

Report

The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ): Prospects of a Two-Party System in Japan

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The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came into power in 2009 with promises of bringing long-term change to the Japanese political system: giving the cabinet policy making power, changing the U.S.-Japan security relationship and moving away from massive infrastructure and public works spending. This was supposed to be a water-shed moment in post-war Japanese history. After three years of undelivered policy changes, the DPJ incurred heavy losses in the 2012 elections and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with Shinzo Abe as the premier, are back in power once again.

The 2009 elections brought an end to what became known as the 1955 system. The former Japanese Prime Minister engineered the merger of two conservative parties in response to the threat from a strong opposition from the political left. The merger reduced the opposition to an almost "permanent minority" and Japan became a '1.5 party system'¹.

This system was based on political stability, not plurality, and the LDP was in power between 1955 and 2009, barring an 11 month period in opposition, and even then they were the largest party in the Japanese parliament, the Diet.

Rise of the DPJ, Fall of the LDP

The DPJ was established in 1998 after a merger of various small political parties, along with a group of former Japan Socialist Party (JSP) members and reformist LDP defectors. Yukio Hatoyama and Naoto Kan had been the leaders of the party until 2004 when Kan was forced to resign following revelations of unpaid annuities. A crucial point in DPJ's history was gaining the influential power broker Ichiro Ozawa -a former chief secretary of the LDP- in 2003. Despite bumps along the way, the DPJ began to gain seats in the Upper and Lower Houses of the Japanese parliament and consistently became the strongest opposition party in Japan.

The LDP, on the other hand, had been a political party in trouble since the 1990s since the collapse of the asset-inflated bubble economy. After leading Japan to years of double-digit growth, the LDP was now presiding over a lengthy period of economic stagnation, low growth rates and rapidly aging population. It was only Junichiro Koizumi's political nous, his ability to connect with the electorate, and a weak opposition that the LDP was able to stay in power. His three successors-Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda and Taro Aso- failed to stem declining LDP support since Koizumi's resignation in 2006.

On the eve of the 2009 elections, Japan faced a host of problems: declining birth-rates, an ageing population, the collapse of the agricultural sector, economic stagnation, rising unemployment, large national debt and realignment of geo-political power dynamics with the rising power of China. Was the LDP able to reform sufficiently to deal with these problems?

DPJ Solution Proposals: Challenging the Status-Quo

One of the key pledges of the DPJ manifesto was to "end wasteful" spending on expensive public-works and infrastructure projects². Japanese national debt is enormously high (and mainly domestic) and *dokken kokka* is often considered the major contributing factor for it. Gavan McCormack describes the *doken kokka*, or 'construction state', as being a unique system by which the elite Japanese bureaucrats are able to "channel the population's life savings into a wide range of debt-encrusted public bodies" responsible for building dams, highways and other expensive projects³. The *doken kokka* is based on what is often referred to as the 'Iron Triangle': strong formal and informal relations between LDP politicians, elite bureaucrats and the *zaikai*, or the business elite. The crucial phenomenon that is fundamental to this institutional cooperation is *amakudari*, or 'descent from heaven', which, in the modern context, refers to ex-bureaucrats moving to senior leadership positions in businesses upon retirement, often

from the same sector they were once in charge of regulating⁴. *Amakudari* not only allows for expertise in terms of understanding of government regulations, but also establishes strong inter-personal relations between the ministry and the business.

The DPJ not only called for the abolition of *amakudari*, but also promised to rein in the bureaucracy by giving the cabinet powers to draft law and determine national policy. Gerald Curtis argues that the idea of Japanese political leadership is an oxymoron and describes the importance of the bureaucracy within the Iron Triangle⁵. In the Japanese political system, it is the elite bureaucrats who draft law and determine national policy, not the elected cabinet.

Hatoyama, the president of the DPJ, also promised to recalibrate the U.S.-Japan relationship and Japan's post-war security and foreign policy setup. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution states that Japan renounces war and the use of "force as a means of settling international dispute" and that Japan would not be allowed to maintain land, sea or air forces.⁶ In 1951 the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was signed to codify "U.S. commitment to defend Japan against external aggression, in exchange for the U.S. use of Japanese military bases for Japan's defence and the peace and security of the Far East."⁷ This meant that Japan was dependent on the U.S. for its security and took its lead when it came to foreign policy. Hatoyama's foreign policy vision was to have a strong East Asian community with Japan taking a crucial leadership role alongside China and South Korea. This would only be possible with Japan becoming a 'normal' country and reducing its dependence on the United States. As a part of this strategy, Hatoyama pledged to relocate the Futenma U.S. Marine base at least outside of Okinawa, if not the country. The base's presence in Okinawa has long been controversial on the island and faced severe unified Okinawan opposition, which made this pledge over relocation popular on the island.

An interesting and often overlooked aspect of the DPJ campaign was to appeal to the traditional LDP base, the rural and older voters. The former were enticed with ideas to reform sectors like pensions and health care for the elderly. The DPJ tried to appeal to rural voters with proposals like reinstating subsidies for farmers and funding rural revitalization⁸.

DPJ Victory

General elections in Japan are national elections in which every seat in the Lower House of the Diet are contested and can be called anytime within the 4 year period after the previous election. There are 480 seats in the Lower House which are contested in 2 types of elections: single member district (SMD) elections for 300 seats conducted by the first-past-the-post system and the proportional representation (PR) elections for 180 seats. This was the first election since the resignation of the popular LDP Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2006 and proved to be a disappointing one for the party.

