Will Japanese Politics Change?

By Kazuo Okamura

Will Japanese politics change? Observing the current situation I feel there is a strong desire for change, yet it is difficult to predict with much confidence that 1993 will usher in long-term changes. However, at the beginning of 1991 no one predicted the collapse of the USSR nor did anybody, as far as I know, predict Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) kingpin Shin Kanemaru's spectacular fall from power, never mind the disintegration of the Takeshita faction into the fourth and fifth largest factions. In any case, the Japanese power structure changed and Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, in last December's Cabinet reshuffle, was able to implement his power as prime minister/LDP president and choose his Cabinet for the first time.

Internal turmoil

Since World War II the U.S. has seen power shift between the Democrats and Republicans six times. European countries like Britain, France and Germany have also seen power change hands several times. In Japan, however, the LDP has monopolized power for the past 37 years, since the 1955 merger of two conservative parties.

Power corrupts: Absolute power always corrupts. Deeply ingrained corruption in the ruling LDP and an inert opposition has diminished political tensions and provided a hotbed for political scandals such as Lockheed, Recruit and Tokyo Sagawa Kyubin. Public mistrust in politics runs deep. So what can we expect in the 1993 political scene? First we must look to the current general assembly of the Diet which began on the 22nd of January.

The LDP, in order to be seen as combatting the recession and to put the Sagawa Kyubin affair out of the public's eye, is eager to pass the budget for fiscal 1993. The opposition, on the other hand, is still demanding parliamentary testimony regarding the Sagawa Kyubin affair and is calling for the resignation of ex-Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita, who allegedly came to power with the aid of a criminal organization. While the opposition agrees that a stimulative budget should be passed without delay, the outlook remains uncertain. If there is a parliamentary block, Takeshita may have to resign as an assembly member, as he did as prime minister in 1989.

The focal point in the budget is tax cuts. Opposition parties are unanimous in demanding tax cuts of ¥2 to ¥5 trillion in addition to revisions in the proposed budget. The ruling LDP, however, wants to pass the budget as is and swiftly add fiscal stimuli depending on economic conditions. However, given the strong call for major tax breaks from industry and labor, the government may be forced to change its proposal by issuing deficit bonds. This will surely be the hottest point of this Diet session.

Also looming ominously is the rice issue raised at the Uruguay Round negotiations. If the U.S. and the European Community (EC) manage to work out their differences and Japan accepts tariffication of rice imports, rice farmers will explode in anger and the opposition will initiate a no-confidence vote on grounds that the LDP violated three Diet resolutions as well as its own public pledge. Should agrarian-based LDP members join the opposition or abstain from voting, the political scene could change drastically. So far, a conclusion to the Uruguay Round talks appears to be stalled, but the rice issue is still a time bomb waiting to explode.

Major LDP electoral defeats

Date	Number elected	Cause of defeat	Resulting political situation
Lower House			
12/76	249	Lockheed Affair	Resignation of Miki Cabinet
10/79	248	Consumption Tax	40-day internal struggle
12/83	250	Lockheed Affair	Coalition Cabinet
Upper House			
7/89	36	Consumption tax/Recruit	Resignation of Uno Cabinet

Next general election will be a turning point

In addition to these problems is the issue of political reform. This major LDP plank has been put on hold and some elements were calling for a March or April election until the royal engagement was announced. While politics and the crown are separate, politicians, with the exception of members of Nihon Kyosan-to (Japan Communist Party), are reluctant to cause political controversy, such as calling for a dissolution of the lower house or a general resignation of the Cabinet, before a happy occasion in the royal family. Thus the royal marriage may have cooled the political situation for now.

The current Diet session is scheduled to end June 20, the Group of Seven (G-7) meeting in Tokyo is scheduled for July and Miyazawa's term as LDP president expires at the end of September. So, a LDP party election and a lower house general election will soon come to the fore.

