

The General Election and Trends in Japanese Politics

By Sasaki Takeshi

THE general election of Nov. 9, 2003, gave the ruling parties a majority of seats in the House of Representatives and sustained the Koizumi Cabinet. The number of seats each party secured in this election is shown in Table 1. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost 10 seats compared to the number it held before the dissolution of the Diet, the New Komeito party gained three seats and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) gained 40 seats. The Social Democratic Party (SDP), Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and New Conservative Party (NCP) suffered heavy losses, and the NCP formally disbanded the day after the election and merged with the LDP. The general view is that the election is an announcement of the advent of a two-party system made up of the two major parties, the LDP and the DPJ.

The LDP obtained a majority of seats in the single-seat constituencies, but in the proportional representation system it took second billing to the DPJ. LDP dominance in the single-seat constituencies relied heavily upon the abstention of the New Komeito party and the support it gave to LDP candidates in those constituencies. According to one exit poll, 72% of New Komeito supporters voted for the LDP candidate in the single-seat constituencies, compared to 61% in the previous election. In single-seat constituencies where there was no LDP candidate, the polls showed that 56% of LDP supporters voted for the New Komeito candidates, compared to 38% in the previous election. Thus it was significant that the LDP-New Komeito coalition connoted cooperation in the election.

In September 2003 the DPJ merged with the Liberal Party, and by doing this, it succeeded in broadening its support base. In the previous election both parties fielded candidates in the same constituencies and this resulted in the defeat of both parties, but this time they

avoided competition and succeeded in rallying together the votes of supporters from both parties. In Japan, independent voters made up about half of the electorate, and in this election too, trends within this group had an effect on the election results. According to the exit polls, 56% of independent voters said they had voted for the DPJ. Compared with the 21% of these non-affiliated voters who voted for LDP candidates, the DPJ was able to gain considerable support. Compared to the previous general election, both parties gained increased support from these independent voters, and this suggests that the system of political parties in Japan is moving toward a two-party system. Support for small political parties among non-affiliated voters decreased significantly.

Voters in Japan cast one vote for single-seat constituencies and another for proportional representation seats. One also finds in Japan a split-ticket vote, whereby the voter casts one vote each for different parties. Of those who cast a vote for the LDP in the single-seat constituencies, 67% voted for the LDP in the proportional representation system, with the remaining 32% voting for the DPJ or New Komeito (40% for DPJ and 52% for New Komeito). Similarly, 79% of the voters who cast ballots for the DPJ in single-seat constituencies did the same for the proportional representation seats, and the remaining 21% voted for the LDP or New Komeito (43% and 25% respectively). However, in comparison with the previous election, in general the ratio of cross-voting declined, showing an increased allegiance to one particular political party.

The voter turnout of 59.86% is certainly not high. Up until now, it has generally been held that if voter turnout rates are low, this will favor the LDP, and in view of this trend plus the fact that New Komeito voting levels were high, neither party should be satisfied

with the number of seats they obtained. It is commonly believed that if the voting percentages had been slightly higher, the DPJ would have come closer to taking power. In recent elections there has been a continued narrowing of the gap in voting rates between urban and rural areas, and this suggests a continued weakening of the strong support for the LDP in rural areas.

In the election both the LDP and DPJ offered political manifestos and attempted to open a debate on government policies through these public pledges. The active participation of the leaders of both parties in creating such platforms was a major characteristic of this election. Over 50% of the voters indicated that they considered the manifestos when they cast their votes, and it was therefore anticipated that the election would center on a debate over concrete political issues, rather than on the popularity of the politicians or political scandals, as has been true in the past. Both parties raised "reform" as a central totem, and made significant policy proposals concerning the same issues. However, the manifestos were simply made public, and it cannot be said that there was in fact any ardent debate over policies. Nonetheless, one result is that in comparison with the past, it is now clearer what the parties in power have promised the people and it has become easier to evaluate the government's actual achievements.

