

# Ramifications of Election Reform

By Shiraishi Kojiro

Will changes to the electoral system, the pillar of political reform, rid Japan from plutocratic, corrupt politics and transform the country into a nation which shoulders its international responsibilities as a major economic power should?

As the phrases "absolute power corrupts absolutely" and "money-feed politics" demonstrate, no matter what system, whether East or West, political power always poses the risk of corruption and politicians who wield political power are incessantly entwined in money scandals.

Japan is not unusual in this sense and the expectation that political reform will completely eradicate influence peddling and corruption is overly optimistic. Even so, if the anti-corruption measures which have been incorporated in the political reform bills function properly, it may not be too overly optimistic to believe that political housecleaning can proceed. Moreover, changes in the electoral system should open a path for Japan to more actively discharge international obligations.

What kinds of changes will the newly-introduced electoral system produce in Japanese politics? Over the medium- to long-term we can expect positive changes, mainly in three areas.

The trend toward reorganization of the political world will gather speed and, as a result of the decline of the Social Democratic Party's (SDP) left wing and the decline in the influence of communism, there will be a shift to two major political parties that share the basic ideals of parliamentary democracy and free market economy, resulting in stable government changeovers.

In addition, leadership will shift from bureaucrats to politicians and improvements in decision-making mechanisms will result in speedier and more rational deliberations and decisions regarding security, social welfare, the economy, and other important policies.

There should also be greater possibilities than ever before for Japan to take on



Prime Minister Hosokawa and LDP President Kono shake hands upon reaching a compromise on plans for political reforms.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

roles and responsibilities as an important constituent of the international community with respect to participation in U.N. peacekeeping activities, promotion of the free trade system, overseas assistance, and substantial investments.

In the short-term, however, fears of (1) political turmoil which is inherent in a period of transition, (2) stagnation in the formulation of economic policies, and (3) delayed decision-making on diplomatic and security policies do exist. Before discussing these facets of the reformed electoral system, however, I would like to explain the makeup of the new system, differences with the current system, and the current system's demerits.

## Yen-influenced elections

The Japanese political system takes the form of a bicameral assembly composed of an upper and lower house with the lower house basically considered to take precedence over the upper house. The leader of the political party that holds the greatest majority in the lower house is elected prime minister and forms a Cabinet as the person with the greatest responsibility in the government administration. That successive Japanese prime ministers have been selected from the lower house is proof of its predominance.

The current lower house electoral sys-

tem was introduced about 70 years ago, with changes being applied a number of times since its introduction. The entire country is divided into 129 electoral districts and, as a rule, two to six Diet members are elected from each district, depending upon the number of eligible voters in the district. There are 511 seats in total and each voter has the right to one vote.

The electoral system referred to as the medium constituency system (tech-

nically speaking, the major constituency system) is unique to Japan with no equivalent in other nations. If a single party wants to acquire the 256-seat majority needed to form a government under this system it must put up several candidates in the same electoral district.

In reality, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had held the reins of government since 1955, would advance three to five candidates per district for general elections, garnering around 270 successful candidates of the 330 or so supported nationwide. The LDP candidates that stood in the same electoral district would inevitably compete more fiercely among themselves than against the candidates from other parties and would have to devote all of their energies to entertainment or buying votes in order to amass votes. This resulted in corrupt elections that would cost from 100 to several hundred million yen, resulting in a pattern of corruption—illegal contributions would be received from companies to fund elections and in return those companies would be accommodated through the political power wielded after an election.

Candidates would form their own individual support groups and, receiving powerful support from influential LDP politicians, both in the form of campaign funding and votes, would compete against other candidates from their own



party. These unions between candidates and influential politicians led to the formation of factions within the LDP.

As a result, the LDP as an organization has come to be a political party that depends upon support groups that are aggregations of Diet members' private backers. Moreover, it has become a federation of cliques that possess the functions of quasi-political parties, each setting up separate offices, having an organization with a chairman, secretaries-general, and other officers, and scouting out and supporting candidates.