A senior assemblyman, Justice Minister Gotoda, has voiced his support for Miyazawa saying, "Is there anyone who could replace Miyazawa?" Other major figures like Deputy Prime Minister Watanabe and Policy Research Council Chairman Mitsuzuka also support Miyazawa, although with some reservation. Former Prime Minister Nakasone damns Miyazawa with faint praise saying, "Can the population be glad to see a person with only some 10% support re-elected?" A January survey conducted at the

Japan Press Club asked whether Miyazawa would still be prime minister at the end of the year and the answers were as diverse among journalists as politicians.

The upcoming general election, especially if held before year's end, will be a crucial battle in determining Japan's political course through the late 1990s. Since World War II, parties involved in major political scandals, such as the Shoden and Zosen affairs, have lost elections held immediately afterward. In the last six lower house elections, the LDP won only three majorities. The three losses are as follows:

In December 1976 the LDP won only 249 seats resulting in the resignation of Prime Minister Miki. The major reason for the defeat was the Lockheed affair in which former Prime Minister Tanaka was arrested.

In October 1979 only 248 seats were won. An attempt to introduce a general consumption tax was the reason for this defeat and the question over who was to blame lead to a 40-day internal struggle dividing the LDP into two camps.

In December 1983 the party won only 250 seats because Tanaka was sentenced. At that time Prime Minister Nakasone managed to secure a majority by forming a coalition with the Shin Jiyu Kurabu (New Liberal Club) .

The 1989 upper house election was a nightmare for the LDP: The party won only 36 seats out of the 69 up for reelection. The damage still reverberates in the party as it has yet to regain a majority. The reasons for defeat were myriad: the consumption tax, Recruit scandal, liberalization of beef and orange imports and a sex scandal involving the prime minister. In the coming general election, the LDP faces far more serious problems: a deep recession rather than the consumption tax; liberalization of rice imports which hits deeper than that of beef and oranges; and the Sagawa Kyubin affair instead of Recruit. There is no guarantee that a nightmare won't be repeated.

Can Miyazawa hold on to his job as prime minister? Nagata-cho ethics will no longer be accepted.

November 15, 1955 founding meeting of the Liberal Democratic Party, a merger between the Liberal Party and the Japan Democractic Party.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

Will the LDP split?

The main issue in politics is whether the 37-year-old structure—dominated by the LDP in power and Nihon Shakai-to (Social Democratic Party of Japan) leading the opposition—will collapse and lead to a restructuring of the existing political parties. The general public is disgusted with the corrupt LDP and moribund opposition. New parties have taken advantage of this and emerged one by one last year.

Nihon Shin-to (Japan New Party), led by Morihiro Hosokawa, won four seats in last July's general election. It received 3,610,000 total votes, more than either the JCP or Minsha-to (Democratic Socialist Party). Following this, Ken'ichi Omae started Heisei Ishin-no-Kai, and Satsuki Eda formed the study group Sirius with young members of Shamin-ren, Minshu Kaikaku Rengo (formerly Rengo Sangiin) and the SDPJ.

Inspired by such developments Komeito, at its November party congress, called for a potential radical realignment of the party. Also DSP Chairman Ouchi has, under the surface, actively been contacting these groups to form a new political party. This activity is unprecedented. Nevertheless, even with the favorable wind brought by the Sagawa Kyubin and other scandals, few expect the new forces mentioned above to win a 256-seat majority in the lower house needed for a true power shift.

For a shift to take place, a split in the LDP, and to a lesser extent in the SDPJ, is indispensable. Thus, close attention is being paid to the formation of the Hata faction in the LDP. Coming from the Takeshita faction, Hata's is only the fifth largest in the party but is in the lead calling for reforms. The practical-minded leader, Ichiro Ozawa, has hinted at the disintegration of the LDP and the formation of new parties. "This year," he says, "is likely to be one of big changes in Japanese history."

Yet, as we will see below, it is not easy to split existing parties or make new ones.

Under the Lockheed storm of 1976, Yohei Kono (current chief Cabinet secretary) left the LDP with other members to form the Shin Jiyu Kurabu. The new party succeeded in temporarily gaining support from voters disgusted with the LDP but gradually waned in popularity and was reabsorbed by the LDP 10 years later.