An election for the House of Councilors is scheduled for the summer of 2004, and a few months from now the clash between the LDP and the DPJ will resume. Consequently, the focus of attention will be on what kind of "reform" results the Koizumi Cabinet will be able to achieve prior to next summer's election and whether its rate of support will rise or decline. According to the provisions of Japan's Constitution, there is no need for a change of cabinet based on the results of the elec-

tion for the House of Councilors, but attention will be given to the fact that there have been cases in the past where the cabinet has been reshuffled as a result of a House of Councilors election.

This election has shown that the Koizumi Cabinet does not enjoy the same enthusiastic support it had two years ago. The strong support for Prime Minister Koizumi Jun-ichiro has fairly depended on the overwhelming lack of popularity of his adversaries within the LDP, i.e., the bosses of the factions. He has defined these faction leaders as a group of resistance vis-à-vis reform and by emphasizing his confrontations with them has attempted to distinguish their political viewpoints from his own. However, in the recent election for the presidency of the LDP, Koizumi won a sweeping victory and the factional leaders completely lost whatever influence they once had. As a result, the Koizumi Cabinet no longer has a means of procuring support other than by exhibiting the achievements of its reform efforts. It is eloquently clear that in this general election, voters looked at the Koizumi Cabinet with cool eyes. In all likelihood, it will not be easy for Koizumi to point to any concrete results of reform by the summer of next year.

Of future concern to the Koizumi Cabinet is the issue of the dispatch of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq. With the recent series of attacks on American troops in Iraq in mind, it is possible that the dispatch of SDF troops will carry a high political risk. In comparison with the response of the Japanese government so far, dispatching troops to Iraq means a major change of policy, and the probability that it will become a positive political resource is extremely limited. The concern of the Japanese people is overwhelmingly focused on North Korea, and the dispatch of troops to Iraq is simply seen as a by-product of the close cooperative relationship between Koizumi and

Table 1: Number of elected members in the House of Representatives

	Members elected	Single-seat constituencies	Proportional representation seats	Previous strength
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	237	168	69	247
Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)	177	105	72	137
New Komeito	34	9	25	31
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	9	0	9	20
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	6	1	5	18
New Conservative Party (NCP)	4	4	—	9
club of Independents	1	1	—	5
Liberal League	1	1	—	1
Minority Parties	0	0	—	2
Independents	11	11	—	5
Total	480	300	180	475
Seats	480	300	180	Vacant seat 5

Note: Previous strength for the LDP includes the chairman of the Lower House, and previous strength for the Independents includes the vice-chairman of the Lower House.

President George W. Bush. But if the SDF personnel incur some casualties, it will not be easy for the Koizumi Cabinet to make a political recovery.

The central message of the DPJ is that the “reform” of the Koizumi Cabinet is mere rhetoric and there have been no actual results one can point to. The DPJ did its utmost in the election campaign to convey the impression to voters that it was the party to choose for more radical reform. A decline in support for the Koizumi Cabinet is a prerequisite for attracting real concern for their concrete prescriptions. At the same time, it is unavoidable that the DPJ, which opposes the dispatch of troops, will vehemently attack the Koizumi Cabinet over this issue. The supporters of the New Komeito party traditionally took a highly cautious attitude toward sending troops abroad and this will be another factor for potential difficulties.

There is a long list of issues in Japan’s reform agenda, including a reconstruction of Japan’s pension system which is on the verge of collapsing, coming to terms with the serious unemployment problem and a reform of the central-provincial relationship. As a result of this general election, “reform” became a political symbol shared in common by

all major parties and the focal point has shifted to the actual ability to implement such reforms. Within the LDP there appears to be no one other than Koizumi who is capable of shouldering this task. Consequently, if the Koizumi Cabinet’s rate of support drastically declined, the coalition government would face a severe result in the election for the House of Councilors. However, one cannot exclude the possibility that even prior to the various issues concerning reform there could be a major political focus on the dispatch of troops to Iraq. If such a situation occurs, as the election approaches attention will be focused on the members of the House of Councilors and the movement within the New Komeito party. Japanese politics is continuing to eradicate remnants of the postwar system, but it will take considerable time before the next political structure comes into view. JS

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