

Koizumi Cabinet Faces Shrinking Base of Support

By Sasaki Takeshi

UNTIL a few months ago, it appeared that Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) would in all likelihood win 51 of the total number of seats up for grabs in the House of Councillors. On the other hand, the leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had resigned, public support for his party had waned, and prospects for the newly appointed DPJ head, Okada Katsuya, looked bleak. Once the polling results for the July 11 elections were in, however, the two parties found themselves trading places. This stark reversal has even brought conjecture that Koizumi and his cabinet will, sooner or later, be forced to step down.

DPJ Takes Off, LDP Falls Back

The election results outlined in Table 1 show that the LDP secured 49 seats, with its coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, taking 11 seats. These new seats, together with the uncontested ones, leave the LDP-New Komeito coalition in control of more than half of the Upper House seats. Still, the DPJ grabbed 50 seats on its own, and since many candidates elected as independents received DPJ backing, the DPJ demonstrated its ability to take more seats. In the July elections, voters cast ballots for contested seats in both directly elected prefectural constituencies and proportional representation at the national level. Table 2 compares the number of votes secured by each political party in both ballots against the House of Councillors election in 2001, when the popularity of the Koizumi administration was at its peak. The 2004 figures illustrate that, in both the prefectural constituencies and the national proportional representation ballot, the DPJ gained a greater number of votes than the LDP. Voter support for New Komeito was vastly higher for proportional representation seats than in prefectural ballots, an indication of the strong backing the LDP

enjoyed from New Komeito supporters who voted this time for LDP candidates in prefectural constituencies where their own party did not field candidates. Without this strong margin of New Komeito support, the LDP would have clearly found it difficult to win the 49 seats it did.

The tendency of the majority of the public to identify themselves as independent voters is a significant factor in the outcome of Japanese elections. Exit polls indicate that 50.6% of independent voters cast their ballots for the DPJ in this election, while the LDP was only able to lock up 14.4% of their vote. With the DPJ claiming 56% of the floating vote in the 2003 general election, this year's election results come as little surprise. Contrast this with the LDP's 21% share of the floating vote in last year's general election and the picture emerges of an LDP that has found it increasingly difficult since 2001 to win unaffiliated voter support. This year's elections were no exception.

What is more, once in the voting booth only 60% of LDP supporters actually cast their ballot for the LDP candidate, whereas 80% of DPJ supporters voted for their own party. These figures indicate a solidification of the DPJ support base, as well as an element of LDP supporters "distancing themselves from the LDP." The DPJ secured a greater number of votes in the national poll for proportional representation than its rival and exit polls indicate that 46% of male voters and 33% of female voters cast their ballots for the DPJ. The DPJ has typically derived its base of support from male voters, with overwhelming backing from males between 20 and 60 years old, and has attracted few female voters to its party in the past. Soaring support from female voters ensured the DPJ a stronger showing than the LDP in the most recent election. The LDP came in behind the DPJ in every age group, and even among voters over 60, whose overwhelming support it has long enjoyed, the LDP lost to the DPJ, albeit narrowly. Given these returns, it is hard

to deny that the LDP's clout among the general public is fading.

Support Flagging, LDP Depends on New Komeito

Public opinion polls showing stagnating popular support for the Koizumi cabinet anticipated the tough fight the LDP would face in this race. The current administration's campaign strategy has in the past focused largely on capitalizing on the broad-based popularity enjoyed by Koizumi himself to secure large numbers of votes in urban areas and clinching the victory by mobilizing the LDP's support base in rural areas. Koizumi's dwindling personal popularity and a sense that people have generally had enough of his administration hampered the party's success in gaining urban votes. About 70% of voters were critical of the administration's pension reforms, and this had a considerable influence on the choices made by independents and other voters. The issue was more critical to the LDP's loss of support than the decision to send the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to Iraq. Rural supporters of the LDP are the most dependent on public works projects and this has been one of the groups hit hardest over the past several years by Koizumi's structural reform policy. With these factors in play, an anti-Koizumi mood dominated, making it difficult for the LDP to mobilize support and effectively eroding the loyalty of the party's long-established support base. The prime minister's famous words, "I will tear down the LDP," garnered strong support among the Japanese public, and in a certain sense his words become true when we consider the state of the LDP base in areas outside major cities. In contrast to the two seats gained by the DPJ in Tokyo, Kanagawa and Aichi, where the economy is in the best shape, the LDP was only able to capture a single seat. The inability to gain new supporters and a lower degree of loyalty among established backers clearly

indicate that support for the LDP is flagging.

