a direct result of Hata and Ozawa's focusing too much on the power game in their drive to forge a majority coalition and states that this represents a serious failure of leadership.

Hayano is not the only person to charge Ozawa and company with being obsessed with power politics, and much of the media discussion has faulted Ozawa's brusque style for being decidedly anti-democratic. At the same time, some writers have suggested that there is a dangerous historical parallel with prewar Japan, when party politics was pushed aside while the Seiyu-kai (Association of Political Friends) and Minseitō (Democratic Party) bickered not over how to best govern but how to divide the spoils of power. It should be clear that the old power game, alienating the people from politics as it does, needs to be abandoned and politicians need to engage in a new agenda of involving people and creating a better life not just for politicians but for all people.

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