

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

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Policy Studies

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International Affairs

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Peace and Security

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No.103. 2 November 2010

DON'T THINK TWICE ABOUT JAPANESE POLITICS. IT'S ALL RIGHT.

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Japanese politics in recent years has often been described with such adjectives as volatile, confused, and unpredictable. Surely, prime ministers resign frequently. True, public opinion seems to shift radically from one election to another and, yes, the tendency persists toward “a divided Diet” in which the composition of the majority differs between the two houses of the bicameral parliament. Despite appearances, though, it would be wrong to regard today’s Japan as an unstable democracy or a country that faces some crisis in governance.

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None of the above represents a phenomenon that deviates from standard democratic practices or that challenges the legitimacy and integrity of the governing institutions. If anything, those symptoms point to the maturity, not the precariousness, of Japan's democratic polity.

The recent political trends in Japan must be viewed and appreciated from an appropriate long-term perspective. Consider, in particular, what Japanese politics has gone through over the last two decades. In 1993, in the aftermath of a series of large-scale scandals that involved high profile incumbents, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was forced out of power after 38 years of continuous rule. The non-LDP coalition government then carried out a comprehensive reform of the electoral system used for the House of Representatives, which changed the fundamental "rules of the game" for Japanese politics. The non-LDP camp, however, was unable to turn itself into a coherent parliamentary force, a situation of which the LDP took advantage to explore various coalition opportunities with different partners. Because both the partisan landscape and government composition were in constant flux, many Japanese voters abstained from voting in the 1990s, as they waited for a clear alignment to emerge. The dust settled eventually. The mechanics of the new electoral system clearly benefit larger parties by assigning more weight to single-member district contests than to regionally-divided proportional representation competition. As a consequence, for the first time in Japan's postwar history, a viable two-party system has finally begun to take shape in the 2000s. In this context, the ascendance of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) should be understood as an episode marking the *conclusion* of a long turbulent era of Japanese politics.


For myopic observers, the dramatic transition of power in 2009 from the LDP to the DPJ may appear to be a watershed event that materialized the two-party system in Japan. The reverse is the truth, however, as is evident from the electoral records. Not only in the general election in 2009 but also in the two preceding elections in 2003 and 2005, the LDP and DPJ together consistently won more than 85% of total Lower House seats (86.3% in 2003, 85.2% in 2005, and 89.0% in 2009), leaving little room for any other parties deemed rivals. In

other words, it was not the DPJ's smashing victory in 2009 that caused the emergence of the two-party system in Japan. The DPJ's success was rather an effect of the system that had already existed for some time.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that none of those allegations made about volatile, confused and unpredictable politics in Japan is worthy of being taken seriously. For example, the fact that the LDP leaders (and thus prime ministers) changed so frequently in the last few years of the LDP's rule is hardly surprising, given that this party had to adjust to the new political reality of the two-party system. No doubt the situation surrounding the LDP in those years was extremely tense as it faced an ever-vibrant rival party ready to pounce and take office at any chance given. If it had not been for the pressure originating from the competitive two-party system, the tenures of these LDP leaders might not have been cut so short. A similar pressure, of course, has affected the DPJ as well. After the historic election of 2009, Japanese voters did not seem particularly willing to prolong their "honeymoon" with Yukio Hatoyama, the first DPJ prime minister. As his approval rating plummeted, Hatoyama was in fact forced to resign after less than a year in office largely because of his mishandling of the controversial issue of US base transfers in Okinawa. Again, if it had not been a two-party system under which voters could always ditch the incumbent and vote for the alternative, the margin of error allowed Hatoyama might have been much larger. In any case, the seeming tenuousness of recent Japanese prime ministers is not an indication of structural problems with Japan's governance, as suggested by some pundits. It simply indicates that the two major parties in Japan, the LDP and DPJ, are now engaged in a fierce competition, and that Japanese voters are exercising their political clout shrewdly and effectively, just as political parties and voters in any mature democracy would.

In the same vein, the pejorative comments often made with regard to the huge electoral swing and the "divided Diet" in Japan of late are also off the mark. It is true that the LDP won a landslide victory in the 2005 general election, that the DPJ was enormously successful in the 2009 general election, and that the LDP made a handsome comeback in the most recent Upper House election in

2010. These aggregate results alone, however, do not constitute any evidence that the behavior of Japanese voters is particularly erratic or confused. It is widely known that individual voters in many well-established democracies, including the United States and Canada, often engage in acts of “balancing” voting and, as a result, different branches of government and/or different houses of the bicameral parliament feature different majorities. The intention behind such voting is straightforward in that those voters do not want one party to effectively be a dictator provided with a *carte blanche* mandate. There is nothing that makes us doubt that Japanese voters are as mature as those elsewhere in engaging in such balancing behavior. Especially given that they have never experienced a viable two-party system before and that they thus have every reason to be cautious, the current “divided Diet” may be exactly what Japanese voters truly desire.

“It ain’t no use to sit and wonder why, babe” as Bob Dylan once sang. Japan’s democracy works. It is as simple as that. 

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