The Democratic Socialist Party split from the SDPJ in 1960. Thirty-three years later, it has shriveled to one-third of its original lower house representation.

For Diet members, above all else, the first priority is re-election. Knowing the bitter results of his predecessors, will Hata continue on the same course? His actions are vital to any real political restructuring.

A call for revision in the electoral system

For voters, who have reached new levels of despair over politics, the question is not which group will seize power, but what they will do with that power. It is highly dubious that politicians are sincerely contrite over the Sagawa Kyubin scandal which is all the more reason for reforming this rotten political structure. A former minister of justice said, "To ask a politician for ethics is like asking a green grocer for fish," a statement itself which created a minor scandal. If we cannot trust politicians' self-restraint, then we should consider resorting to an anti-corruption law such as the one enacted in the United Kingdom in 1883 which effectively bans corrupt politicians from public office for a long period or for life.

The existing multiple constituency system, in which LDP members fight among themselves, provides fertile ground for money-oriented politics and corruption and should be changed.

The LDP is proposing a full-blown single-seat constituency system. The opposition, however, is violently opposed as it would give disproportionate benefit to the LDP. Instead, the SDPJ and Komei-to are proposing a German-style mixed system of single-seat constituency and proportional representation. In reality, however, this is a proportional representation system which inevitably would lead to a loss of LDP power. Thus, the LDP will never accept it.

In my view, a compromise could be reached by employing last year's failed draft of a mixed system but setting the ratio of seats given to single-seat constituency representatives and proportional representatives at 50:50. This would make it more acceptable to opposition parties than the original proposal. However, this will not be settled so easily as it directly effects the survival of existing parties. Nevertheless, we should not misinterpret the situation; political reform is a natural process and we should not be elated just because politicians are adept enough to respond quickly and properly to the events around them.

Constitutional revision coming to the surface

In the current situation where diverse political directions are being taken by various groups, one development to be noted is that constitutional revision is being considered solely in terms of contributions to global security. The LDP alone has lead the call for replacement of the constitution given by the U.S. with an authentic one. However, the opposition—with the exception of the JCP and the indecisive SDPJ—is considering revision of Article 9 of the constitution which rules out Japanese use of force as a sovereign right of the nation.

Spurred on by the Gulf War, the government has moved toward making contributions to global security by enacting the PKO bill last June. This allowed for the dispatch of 600 Self-Defense Force soldiers to Cambodia which marked a major turning point in Japanese foreign policy since the end of World War II. Just after the bill was enacted, however, the U.N. secretary general proposed the formation of peace enforcement units (PEU) as well as a preventive PKO. So Japan, taking part in the Cambodian peacekeeping operation with the understanding it will not use force, is lagging well behind U.N. proposals. Added to this problem is the strong desire of the Japanese government to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. If this comes to pass, can Japan use the excuse of unconstitutionality to avoid participating in PEU or U.N. armed force dispatches, especially after taking part in the decision making?

Demand for a change in the constitution or a change in interpretation to clearly legalize the Self-Defense Force and Japanese contribution to U.N. security operations has been increasing among senior members of the LDP, including Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Michio Watanabe and Policy Research Council Chairman Mitsuzuka, as well as among some opposition members. As expected, the JCP has expressed strong opposition while the SDPJ continues to vacillate. Prime Minister Miyazawa, however, has also expressed opposition stating, "I have no intention to change the constitution as public opinion is not yet ripe. Collective self-defense as a sovereign right is unconstitutional." Thus speaks the voice of the doves in the ruling LDP. If Foreign Minister Watanabe runs for LDP president in the fall election, the PKO/constitutional issue could be a clear challenge to Miyazawa.

All in all, will Japanese politics really change this year? It is possible that nothing will change after all. At the same time, we may be witnessing the end of the LDP's long monopoly of power and changes leading to political restructuring and power shifts. JJTI

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