In the opposing camp, on the other hand, although the SDP was the largest opposition party they were never able to advance more than 120 candidates or so. In addition, we can also say that because it was also impossible for opposing parties to join together to confront the LDP due to serious ideological conflicts, the LDP was permitted to maintain one-party rule.

As can be understood from the preceding analysis, the current medium constituency system has served to promote elections that required cash due to internal competition, factional politics, one-party rule by the LDP, collusion of the LDP with bureaucrats and business, and other negative political aspects. It has reached the stage where these defects cannot be ameliorated without changes in the electoral system.

It was these considerations that gave rise to the latest political reforms, including reform of the electoral system. Abolition of the medium constituency system is the greatest focus of the electoral system reforms. A system that combines single constituencies and proportional representation is to be introduced in place of the medium constituency system.

### Historic compromise

The lower house is to consist of 500 seats, with 300 allocated among small constituencies that will elect one representative per electoral district and the remaining 200 divided among 10 blocks across the country, elected on the basis of proportional representation. Votes will be cast for single candidates in small constituencies and for political parties in

proportional representation elections. A candidate who obtains a plurality in a single constituency wins the election. In elections based upon proportional representation the ratio of votes obtained by political parties will be apportioned according to the totals for each block and a fixed number corresponding to population distribution tallies made in advance will be distributed to each party.

Japan adopted an electoral system similar to that of Germany in order to introduce the dual merits of the single constituency system, emphasizing gathering public consensus, political stability, greater possibilities for alternating administrations, and proportional representation, placing the priority on reflecting the variety of public opinions in spite of the risk of a flood of small parties.

In addition to the preceding reasons we also need to point out that, considering the present circumstances with eight parties of greatly different sizes (from the LDP's 230 members to the new Sakigake Party with about 20 people), a combination of the single constituency system—which is said to favor large political parties—and proportional representation—which allows small parties to acquire seats comparatively easily—was a compromise and an attempt to obtain the agreement of larger and smaller parties.

Changes to the electoral system will probably force a conversion in the makeup of political parties first and spur small party mergers. There is a strong possibility that the first general election to be held under the new system will be in autumn this year or later and until that time a reshuffling in the world of politics will be inevitable.

According to preliminary forecasts based upon past election data from several media organizations, if the anti-LDP coalition government (excluding the Communist Party) can hold together and square off against the LDP with unified candidacies in every single constituency it will be able to acquire about 60% of the total number of Diet seats. However, if each of the coalition parties contest the election on their own, the reverse will hold—they will end up los-

ing more than half the seats to the LDP.

As such, there is growing interest in whether the governing coalition will be able to maintain its cohesion, whether it will reform into several groups, or whether the LDP will split again for the reason that this will have a tremendous bearing upon the outcome of the next general election.

The current coalition camp is divided into three groups based upon political differences related to political philosophies and policies—the Japan New Party and Sakigake, the Shinseito, Komeito, and Japan Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), and the SDP. Of these, the SDP is faced with serious internal conflicts between its left and right wings and is in the position of being unable to avoid splitting sooner or later. The SDP's right wing takes the stance that the constitutionality of the Self-Defense Forces and the U.S.-Japan security treaty should be accepted and with this in mind cooperation should be possible with the conservative Japan New Party, Sakigake, and Shinseito, as well as with the centrist Komeito and DSP. It is within the realm of possibility that in the future the SDP's right wing might dissolve the party, forming a new party with moderate conservative forces such as the Japan New Party and Sakigake. The right wing is hesitant, however, regarding a merger with Shinseito and Komeito.

Both the JNP and Sakigake are betting on a further LDP split and are considering uniting with them and establishing a new political force if progressive LDP groups break away from the party. Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro, head of the JNP, and Sakigake party leader, Chief Cabinet Secretary Takemura Masayoshi, are striving for a moderate, multi-party system and have taken a circumspect stance regarding a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. This position differs from both Ozawa Ichiro, the power behind Shinseito, who would like to see a two-party system and emphasizes the active sharing of international responsibilities, and Komeito Secretary-General Ichikawa Yuichi.

