The Nagatacho Shuffle

By Takahashi Susumu

Japan's political parties are realigning with a vengeance. The coalition that sustained former Prime Minister Hata and that was ousted prior to Prime Minister Murayama's election at the head of an LDP-SDPJ-Sakigake coalition has now picked up some additional ex-LDP Diet members to expand to 12 parties, and these dozen have agreed on basic policy outlines for forming a new party. "Responsible government" is the dozen-party coalition's buzzword—a slogan coined expressly to contrast with the "caring government" that Murayama advocated in his July policy speech to the Diet.

Intending to imply that the new party will be a bastion of can-do efficiency, the dozen have pledged to carry on with political reform, to promote administrative and fiscal reform and its counterpart of decentralization, to work for economic reform and higher living standards, and to make educational reform a priority. At the same time, the coalition has said it will work to create the social infrastructure needed for an aging population.

Finally, on the foreign policy front, they have called for Japan to take an activist international role, arguing that Japan must abandon the idea that it can prosper and be at peace when the rest of the world is neither prosperous nor at peace. Together with adopting this campaign platform in September, the group set up a leadership council to pave the way for formal merger by the end of the year.

Similar moves are afoot within the three-party government coalition. The main problem at issue between them—especially between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ)—is how to coordinate their candidate slates and cooperate in the next election. The first hurdle will come with next year's House of Councillors election, and they have already begun to try to coordinate candidate lists. The LDP, which has traditionally run people in every district, is thus looking for districts it can cede to its coalition partners. As a first step, the LDP committee on party reform has recommended that intra-party factions be abolished (since factional jockeying for position exacerbates candidate proliferation). Concurrent with this, the Group Shin-seiki has coalesced within the LDP across faction lines and has started calling for the creation of a new party of LDP, SDPJ, and Sakigake people. The situation within the LDP is clearly in transition, and the Group Shin-seiki is at the center of things.

Even within the SDPJ a new coalition was formed as of September 1, and this right-wing (for the SDPJ) New Democratic Union is trying to put together a liberalist group that would also include people from the Democratic Socialist and other parties. Restructuring is underway in both the LDP and the SDPJ, and it is impossible to tell how these moves will mesh or clash. All that can be said at this point is that developments defy definition or characterization under the old faction labels.

Catch-all parties

Commenting on this situation, the *Mainichi Shinbun*'s Iwami Takao made the interesting observation (*Mainichi Shinbun*, September 6) that the LDP has been proclaiming the dissolution of its factions for the past 30 years but has never been able to follow through. Even with the formation of new break-away parties last year, the factions remain indispensable units for reconciling the conflicting interests within the party, leading Iwami to suggest that the LDP quit talking about abolishing the factions and talk instead about restructuring them and about new factions with new raisons d'être and new modes of operation.

While there is still no end in sight for the process of political realignment, it has clearly moved beyond the demolition phase in which the old parties and party alignments broke down and new splinter groups were formed and has entered a new phase in which people are trying to put the pieces together into new parties. Yet given the fuzzing of political ideals, the pervasiveness of catch-all parties, and the organizational dynamics within the parties, it is not yet clear what these new parties will look like.

In Japan as in the other industrial countries, there is a major rethinking of such political orientations and ideas as "conservatism," "liberalism," and "socialism." While there are many reasons for this reassessment, the multiplicity does not make it any less real, and Japanese politicians and parties caught up in this atmosphere of ideological unmooring find it difficult to elucidate any clear political ideals that people can gravitate towards.

Unlike special-interest parties with clearly defined goals and strong support among clearly defined populations, parties seeking to be more than special-interest groups have no choice but to embrace wide-ranging and ambiguous platforms alienating as few people as possible. This phenomenon—the rise of the catch-all party—explains why the differences among the major parties tend to narrow as they all vie for the center of the political spectrum. Yet at the same time, the catch-all parties' necessarily ambiguous nature has meant that their popular support has been broad but shallow. Within the current political realignment, the two main forces are both trying to attract as wide support as possible and are hence emerging as little-differentiated, catch-all parties.

