

Raising Eyebrows

By Takahashi Susumu

In a turn of events that would have been unthinkable only a year ago, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), and the Harbinger Party formed a new coalition government on June 29 headed by the SDPJ's Murayama Tomiichi, the first Socialist prime minister since the 1947 government of Katayama Tetsu. This is a "grand coalition" government, bringing the conservative LDP and the reformist SDPJ together. While there are some people who look askance at the LDP's return to power as a revival of the old 1955 regime, the very fact that the LDP and the SDPJ had to put aside their past differences and form a coalition seems to show just how very dead the 1955 system is.

There are a number of features that characterize Japanese politics today. The first is that the situation is extremely fluid. Political parties have lost their iron grip and are now themselves affiliations of convenience for Diet members to wear and discard as they see fit, demonstrated by the defections suffered by both the LDP and the SDPJ in the recent voting for prime minister.

The main reason behind this breakdown of party control is that individual politicians have developed their own power bases, parties have lost their cohesiveness, and the once-solid political order has turned to chaos.

The second feature characterizing Japanese politics today is that people are still not sure what a coalition means. Even though none of the three main forces (the LDP, the SDPJ+Harbinger, and the Renewal-led alliance) is able to form a government on its own, it does not necessarily follow that two of them have to join forces. It would also be possible to form a minority government. Of course, such a minority government would have to work hard to gain the (at least passive) support of a majority in the Diet and could perhaps be characterized as a coalition of individuals, but the

possibility was never considered in this latest round. Japan has become so accustomed to majority governments that everyone assumes parties must join together to form a majority coalition, no matter how unwieldy.

It is possible for a minority government to be quite stable if done correctly, but the effort was not even made—as shown by the relations between the government and opposition parties during Hata's two months at the head of a minority government. Unable to see any alternative, Japanese politicians clearly have only a superficial conceptualization of what a coalition government means.

This is the scenario in which this majority coalition government was formed in late June. One of the main factors was the size of the government. The old Renewal-led coalition government of Hata Tsutomu had three main participants (the Kaishin group, Komeito, and the New Vision Party) for a total of 183 seats. A combination of the SDPJ, Harbinger, Group Seibun, and Minshu no Kaze (these latter two have since been absorbed into Harbinger) gives a total of 96 seats and the LDP has 206 seats. It takes 255 to make a majority in the House of Representatives. (We are only looking at lower house figures here as that is the body which has the final say in designating a prime minister.)

Playing the numbers

Given these figures, many combinations were suggested. The first was a conservative-conservative coalition with the Renewal-led alliance joining forces with the LDP for a total of 289 seats. But it was the LDP that was the most forceful in the ousting of the Renewal-led government, and there is a strong body within the LDP adamantly opposed to the Renewal-led group. As a result, it is implausible that the Renewal-led group would be able to link up with the entire LDP, thus making it impossible for this combination to form

a majority government even if some LDP members did defect to support a Renewal-led initiative.

The second possibility that was bandied about was the SDPJ rejoining the Renewal-led coalition. Even if the Harbinger and other parties refused to go along, the SDPJ alone commands 74 seats. Add 74 to 183 and you get 256—just barely a majority. However, just as with the LDP, there are some SDPJ people who would have refused to go along with this remarriage, and this scenario fails to achieve a majority once these dissidents are subtracted.

Thus the vote-counters came up with two more possibilities: scenario T (a LDP-SDPJ-Harbinger combination) and scenario O (a combination based upon the Renewal-led coalition but also including defectors from both the LDP and the SDPJ). Both of these scenarios hinged upon how many people would defect from the LDP and SDPJ. Scenario T would only work if there were very few defections, scenario O only in the case of massive defections. Thus the question became one of whether or not the LDP and SDPJ could hold the line; of how many people the Renewal-led forces could siphon off.

When the votes were counted, the LDP-SDPJ-Harbinger combination had won the day—a victory that turned largely on the willingness of the LDP and Harbinger Party to back the SDPJ's Murayama for the prime ministership, and the fact that the LDP dissidents did not have enough time to organize effectively. Although Murayama received a total of 261 votes in the run-off election, this was still far short of a LDP-SDPJ-Harbinger total (302) and was just barely over the 253 needed to win (253 constituting a majority because of vacancies and such).

Numbers were all-important in the drive to form the LDP-SDPJ-Harbinger coalition since, given the likelihood of defections, the coalition had to start with a large enough bloc of votes that these

defections would not be fatal. As such, scenario T was virtually the only realistic possibility for stability in this time of flux. In the first round of voting, former Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki garnered 220 votes to Murayama's 241 (with 23 invalid ballots and 5 abstentions). Even if all of the invalid and abstention ballots went to Kaifu in the second round, he would still have had only 248—just short of a majority—indicating that sce-

nario O did not have enough votes to win.

Implications for the future

What implications does Murayama's election have for the future? The first is on the form of government: whether it is to be a minority or a majority government. Given that the LDP had said a

minority government lacked the stability necessary to see Japan through the difficult years ahead and had led the attack on the Renewal-led Hata government, the LDP had no choice but to try to form a majority government. And this meant it needed the SDPJ—which is why it had to embrace Murayama to bring the SDPJ on board.

Second are policy implications. All three of the main participants in the current ruling coalition have drawn up their own "coalition platforms," but the platforms are not all that different. Indeed, they are strikingly similar, meaning that the different parties largely agree on which policies have a realistic chance of passing, and that there are still wide disparities between the parties' own internal platforms and their coalition platforms. It is this second point that is likely to cause the coalition members the most trouble.

How can the parties reconcile what they preach to their members and what they practice in the Diet? That question necessarily underlies all of the jockeying for new coalitions and realignments. Parties did not have this problem under the old 1955 regime.

The LDP was the government, and the demands of governing drove its internal platform. On the other side of the aisle, the opposition SDPJ found it enough to oppose the LDP and did not need to formulate realistic policies for governance. Even within the last year, the Renewal-led coalition was held together basically by the reform-and-realignment issue and has yet to formulate clear policies on any of the many other issues facing Japan.

All three of the main players have spent time in and out of power over the last year or so. It has been a hectic year, and the Murayama government is in many ways a lull during which the parties can rethink their policies, attempt to identify their defining principles, and try to reestablish their policy moorings. In a sense, this is a time of policy innovation for everyone. ■

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In his opening address to the Diet, Prime Minister Murayama stressed stable, "caring" politics.