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The Backwardness of Japanese Political Journalism: Nonestablished Ethics and Unwritten Rules

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Last fall there was an unexpected political development in Japan that revealed as much about the state of political journalism as domestic politics. Opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa, president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), suddenly met with Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda to discuss a "grand coalition" with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).[1] The idea was quickly rejected within the DPJ, but it was rumored that Tsuneo Watanabe, chairman and editor in chief of *Yomiuri Shimbun*, mediated between the two leaders. Watanabe is considered one of Japan's most distinguished political writers with more than a half century of experience, but his intervention was an obvious breach of journalism ethics given his failure to remain unbiased.[2] Cozy relationships between journalists and politicians, while not unique to Japan, have a long history, and the public has come to accept such practices as routine. However, a failure to reform journalism ethics and standards could have a negative impact on Japan's global reputation. According to the "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007" published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a media watchdog nongovernmental organization (NGO), Japan ranks 37th behind countries like Macedonia (36), Bosnia-Herzegovina (34), Trinidad and Tobago (19), and Latvia (12).[3] This low ranking speaks to the underdevelopment of journalism in Japan and is at odds with Japan's supposed role as a democratic leader.

"Kisha Club" System

The RSF index cites the prevalence of the kisha club system as the main reason for Japan's low ranking. Reporters who are assigned to cover a particular politician or official exclusively are called *ban-kisha* (watchdog) reporters and are assigned to a corresponding kisha club. Ban-kisha in the kisha clubs are granted exclusive access to informal, typically off-the-record meetings with the politicians they cover. Reporters usually are not allowed to take notes at these meetings, yet the gatherings are indispensable for information on the outlook of Diet proceedings or political developments. The kisha club system allows powerful politicians to manipulate relationships with reporters and make it difficult for the ban-kisha to write critical articles. Although the ban-kisha rotate every year or two, they tend to remain "loyal" to the politicians they have covered over the course of their careers. In a way, politicians make an investment in their ban-kisha, some of whom become future editors of major media outlets.

The "1955 System"

The existence of kisha clubs alone does not explain why politicians attempt to build close ties with ban-kisha. With three exceptions, the LDP has controlled the government since 1955. Under this so-called 1955 system, leadership battles more often occur among factions within the LDP than among political parties, and the factions essentially function as mini-political parties. Political debates therefore have a tendency to focus on leadership competition among the factions rather than on a discussion of fundamental policy reform. Media coverage of domestic politics has followed these lines, and all too often the media has been drawn into these power games. Journalists who succeed in establishing preferential ties with politicians occasionally start to develop political influence. A senior political writer for a major newspaper commented that some ambitious reporters "raise and educate" politicians with the hope that they will be promoted when one of their protégés becomes prime minister.[4] Watanabe claimed to have "raised and educated" Yasuhiro Nakasone, who became the prime minister in 1982. Watanabe later extended his involvement in politics as an outright player and "fixer" as the chairman and the editor in chief of *Yomiuri* and continued to write various inside stories on political decisionmaking.

Weak Concept of Journalism Ethics

Another possible explanation for the immaturity of Japanese journalism is that the concept of ethics has not been fully established. Few Japanese media outlets compile and disclose codes of conduct like the *New York Times* or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). On the contrary, Japanese media have encouraged reporters to take an active role in backroom political dealings in order to build and capitalize on their political contacts, occasionally to the extreme. For example, when Prime Minister Yoshihiro Mori was in a serious predicament in 2000 after he said, "Japan is a divine nation with the emperor at its center," someone in the kisha club at the prime minister's office tried to coach Mori on how to apologize.[5] A day before Mori held a press conference on May 25, 2000, a piece of paper was found in the kisha club with detailed advice on how he should form his explanation to dissuade the media from harsh criticism.[6]

In 2001, the public television network Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) was said to have altered the contents of a documentary program on the issue of sex crimes during World War II because of excessive concerns among executives about maintaining relationships with powerful conservative politicians in the LDP, including former prime minister Shinzo Abe. This was regarded as an example of executives giving too much consideration to influential lawmakers.

Little Prospect for Reform

The culture of political news coverage has changed gradually since the late 1990s, especially after Junichiro Koizumi became prime minister in 2001. He was a political lone wolf with very few advisers in his inner circle, and political reporters had to adjust their practices to cover him. Koizumi preferred daily, public interviews with the press core over traditional backroom ties and excelled at dodging questions while using his personality to appeal directly to the public. His success at "tele-politics" led other politicians to prioritize close relationships with television networks rather than print reporters and place greater emphasis on public relations. The solidarity of LDP factions has also weakened in recent years, allowing someone like Koizumi to disregard traditional politicking and still remain in power. However, factional politics appears to have rebounded under his successors, Shinzo Abe and now Yasuo Fukuda. This leaves room for traditional politicians to continue to dominate the LDP gerontocracy, and it is likely that old-time journalists like Watanabe, whose age and experience exceed the majority of LDP leaders, will continue to command respect and exercise influence in politics. The unwritten rules governing relationships between politicians and reporters could well endure and prevent reform of journalism ethics and practice.

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[1] Watanabe virtually admitted that he acted as go-between in his speech at a fundraising party held by an influential LDP politician on December 5, 2007. "Seikai : Watanabe Tsuneo-shi, Tou-shu Kaidan, 'Izure Kaku'", *Mainichi Shimbun*, December 6, 2007, p.5

[2] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 12–13.

[3] Reporters Without Borders, "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007," http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article =24025.

[4] Author's interview with a senior political staff writer of major Japanese newspaper, on December 14, 2007. He spoke under the condition of anonymity.

[5] "Japanese PM Says Sorry," BBC News, May 17, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/752284.stm.

[6] "Mori Shusho Shakumei Kaiken 'Shinan-sho' Mondai, Kokumin heno Haishin Misugosenu," *Nishinippon Shimbun*, June 8, 2000, p.29.