The thinking of Hosokawa and



**Chart 1**

11 Electoral Blocks and Allotment of Seats Under Proportional Representation System		
Name of Block	Prefectures	Number of allotted seats
Hokkaido	Hokkaido	9
Tohoku	Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Akita, Yamagata, Fukushima	16
North Kanto	Ibaraki, Tochigi, Gunma, Saitama	21
Tokyo	Tokyo	19
South Kanto	Chiba, Kanagawa, Yamanashi	23
Hokuriku and Shin'etsu	Niigata, Toyama, Ishikawa, Fukui, Nagano	13
Tokai	Gifu, Shizuoka, Aichi, Mie	23
Kinki	Shiga, Kyoto, Osaka, Hyogo, Nara, Wakayama	33
Chugoku	Tottori, Shimane, Okayama, Hiroshima, Yamaguchi	13
Shikoku	Tokushima, Kagawa, Ehime, Kochi	7
Kyushu	Fukuoka, Saga, Nagasaki, Kumamoto, Oita, Miyazaki, Kagoshima, Okinawa	23

This chart is based on a report by the Eighth Election System Council. The allotment of seats was calculated by the method used by the council on the basis of voter population.

Source: *The Daily Yomiuri*, January 30, 1994

**Chart 2**

Proposals By the Government and the LDP, and the Final Compromise			
	Government	LDP	Compromise
Total seats	500	471	500
Single constituencies	274	300	300
Proportional representation	226	171	200
Proportional representation base	national	prefectural	11 blocks
Donations to individuals	prohibited	acceptable through two fund-raising groups	acceptable through one fund-raising group
Donations to parties	accepted	accepted	accepted

Source: *The Daily Yomiuri*, January 30, 1994

Takemura is similar to that of LDP President Kono Yohei, referred to as a moderate within the party. In contrast, Watanabe Michio, an influential LDP member, is closer to Ozawa from a political standpoint.

Predictions are that LDP members' interests concerning candidate selections for the next general election will conflict severely. There is a strong possibility that a number of unhappy elements will defect, leaving the LDP in a state of disintegration.

In other words, both the LDP and SDP face the possibility of dissolution. This will probably lead to accelerated reorganization through inter-party realignments. Once general elections

have been held two or three times under the new system a broad reshuffling of the political world will proceed and by the 21st century a political system that is different from today's will appear. There will be a shift from a multi-party to a two-party system, with smaller, weaker parties weeded out through natural selection.

It is estimated that socialism and communism will wane as political forces during this process, and that moderates will also be absorbed by either conservatives or liberals. It will undoubtedly be similar to the American-style political system's focus on Democrats or Republicans. On the other hand, European-style, single issue

parties that emphasize environmental concerns or other questions may well come into existence, although they will have very little parliamentary power.

If two major political forces that share the fundamental philosophies of parliamentary democracy and free market economics are created and stable government transfers are carried out, Japan's bureaucrats should feel the need to adhere to political neutrality without attaching themselves to a specific party and political parties should be able to take the initiative in drafting policies and putting decision-making mechanisms in place. At the same time an environment for Japan to flexibly take on appropriate international responsibilities should be created.

However, in the short term there is a risk that the introduction of the new electoral system will produce temporary political confusion. Within both the LDP and the SDP those in favor of political reform are feuding with those against and, considering the lingering aftereffects and the political confusion accompanying reforms to the electoral system, continuing political disarray may be unavoidable for the next one or two years until the new system takes hold.

Political instability will impede economic recovery and also act against Japan carrying out international responsibilities. However, this predicted turmoil will be an inevitable outgrowth of systemic reform and should be surmountable.

It is especially notable that Japan has taken a step toward achieving political reforms, including electoral reforms. This is to say, steps are finally being taken to correct corrupt politics and changing the back room political style so strongly criticized by other countries.

Whether reforms of the electoral system will be successful or not depends upon the ethics and good sense of politicians and political parties. At the same time, however, it goes without saying that Japan's voters also share a heavy responsibility.

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