The boost that New Komeito supporters provide the LDP can be characterized as the last resort of the LDP to deter a catastrophic disaster. Exit polls paint this picture vividly, with 60% of New Komeito voters casting their ballots for LDP candidates in the 44 electoral districts where New Komeito did not field their own party candidates. (16% of New Komeito supporters voted for DPJ candidates.) In other words, the LDP gained almost the same percentage of votes among New Komeito supporters as of its own party voters. It is also widely recognized that the party was only able to survive this challenge in the general election last year thanks to the New Komeito supporters who voted for LDP candidates. In forming its coalition bloc, the two parties came to an understanding that LDP supporters would vote for New Komeito candidates for proportional representation seats at the national level. The election results make clear, however, that only 5% of the LDP support base did in fact cast their ballots for New Komeito candidates in the proportional representation election, while 20% of the LDP base voted for the DPJ. These rates of support are a strong indication that the LDP support base feels a stronger affinity for the DPJ than the New Komeito party.

The relationship between the LDP and New Komeito is multifaceted and complex. The LDP has become worried that, without the support of the New Komeito base, it cannot survive a head-to-head battle with the DPJ, and party strategy no longer contemplates a campaign that does not take the support of New Komeito into consideration. The LDP's growing reliance on New Komeito has made it increasingly impossible to form a ruling coalition without certain concessions to New Komeito. The closer the LDP moves toward New Komeito, the weaker the loyalty of its own traditional support base becomes. New Komeito is the Buddhist-backed political party which may be rejected by some voters, and undisguised dependence on this party's support leaves the LDP vulnerable to splintering among

Table 1 Number of Elected Members by Parties

	Elected members	Over-term seats	Prefectural constituencies	Proportional representation	Present members	Former members	New members	Female	After election	Before election
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	49	50	34	15	26	0	23	3	115	116
Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)	50	38	31	19	23	0	27	7	82	70
New Komeito	11	10	3	8	5	0	6	3	24	23
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	4	15	0	4	3	0	1	0	9	20
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	1	5	5
GREENS JAPAN	0	1	-	0	0	0	0	9	0	1
Minority Parties	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Independents	5	4	5	-	0	0	5	1	7	8
Total	121	124	73	48	59	0	62	15	242	245
		Vacancies 2								Vacancies 2

The total number of re-elected seats was 121 due to a reduction of five seats. The chairperson is independent, but originally belonged to the LDP. The total number of seats before the election and the total of over-term seats included four for the club of Independents which had no candidates. Excluding additional nominated candidates

Source: *Asahi Shimbun* (12 July, 2004)

Table 2 The Votes and the Voting-Rate by Parties

	Prefectural constituencies	Voting-rate	2001	Proportional representation	Voting-rate	2001
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	19,687,954	35.1	41.0	16,797,687	30.0	38.6
Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)	21,931,984	39.1	18.5	21,137,458	37.8	16.4
New Komeito	2,161,764	3.9	6.4	8,621,265	15.4	15.0
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	5,520,141	9.8	9.9	4,362,574	7.8	7.8
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	984,338	1.8	3.4	2,990,665	5.3	6.6
GREENS JAPAN	—	—	—	903,775	1.6	—
Minority Parties	126,162	0.2	2.5	1,118,360	2.0	2.5
Independents	5,696,505	10.2	10.4			
Total	56,108,848			55,931,787		

Excluding additional nominated candidates

Source: *Asahi Shimbun* (12 July, 2004)

the rest of its support base. For its part, New Komeito would gain no political advantage from helping an LDP which is so weak that it can no longer maintain its hold on power. As they set their sights on the next general election, increasingly sophisticated and delicate psychological tactics will inevitably come into play between the LDP and New Komeito.

■ Dwindling Public Support

The two ruling parties have not yet called for Koizumi to take responsibility for the party's poor showing or resign his post. The long-established factional LDP infighting is no longer evident, with no suitable candidate waiting to take the reins from the prime minister and no plans to find one in place as yet, the party has been forced to consolidate its forces into a united front concerning their political future. The future of the LDP-New Komeito coalition therefore depends largely on the amount of support which the Koizumi cabinet is able to maintain. However, the "Koizumi magic" that kept high support for the administration is already beginning to lose its shine, with post-election polls showing support falling to 39% and disapproval rising to 50% for the first time since Koizumi took office. Though an

approval rating hovering around 30% has conventionally indicated a political crisis, the fact that this is the first time since 1955 that the LDP has lost its edge as the political party with the greatest amount of support, as the DPJ squeaked by with a marginal lead (*Asahi Shimbun*, July 14, 2004), adds another dimension to the political situation. LDP-led governments have thus far been able to prop up the lack of support for the administration itself with the strong support the party enjoyed, but we may now be seeing a shift in the underlying political structure that has been in place in Japan for more than 50 years. As the parties' support bases undergo structural change, the one party-pre-dominant system in Japan is dying and a system of two major political parties is emerging as a reality. Riding this tide, the DPJ has begun to exude confidence in declaring that replacing the current administration in the next general elections is its primary goal. Depending on the future successes or failures of the Koizumi cabinet, this turn of events may come about even more rapidly. **JS**

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