Almost all of Japan's political parties are parliamentarian-dominated, and it is still unclear what the changes in the election system mean for the parties. Will the old structures still be feasible, or will the organizational dynamics within the parties change along with the election system? While much of the talk of political reform had assumed replacing the LDP and other parliamentarian-dominated parties with the kind of party-oriented parties seen in the West, it is becoming increasingly clear that

Japan will continue to have parliamentarian-dominated parties for some time to come, even with the new election system, and people are thus looking for (and have yet to find) the new organizational concepts that will bind parliamentarians together. These are all perplexing issues, and it will obviously be some time before they can be resolved and a new post-realignment party system established in Japan. Given the turmoil, it should not be all that surprising that some foreign observers of the current transitional structure have harked back to the prewar situation and recalled the maneuvering by the Seiyukai and the Minsei-to.

SDPJ about-face

Further complicating political analysis, the SDPJ recently ratified the abrupt about-face announced by Prime Minister Murayama in his July 18 policy speech to the Diet. In this speech, Murayama proclaimed the Self-Defense Forces as constitutional, pledged to firmly maintain the Security Treaty with the United States, embraced Japanese SDF participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations, accepted the prewar flag and prewar anthem as the de facto national flag and anthem, called for tax reform presumably including a consumption tax hike, and reversed a number of other long-standing party lines. This was described as a bold reconciliation with reality, and it was this new line that the party was convened to ratify on September 3.

Not surprisingly, opinion is divided on this volte-face. One of the more balanced commentaries came from the *Asahi Shinbun*'s Hayano Toru who wrote (in the September 5 *Asahi Shinbun*) that these policy shifts mark the end of the SDPJ's postwar period in which having ideals was equated with being in opposition but that, even more important than the SDPJ's having abandoned its former positions, it has yet to formulate any clear vision for the future and runs the risk of becoming a party without an identity.

The same thing could also be said of most of Japanese politics, where the question is now being asked who will represent our idealism. If all of the parties seek to be mainstream and adopt pragmatic realism, will no one be left to speak for our ideals? There are some who maintain that the very nature of party politics demands that any party with serious pretensions to governance adopt pragmatic realism and simply argue about the implementational details, leaving ideals to grassroots movements seeking to influence politics by redefining the mainstream.

Yet there are serious reservations about whether or not this is applicable to Japanese politics. In Japan, realism more often than not implies an acceptance of the status quo, and pragmatic realism has not been a force for reforming current realities. It was only the creative tension with idealism that has pushed self-styled realists to question the status quo and to initiate any reforms. Can we count on the pragmatic realists to follow through with reform without idealism's illuminating glare? Or will the loss of idealism as a cohesive party platform mean that ideals are trampled in the rush to embrace all of the world's frailties as our own?

Loss of dramatic impact

In addition, we have the problem that Japanese politics, and particularly the creative tension among the parties, has tended to be viewed as a clash of personalities rather than as a clash of ideas. This has been especially true in the postwar years when we had the LDP personifying current-reality pragmatism and the SDPJ personifying idealism and purity. While the numbers made the outcome a foregone conclusion, the drama was in how the battle would be joined and the denouement achieved. It was the drama—drama such as the brawls in the Diet—that enthralled the spectators. Yet with the SDPJ abandoning its idealism, who will play that role now? And what will the spectators/voters do now that the drama is less personifiable and less, well, dramatic?

According to a public opinion survey reported in the September 6 *Mainichi Shinbun*, fewer people now characterize themselves as supporting—or not supporting—the current Cabinet. The big increase is in the number of people who do not care one way or the other. If the play is the thing in which we will catch the voters' attention, what happens now that the play has changed? Will the voters continue to care what happens, and what are the implications for Japanese politics if they do not?

The grand debate between realism and idealism is over. The drama has changed. And the curtain is opening on a new play that has yet to be scripted. It is a time of unsettling uncertainty for all concerned—including the unconcerned.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

In the Aichi race to fill a vacant seat in the upper house, the first national election since the inception of the Murayama government, the previous coalition's candidate won hands down, adding momentum to moves by new parties to form a new alliance.

Takahashi Susumu is professor at the University of Tokyo's Division of Law and Politics, Graduate School.