

Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (6)

# On the Eve of the 21st Century: A Strange Political Landscape

By Nakano Osamu

The most important issue Japanese politicians must address now is how to overcome the economic slump which has continued since the collapse of the bubble economy and has seriously hurt the Asian countries. I am not sure whether Japan's political power is strong enough to overcome the current slump. Yet, politicians, above all, must contain the deepening crisis if they are to have any role to play, because the current situation is beyond the market economy's capacity to heal itself.

I will reserve my analysis of the current political situation for another occasion, and for now would like to examine the various "wonders" of the House of Councillors election held in July.

## 1. Did the LDP win or lose?

I have long been skeptical of the adequacy of the catchwords journalism uses in connection with elections, particularly national parliamentary elections, such as "victory," "defeat," "a close battle," and "a close-in attack." These catchwords are essentially war terms. It may be that the mass media randomly uses these terms because election campaigns are often likened to warfare.

Renunciation of war, stipulated in the Japanese Constitution, is supposed to mean that Japan as a civilized society has gotten rid of all wars, or more logically all wars as a form of civilization and culture. This can be attested by the fact that phrases like "absolute peace" or "absolute renunciation of war" were used not only as



Passing of batons: the transfer of power from Hashimoto to Obuchi has not brought about the expected change yet

words, but also as an ideological concept. The Japanese mass media, which strictly bans the use of politically incorrect words, should be more sensitive about the use of war terms.

My skepticism about the mass media's use of war terms goes beyond that. The use of such catchwords warps the true meaning of elections as a political phenomenon.

Even political academicians, let alone newspapers and television, described the outcome of the Upper House election saying "The LDP suffers unexpectedly," and "The LDP's disastrous defeat," and calling

it "Victory of the Democratic and Communist Parties." I wonder whether objectively a line can be drawn between victory and defeat. On one occasion before the election, a top LDP executive said that the LDP could claim victory if the party won 61 seats, or as many seats as in the previous Upper House election. On another occasion, he said the LDP could not claim victory unless the party won 69 seats, which would allow the LDP to hold a majority in the house. These numbers are arbitrary from an outsider's point of view. The different numbers provided by the same person on different occasions had no objective meaning. Claiming victory or admitting defeat on the basis of whether the outcome was below or above the predicted numbers. It would be more logical to describe the election results as "the LDP won only 49 seats, far less than predicted, in a shocking outcome."

Did the outcome of the latest Upper House election mean a defeat for the LDP?

The voter turnout was restored to the 60% range, reflecting such factors as the critical economic situation and the alternation of implementation and frustration of policies under the Hashimoto administration. There were also campaigns to raise voter turnout, in which voters were warned that a low turnout would jeopardize democracy. Also absentee voting procedures have been simplified and voting hours were extended. Circumstances behind the pickup in

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the voter turnout have not yet been fully analyzed. But the high voter turnout is generally attributed to the fact that as many as 15 million of the uncommitted voters, who account for more than 50% of all voters, went to the polls.

Most of the uncommitted voters are believed to have voted for the Democratic Party or the Communist Party, which sharply boosted both parties' strength in the Upper House. However, the LDP did also win considerably more votes than in the previous Upper House election. In electoral districts, the LDP won 20% more votes than in the previous election. Judging from these figures, voters generally favored the LDP. The LDP saw its Upper House seats decrease primarily because of its clumsy campaign strategy resulting from a weakening of the function of LDP factions. Considering the fact that a majority of voters supported the LDP, it can be said the ruling party did not suffer a defeat.

Campaign slogans of the Democratic and Communist Parties, such as "Stable Life," "A Worry-Free Society," "Welfare and Aid to Unprivileged Persons," were almost identical with the LDP's. They supported the maintenance of the status-quo and were conservative. In this sense, voters who cast ballots for the Democratic and Communist Parties were never anti-LDP, neither politically nor economically. So, the election outcome showed that no parties won a victory or suffered a defeat.

Former Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro was forced to resign to take the blame for what was regarded as a defeat for his party. Nevertheless, the LDP remained in power, as it held a majority in the more powerful House of Representatives, and Obuchi Keizo, who succeeded Hashimoto as LDP president, took over the government. Despite the "defeat," the LDP had no intention whatsoever to hand over the reins of government to the opposition parties or to form a coalition with them. For their part, the opposition

parties urged the LDP to call a general election as a normal constitutional process. But in fact the opposition parties seemed unready to take over the government or to fight an election campaign. Approval ratings for Obuchi and his cabinet are extremely low in media polls, and Obuchi's policies are being criticized even from within the LDP. Even so, there has hardly been any effective, concrete move to unseat the Obuchi administration. Nor has there been any political or partisan campaign aimed at forcing Obuchi to call a general election. The general public has likewise been slow to launch a campaign to unseat the government despite the recession, bankruptcies, and the high jobless rate. In effect, the mass media, the opposition parties and voters all support the LDP and Obuchi's administration. Such a situation tempts me to wonder whether the LDP really lost in the election. Incidentally, infightings among LDP Diet members during the LDP presidential election for their own survival was shameful, reminding me of the confusion at the time of Japan's surrender in World War II.

