

Politics Adrift

By Takahashi Susumu

Just as the winds at sea may suddenly die down and strand sailing ships, so the winds of political change seem to have hit a lull. The winds blowing against the Murayama administration have died down, as have the winds propelling it forward.

For many years, the consumption tax was one of the most contentious issues in Japanese politics. Today, the government's proposal to extend the current tax cuts conditional on a future increase in the consumption tax rate is assured of passage. Political reform is another issue that has been hot for years and years. In fact, it is the issue that split the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and led to the formation of a coalition govern-

ment last year.

Yet, the redistricting legislation that capped this long process passed with very little dissent. (Until now, each election district has returned several people to the House of Representatives. Under the new rules, the districts will be smaller and each district will elect only one representative. Since it will no longer be possible for several people to be elected from the same district, this clearly creates conflict for candidates whose core constituencies overlap. Yet there has been virtually no contention over how the lines are to be drawn.) Nor are there any major foreign policy arguments on the horizon. Because these important issues are being dis-

posed of one after the other without serious dissent, the Murayama Cabinet has come to be called the "clean-up Cabinet" or the "basket-dumping Cabinet."

Muddling through

Assessments differ on what this says about the Murayama Cabinet's political skills. The most common view in the media is that this is a situational peculiarity—that the ruling coalition has been forced to make major compromises to survive as a coalition government and that the opposition has had to compromise because the issues being dealt with are issues that they also faced during their brief taste of power. On the



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While Secretary-General Kubo (left) promotes a plan for a new "Democratic-Liberal" party, there are eye opening moves within the SDPJ toward a new democratic coalition or other forms of political reorganization.

other side and in the minority is the view that it is typical of Japanese politics for there not to be that many sharp differences between the ruling and opposition parties and that the appearance of agreement is new now only because people have abandoned the pretense of disagreement—a pretense that was needed in the old days to camouflage the jostling of power among the LDP factions.

The majority view focuses on the struggle for power and judges the government (and the opposition) in terms of what power they wield, while the minority view focuses on policies and looks at how the agreement has been forged and manifested. From the minority position, the Murayama Cabinet's strength lies in its having studied the recent changes of government, concluded that the traditional struggle for power is incompatible with the politics of reform, and contained the jostling. As such, the current coalition is "no fun" for observers who enjoyed the brawls in the Diet and saw politics as a contact sport.

Second, it should be noted that the current coalition government is being adroitly managed apropos its coalition status. Specifically, the people holding the coalition together have focused on policy issues, have created clearly structured mechanisms for reaching policy agreement, and have been able to reach policy decisions for primarily policy reasons. This has much to recommend it in terms of policy formulation, but it is very dry and unsatisfying for people who are not used to policy-based politics. And the drawback to policy-based politics, of course, is that it is very difficult to rally the voters around simple policy competence and we run the risk that politics will fail to express, vent, or reflect popular feelings.

Thus we are caught between politics that concentrates on gaining power at the expense of policy considerations and politics that concentrates on effecting policy at the expense of popular affections. Both lack "vision," and we have reached the stage where people are starting to feel the need for a vision of where political reform is going, and why.

New parties

Yet Japan's politicians are still absorbed in the restructuring game. In the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), for example, there is a caucus that might be termed "a party within a party" and that is making waves for both the Murayama administration and the SDPJ. This is the "new dem-libs," joining the party's right and center wings to form the largest intra-party bloc. In an effort to get their own way more often, these people are talking openly of bolting the SDPJ and forming a new party. Yet this is not a solid bloc. Far from it. The first part of the bloc is a group of people close to the current opposition gaggle. Then there is a group of people who are unhappy that most of the SDPJ's Cabinet posts seem to have gone to left-wingers. And finally is the group that wants to form a new party with the SDPJ, the Harbinger Party, and elements from the LDP.

Because the SDPJ has no future in its present form, most of its members favor switching to a new party and donning new garb, but there are major differences of opinion over what the new party should be and when it should be formed. Even though the mood within the party favors forming a new party, there is little justification at this point for imperiling the Murayama administration by leaving the SDPJ and forming a new party, and even the advocates of new-party-ism are thus stymied for the time being by the lack of anything they can point to as "just and sufficient cause."

On the other side of the aisle, the current opposition coalition announced the formation of a new party, the New Frontier Party, on November 24. Yet they are also finding the going harder than anticipated. As of early December, they had yet to agree, for example, on what the new party's founding principles should be, on an election platform, on a party head and other officials, or on many of the other essential prerequisites. At the same time, the public remains deeply skeptical of this new party. An Asahi opinion survey taken last November, for example, found 33% of the people saying that they had high

hopes of a new party and 59% that they did not expect it to do anything for them. This is a sharp decline from the expectation levels that greeted the formation of the Harbinger Party, the Japan New Party, and other parties two years ago.

Different people have different reasons for feeling as they do about this new party, and, for better or worse, Ozawa Ichiro figures prominently in most of them. Ozawa is, after all, the prime mover pushing the new party forward and holding it together, and it is unlikely that the party would get off the ground without him. Yet public perceptions of Ozawa (which he claims have been shaped by a hostile media) see him as a control freak obsessed with power, and this has colored how people see the new party as well.

Why? Common to both of these moves to form new parties is the paucity of political principle. Virtually nowhere in the West have parties formed in response to the demands of the election system. Yet in Japan, the dominant perception is that the new parties' formation is driven by tactical considerations of how to win the next election, and the politicians seem to have forgotten the prime imperative of party formation; a plausible *raison d'être*.

There is a lot of talk about political principles, but it is, for the most part, empty talk. And on the policy front, there are very few people who have any long-term vision of the kind of Japan they want and what policies are needed to get there from here.

Instead, they spend all of their time and attention dealing with the day-to-day issues and other short-term concerns. Some control is obviously needed to run a political party, but most of the politicians still seem to see power in traditional terms, and very few have seriously considered how power has to adapt to the changes in Japan's political situation. As a result, there is a strong body of opinion that says any new parties that are formed will be transitional parties. ■

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