

The End of Faction-Based Politics and the Aftermath

By Sasaki Takeshi

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



Tanaka Kakuei making a speech at a meeting of his faction

IN days past factional politics was the sine qua non of Japanese politics. Factions still exist within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but their powers are rapidly diminishing. In the 1980s and 1990s, the former Tanaka faction was in control of not only the LDP but of Japanese politics as a whole, but the Hashimoto faction which succeeded it is now confronting a severe crisis. The faction's leader, former prime minister Hashimoto Ryutaro, was recently forced to resign over a political funding scandal, and a successor has not yet been chosen. This is not unrelated to the fact that each time an election is held, the members of the faction decrease in number, leading to increased anxiety over the political future of the faction. There are factions beside the Hashimoto group, but Hashimoto's is the one which maintains the most distinctive characteristics of a faction, and its decline is an indication of the decline of a kind of political control that once wielded authority and power in Japan. The old regime which the Koizumi administration criticized for being anti-reform now exerts almost no centripetal political force.

The essential qualities of Japanese-style factional politics

The basic nature of factional politics is generally thought to be a certain opacity within which there rules a kind of don. The former Tanaka faction reorganized its political ground by means of extending lengthwise and breadthwise a network of interest politics. This became known as “*ietsu no sankakukei*” (the iron triangle) of politics, bureaucracy and industry.

This network system was closely linked to the characteristics of postwar Japanese politics that interest group politics became innate, and shouldered the mediating function that tied sustained economic growth with guaranteed employment and the distribution of wealth. This triangle was not simply boss-rule, but rather gave meticulous consideration to virtually each and every interest, so it was able to constantly regenerate a support base with popular appeal. In common terms, it was the LDP, which made this possible. A dozen or so years ago, a political scientist referred to the LDP as a “super catch-all party,” and it was the former Tanaka faction which grasped the political skills to make it work.

As this “iron triangle” attempted to subsume any and all interests, it was quasi-social democratic in nature, and because it formed an alliance with the bureaucracy to protect industry, it was not in the least favorable toward the market. That their strongest political base lay in the economically inferior, or in other words poor international competitiveness, area, explains why this was the case. In this sense, the factional politics embodied the political compromise that can be seen throughout the developed nations of the postwar period and it was dependent historically on the premise that the government bureaucracy could control the economic life of its citizens. The government appeared as a guardian of the various interests, and was viewed as an entity that bestowed benefits in a generous way. The dependence upon the bureaucracy for the distributing process of those benefits is clear, hence the political solidarity between the two sides became possible. At the same time, this government became segmented according to the structure of the bureaucracy, and it became inevitable to consider highly separated individual interests.

Dissolution of the 20th century system and the Koizumi administration

What has happened since the beginning of the 1990s is that as a result of the collapse of the old Japanese economic system, the myth that the government can control the economic life of its citizens has also collapsed. The chain of events which started from Japan-U.S. economic friction, the collapse of the bubble economy to the crisis of the financial system over the accumulation of bad loans destroyed the very premises which the special-interest politics of the old Tanaka faction had taken for granted. The Obuchi administration made desperate efforts to resurrect that system but was unable to stem the tide of history.

The Koizumi administration was born

amidst the unpopularity and failure of long-standing regimented interest politics. With this in mind, it is extremely interesting that Koizumi has frequently compared himself with Margaret Thatcher. In terms of political background, Koizumi belongs to the lineage that opposed the Tanaka and Hashimoto factions. He pursued the strategy of using the political capital of opposition to old-style faction-based politics in actively gathering support. He has frequently called for the privatization of current government functions, and by promoting an orientation toward markets, he has attempted to further weaken the foundations of the older special-interest politics. His strong political persistence in reforming the Japan Highway Public Corporation and in privatizing Japan Post are manifestations of his attack on the last strongholds of political power under the former Tanaka faction. At the same time, the Koizumi administration has consciously made substantial reductions in public works, the fountainhead of political influence for the former Tanaka faction. As a result, the construction industry, once a vote-gathering machine for the LDP, has lost its political clout.

During the past year or so, the dissatisfaction and criticism from the loyal LDP supporters against the Koizumi government has been quite severe in areas outside the major metropolises. The previous special-interest politics mechanism has collapsed, and they have been confronted with a certain governmental coolness regarding their economic interests and with a reformist government which shows no concern for their destiny. The financial system reforms brought by the Minister of State Takenaka Heizo have meant that these LDP supporters have found their lifelines severed. Their dissatisfaction and criticism bordered on resentment, and in due time it turned to resignation and indifference. The poor performance of the LDP in agricultural areas in the July elections for the Upper House and the apathy toward the elections shown by LDP support groups are the political consequence of this way of thinking. The former Tanaka faction

(Hashimoto faction) was particularly hard hit. Among the slogans that made the Prime Minister Koizumi popular was his promise to “splinter the LDP,” and the decline of the former Tanaka faction in a sense made this proclamation a reality.

In this respect, the Koizumi administration has constructed government policies on the basis of a negative logic. As long as things which ought to be negated remain persistent, this stance is capable of gathering votes and contributing to keeping the administration afloat. However, the biggest dilemma for this type of politics appears when the target to be negated actually becomes weak – the political drama loses its impact. The politics of negation embraces the dilemma that as it succeeds, its reason for existing is undermined. This is precisely what the Koizumi administration is confronted with now. The public feels that this old drama of the political legacy within the LDP has in reality already come to a conclusion.

■ What are the issues?

The question then arises as to what should be done next. It is quite clear that there can be no return to the old LDP and its factional politics. In this respect, there is little difference between the Koizumi administration and the Democratic Party of Japan. The old cozy relationship between politicians, bureaucrats and industrialists is a thing of the past, but this does not mean the government has no role to play, or that politics is unnecessary. It is clear that the responsibility of politics in the practice of administration is even greater than before, and the establishment and implementation of a system of government policies that transcend bureaucratic sectionalism is plainly evident. Government can no longer be omnipotent regarding the economic lives of its citizens, but some people believe that through a redefining of the role of government it is essential to construct a new understanding between government and citizenry. What is needed is not a return to the politics and administration of the 20th century but of the 21st century.

Within those parameters, expectations have come forth for a discussion that is not just rhetoric but based in real terms, and for a government that will steadily come to grips with the issues.

With the rapid aging of its population imminent, the reform of Japan's social welfare system is an urgent agenda. It is essential to reexamine the presuppositions which took rapid economic growth for granted, and in particular, it will not be possible to avoid a thorough debate over the burden that the people will be called upon to bear. In the July elections there were a large number of points at issue. In addition to the largest one – that of the burden to be shouldered in reforming the pension system – there were issues such as the “hollowing out” of various government functions. However, what was not achieved was a hammering out of what a 21st century government should be. The Koizumi administration did not produce even an inkling of an intention to turn this into a real issue, but merely fell into repeating its stopgap measures. In Japan, before even getting into the relative size of the burden to be borne, there is still not an adequate environment for constructive policy debate, and the leniency of political control over the bureaucracy and lack of confidence in the bureaucracy is widespread. Perhaps due to fears of criticism of the old cozy structures, one frequently notices a tendency in government to hesitate in positively defining the government's roles. The government even appears to be at times floating along without providing political legitimation for its acts. This is an extremely alarming situation.

Another related issue is whether Japan can develop a form of politics that is different from the old factional politics. The period of criticizing faction-based politics is almost at an end, but until a new form of politics can be found to take its place, the specter of politics through factions will continue to hover around us. **JS**

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