What I mentioned above is designed to shed light on the political process that has been taking place since after the Upper House election in July. The use of war terms in this process is not adequate. Politics is a power struggle, and this is why war terms are often used in politics, not only in Japan but also in other countries. However, political processes are not necessarily identical with war. We need terms which precisely describe and analyze politics.

## **2. Are uncommitted voters really uncommitted?**

The phrase "uncommitted voters" has been used conveniently and in a positive sense already for several years. Lately, uncommitted voters outnumber committed voters in any public opinion poll. Judging from the fact that the ratio of uncommitted voters and the abstention rate are almost on par, it is safe to define

"uncommitted voters" as habitual nonvoters.

Let's make a hypothetical calculation. Suppose the voter turnout was 50% in a House of Representatives single-seat voting district which had 500,000 eligible voters. Suppose an LDP candidate won by collecting 100,000 votes, while a Democratic Party candidate collected 80,000 votes, a Communist Party candidate 40,000 votes and other candidates 30,000 votes. If 10% of uncommitted voters who previously abstained voted, the result of the election would be entirely different. If 20% of uncommitted voters voted, the result would be more dramatic. Such a hypothesis became a reality in the July Upper House election, with the result that the Democratic and Communist parties substantially increased their seats, which was described by the mass media as "victories." In a single voting district, such a pattern could always happen, though the right or wrong of having a single-seat district is another matter.

The voting rate has been steadily decreasing, and so election results are influenced by the whim of uncommitted voters, or habitual nonvoters. No wonder uncommitted voters are becoming a force to be reckoned with.

It is not the first time uncommitted voters have been positively assessed and have become one of the key subjects of political discussions. More than a decade ago, a group of leftist intellectuals, known as "progressive intellectuals" in this country, led a campaign to boycott elections. The group contended that since the conservative forces win in any election, the casting of ballots, in effect, means approval of the election results. They called on young voters to refrain from going to the polls as an expression of their disapproval of election results.

There is an ideological trend, though on a small scale, in modern Japan which finds a positive political significance in disapproving of existing political parties and in abstaining from voting in elections. As the whole

nation has devoted itself to political and economic modernization and military reinforcement since the Meiji Restoration, some intellectuals argued that intellectuals can establish their identity only by criticizing and pretending to be indifferent to such national efforts. The campaign for boycotting elections is in a ideological vein. So is the great importance assigned to uncommitted voters by some members of the mass media. It is logical for such ideologues to put such great importance on uncommitted voters at a time when opposition parties are becoming increasingly identified with the ruling party.

While attributing some importance to uncommitted voters, the mass media was seriously concerned about the continuing decline in the voting rate. In terms of conventional wisdom and from a logical point of view, a voting rate below 50% would mean that representative democracy no longer functions normally. This prompted the mass media to launch a serious campaign to prevent a further decline in the voting rate. Even some of the so-called "progressive intellectuals" who once called on young people to abstain now urge them to go to the polls. Did their reversal signify a change in politics in this country over the past 10 years or did it indicate a reversal in the trends of the political world?

The voter turnout in the latest Upper House election did increase 10% from the previous election. Yet, the turnout of voters in their 20s and 30s was still in the 20-30% range, remaining almost unchanged from the 1995 House of Councillors election and the 1996 House of Representatives election. The higher voting rate this time resulted from an increase in the turnout of uncommitted voters in their 40s or older. These voters had previ-

ously stayed away from the polls because they had found politics meaningless in their daily life, especially with the advent of an affluent society. However, the economic slowdown, anxiety over the future, the restructuring of their workplace, the increasing unemployment rate, the introduction of global standards in Japan, and

mentary elections.

I am not sure what they would say when they were asked to express their opinions. But it is safe to assume that habitual nonvoters who again stayed away from the polls this time do not necessarily believe that things will never change regardless of whom assumes power. Neither do they hold a negative view of all parties. They only think they have little to do with politics or other public matters. This is why they do not vote. Is it right to call these people "uncommitted voters," attribute positive value to them politically and assign their behavior positive value? Likewise, is it right to regard a slight increase in the voting rate as a sign that democracy works in Japan? It is totally unpredictable whether these uncommitted voters will go to the polls in the next election.

Thus, it is doubtful whether the "Let's Go to the Polls" campaign produced the intended results. The more than 10% increase in the voter turnout resulted merely from an increase in the turnout of voters in their 40s or older. The increase in the turnout of younger voters, at whom the campaign was aimed, was only minimal.

