

## JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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**Will Japanese Politics Change at Last?**

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We may witness a historic turning point in Japanese politics this year. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has enjoyed majority rule since 1955 with the exception of one brief interlude in 1993 to 1994, may be removed from power. In the mid-1990s, a group of politicians began to argue that the LDP's monopoly had produced rigidity in policymaking that prevented Japan from adapting to new challenges such as globalization. In response, these critics promoted electoral reform aimed at a two-party system that would revitalize the policy debate. Their efforts have produced mixed results, but today, with the LDP weakened by its defeat in the Upper House election last July, and the public voicing its frustration over recent scandals and a weak economy, opposition leaders may at long last succeed in unseating the LDP.

**The Slow Impact of Electoral Reform**

In the 1990s, Ichiro Ozawa, who currently heads the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and other reformers led a movement aimed at fundamentally restructuring Japanese politics. This resulted in the electoral reforms of 1994 that altered the voting system for the powerful Lower House of the Diet. The traditional multimember districts, which were criticized by reformers as having caused fragmentation among opposition groups, were replaced with a combination of plurality voting in single-member districts and regional proportional representation lists. At first, the reforms brought about only disappointing results. Opposition parties tried to join hands to create a major party that could compete head-on with the LDP but failed due to mutual distrust. By contrast, the LDP defended its position by taking full advantage of traditional ties with organized interests and the professional bureaucracy. Only during Junichiro Koizumi's tenure from 2001 to 2006 did the DPJ start to meet its potential as a genuine contender against the LDP. While Koizumi used his telegenic personality to sell his agenda to the public, DPJ members worked quietly behind the scenes to develop organizations and expand networks at both national and local levels. Most notably, the DPJ actively cultivated support among urban voters who felt ill served by traditional LDP policies, which catered more to the needs of rural constituents.

**The July 2007 Upper House Election**

The DPJ took a step forward in the Upper House election last July with a landslide victory over the LDP. The LDP still maintained a majority in the Lower House and therefore did not have to relinquish power because the Japanese Constitution grants the Lower House authority to select the prime minister. However, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resigned in September 2007 to take responsibility for the loss and was succeeded by Yasuo Fukuda. Meanwhile, the DPJ used its majority status in the Upper House to veto key government bills, such as the special law to extend Japan's support for Operation Enduring Freedom in Iraq, and demonstrated its ability to compete head-to-head with the LDP.

The election also provided other indicators favorable to the DPJ. First, it revealed that the LDP's traditional electoral "machine" is no longer functional. The party used to gather votes through pork barrel spending and by manipulating business contracts and social relationships with key constituents. However, the breakdown of traditional communal ties and changes in business practices, which were caused by such factors as generational change, the vanishing of rural hamlets, and the decrease of local merchants and industrialists, now leave the Japanese public more likely to make voting decisions by evaluating political parties' policy platforms. Second, the election also showed that the LDP has lost support in rural districts that have been so critical to electoral

success. The market-oriented reforms initiated by Koizumi inflicted pain on rural economies and caused a backlash against the LDP among rural voters.

## A Much-Anticipated Lower House Election

A divided parliament has frustrated Prime Minister Fukuda's policy agenda, and he is under pressure to call a snap election in the Lower House and let the public break the deadlock. He will likely do so within the year, and the DPJ could gain power if it secures a majority in that chamber. The results are difficult to predict, and many commentators say that a DPJ victory will still be unlikely because it will have to double its seats to overtake the LDP. Nonetheless, public opinion polls reveal that pro-DPJ sentiment among the Japanese people is increasing steadily. For example, a *Mainichi News* poll conducted in December 2007 found that 46 percent preferred a DPJ victory in the next Lower House election while only 33 percent favored the LDP.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Fukuda has failed to connect with the Japanese people; his approval rating is only 33 percent according to another *Mainichi* poll published last month.<sup>2</sup> Fukuda hasn't clarified his policy priorities, and other factors such as his age (71) and his decision to appoint party executives based on seniority create the impression that the "old LDP," literally and figuratively, is back despite Koizumi's previous efforts to destroy the party's traditional approach to governance. Finally, lingering scandals such as the government's failure to account for millions of public pension records could create a favorable environment for the DPJ in the next election.

## Realignment Is Possible

Even if the DPJ succeeds in ousting the LDP from power, it will accomplish only half of the original reform agenda. Above all, the biggest problem facing the DPJ and the LDP is that a diversity of opinions within both parties renders their respective policy agendas highly ambiguous. The vision of a "policy-centered competition between two big parties," which motivated the 1994 reforms, will never truly be realized. It may very well be that only a major reshuffling of both parties will result in a comprehensive policy agenda. In fact, some speculate that Ozawa's ultimate plan is to launch a new party by drawing sympathetic parliamentarians from both the LDP and DPJ. Ozawa's failed attempt at forming a grand coalition with the LDP in November 2007 only reinforces this speculation.

Realignment is very risky in that it could create a power vacuum at the center of Japanese politics and decelerate policymaking considerably. Further, the professional bureaucracy has enjoyed great power as a pillar of the postwar Japanese political system and will not give in easily. Many reformers believe that the strength of unelected bureaucrats is a major obstacle, and the reforms undertaken thus far have left bureaucratic power largely intact. Many observers of Japanese politics have long been disappointed by the failure of political leaders to reshape the system, but this could be a year that produces visible changes.

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<sup>1</sup> "Mainichi Shimbun Yoron Chosa: Jiki Shuinsen, Minshu Shori wo 46%, Jimin Gyakufu 33%" *Mainichi Shimbun* (January 6, 2008): 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Mainichi Shimbun Yoron Chosa: Shuin Saikaketsu, Saikoshi Hantai 51% Tayo ni Keikaikan," *Mainichi Shimbun* (January 21, 2008): 1.