The mass media as well as academics use the catchword "uncommitted voters" for their own convenience and only dress up such trends with an old paradigm. It seems to me, however, that the so-called "uncommitted voters" constitute a new political stratum which cannot be explained with conventional theories.

### 3. Emergence of a new political culture?

I do not consider the "Don't Abstain" campaign in the latest House of Councillors election as successful for the reasons I have mentioned. How about the "Let's abstain"



Photo: Kyodo News

Longer Hours: in an attempt to allow more citizens to vote, voting hours were extended

intensified competition based on the market mechanism reminded them of the closeness between politics and their daily lives. These concerns prompted worriers among them to go to the polls. It is not clear whether the LDP or the anti-LDP camp is a more reliable bet for the nation's future. The candidates of each party said similar things in their campaign speeches. Voters wondered to what extent they could trust politicians. This is perhaps the reason why the number and the share of votes (not the number of seats) each party got was not so different from previous parlia-

campaign of the 1970s and 1980s?

The turnout of voters in their 20s for national parliamentary elections is now usually in the 20% range, sometimes even below that. Their turnout drops further to a single digit when it comes to elections of prefectural governors or chiefs of municipalities. As far as the turnout rate is concerned, the "Let's Abstain" campaign of the 1970s and 1980s can be considered successful. (I say "as far as the turnout rate is concerned" because I do not think the present low turnout of young voters resulted from this campaign.) How would the advocates of the "Let's Abstain" campaign assess the recent decline in the turnout? Furthermore, did the "Let's Abstain" campaigns aimed at young voters succeed in the past?

Up until the 1960s, political apathy, as discussed in the context of mass society, was the basic and effective paradigm for analyzing and explaining the voters' political awareness and thinking. It was explained that the voter turnout is low among elderly people and women, because they have little information and knowledge of politics, have little political consciousness and thought, and politically act and vote in consideration of their own interests and human relations; and from emotional reactions. The voter turnout was said to be high among young voters who have enough information and knowledge of politics, and who have high standards of political consciousness and thought. Such an explanation seemed to fit the then-prevalent political reality and sounded convincing enough. The conservative forces were always victorious under such circumstances, which encouraged the "Let's Abstain" campaign.

From the late 1970s, young people were showing increased support for the ruling conservative party, while the abstention rate rose at the same time. In my view, however, such a trend had nothing to do with the "Let's Abstain" campaign. The lifestyle brought about by high economic growth and affluence was very comfortable, and almost completely

neutralized the criticism and antipathy toward the establishment that had prevailed among young people before the high-growth started. The establishment contributed to the creation of a comfortable lifestyle. Young people generally began to feel that they were the beneficiaries of such a lifestyle. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, support for the leftist forces, called "renovationist forces," which had been prevalent among young people from the end of World War II up until the 1960s, was gone, and supporters of the conservative camp became a majority, even among young people.

Young people up until the start of the high-growth period felt in the bottom of their hearts that their support for the leftist forces and their social interests in a broad sense were theoretically and closely linked to each other. But when they began to feel they were the beneficiaries of economic growth, their wish to guarantee and maintain the amenities of their daily lives, and their political support for the conservatives were not casually and closely related. In other words, when people enjoy a comfortable life, they can no longer have political consciousness to radically resist the political reality. Support for the conservatives logically amounts to apathy toward politics and a retreat from politics.

In the 1980s, young people began to use such adjectives as "gloomy," "unrefined," "old-fashioned," and "wet-blanket" to describe politics. Nevertheless, the media-oriented youths of the 1980s were well-informed and knowledgeable about world politics and the political situation in Japan, and were members of the enthusiastic audience of TV talk shows dealing with political matters. When asked whether they would go to the polls, they said they would, but then they did not go. They were neither ignorant about nor indifferent to politics, but they were extremely inactive. The argument made for political apathy of the 1960s is not applicable.

Also, they were neither opposed to the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party nor to the opposition camp. The young people envisioned by the advocates of the "Let's Abstain" campaign in the 1960s were those who were highly politically conscious, well-informed and knowledgeable about politics, but who intentionally refused to go to the polls. On the other hand, young people now are interested in politics because they regard politics just as an exciting social event. They refuse to get involved in politics, however, claiming it is too much trouble to go to the polls. Therefore, it is not appropriate to regard them as "nonpartisan voters," an expression which has positive connotations. It is safe to assume most of them did not go to the polls this time again.

These politically inactive young people are apparently the product of postwar Japan. Behind their political inactivity is an affluent society, which was what all Japanese longed for and which became part of their daily lives.

Political apathy and detachment from politics resulted from Japanese-style freedom, equality and individualism. Seen from this perspective, their existence itself has a good political meaning. Since they are usually inactive, even a slight change in their behavior could bring about a stunning and visible political consequence. I see here a new political entity and a new political culture (or a new pattern of political behavior). Whether such a new political culture would bring any benefit to the people of this archipelago is a different question. ■■■

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