Ozawa is widely considered to be the architect behind the 2009 general election victory in which Yukio Hatoyama became the Prime Minister of Japan with the DPJ winning 308, crushing the LDP which went from 296 seats before the elections to just 119. The DPJ was successful in breaking LDP dominance with the rural vote in an election that had the highest voter turnout, at just over 69%, since the 1958 election. This was the first time since its creation in 1955 that the LDP was not the largest party in the Diet. The DPJ formed a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the People's New Party (PNP) and ushered in 140 first-time members of parliament, lowering the average age in the Diet. The gender gap in the parliament improved steadily as well, with there being an increase in the number of women in parliament from 43 to 54 (still just 11.25%

overall in the Lower House)⁹. Unsurprisingly, the DPJ candidates made the bulk of that new figure with 43 of their 48 female candidates winning a seat.

Opinion polls conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper after the election indicated that while the Japanese public was optimistic about Hatoyama as Prime Minister and the DPJ's majority in the Lower House, the DPJ was not voted in because of its policies as much as wanting a change in administration¹⁰. The poll also showed how the respondents did not expect the Japanese political system to change and that 76% of them wanted the LDP to come back to challenge the DPJ in the next general election¹¹.

Decline of the DPJ

The early signs for the DPJ following through with its key election manifesto pledges were positive. The Transport Minister Seiji Maehara illustrated that the DPJ was serious about curbing wasteful spending on large public works projects with an announcement of the decision to end the Yanba dam project¹². The assertiveness in Japanese foreign policy was reflected in the decision to end the Marine Japan Self Defense Forces (MSDF) refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean as of January 2010, despite it being unpopular with the U.S. administration¹³. Arguably the most crucial decision Hatoyama took was to reign in the powerful Japanese bureaucracy, centred in the Kasumigaseki area in Tokyo. Hatoyama abolished the vice minister's meetings, the most senior level policy meeting in the bureaucracy, and instead empowered senior political figures at the ministry level. Despite Hatoyama's promise to relocate the Futenma military base outside Okinawa not being in the original DPJ manifesto, it was a crucial aspect of his vision for Japan. Hatoyama was less impressive when dealing with questions over whether he would pull through with his pledge and what credible alternative he would be able to find.

Despite the DPJ making a relatively positive start under Hatoyama, curbing bureaucratic power was proving difficult. Considered the policymaking body and the most powerful player within the 'Iron Triangle', the bureaucracy was going to be difficult to restrain, especially with 140 first-time lawmakers in the parliament. On the practical front, the DPJ needed the bureaucracy to help push through policies in its manifesto. By marginalizing this crucial institution the DPJ "threw policymaking process into chaos, as bureaucrats resisted and politicians struggled" to deal with delays and the increased workload¹⁴.

Factional politics and infighting have been a crucial aspect of research on the workings of the LDP, but the DPJ was not immune to internal conflict either. The DPJ is a patchwork party with cleavages based on ideology, former party identity, and allegiance to party leaders. Serious divisions in policy positions within the party range from tax reform to the U.S.-Japan alliance. Although factional identity for members is not static and the party can allow for "flexibility regarding policy and job allocation", the test of the cohesiveness came when the party was struggling to pass policy, hit by corruption scandals whilst under pressure from poor approval ratings¹⁵.

The divisions within the party were compounded by the indecision of Hatoyama over the Futenma base relocation pledge. The leftist coalition partner, the SDP, pulled out from the coalition as Hatoyama was unable to find a solution to the base relocation dilemma, under pressure from the United States, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Economic, Trade and Investment (MITI). Hatoyama was forced to resign as a result and a bitter leadership battle between Naoto Kan and Ichiro Ozawa followed. Naoto Kan won the party contest and while he improved the relationship with the bureaucracy and the U.S., the divisions within the party remained.

The March 11, 2011 Japan was hit by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Tohoku and the resulting tsunami left thousands dead and missing, thousands displaced. The resulting nuclear disaster on the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant is considered one of the worst in history. The Tohoku disaster further highlighted the inept leadership of the DPJ and its inability to combat its problems of infighting and working with the bureaucracy. Hit by low approval ratings, Naoto Kan was forced to resign in September 2011. To compound the DPJ's problems, Ozawa resigned along with 49 others to form a rival party in July 2012, and Kan's successor, Yoshihiko Noda, was unable to arrest the decline¹⁶.

In the December 2012 general elections the DPJ was trounced by the LDP, winning just 57 seats in the Lower House, and the LDP and Shinzo Abe came back to power winning 294. Does this signal the end of the prospect of a two-party system, with power alternating between the LDP and the DPJ?

Prospects of a Two-Party System and the Future of the DPJ

For the DPJ, the scale of the defeat, and the performance in power, is not something that should be underestimated. The DPJ had gone through years of building party infrastructure and legitimacy in the public eye. The 3 years in power will severely damage the likelihood of them coming into power again, with public trust in the party dented severely. Hatoyama and the DPJ came into power on the manifesto promising fundamental change, and the massive gap between expectation and reality was not surprising in the end. What was surprising, however, was the lack of internal cohesion and that the party unravelled as quickly as it did.

Despite the poor result it is important to note that the 2012 elections had the lowest post-war voter turnout, going down to 59.32% compared with around 69% in 2009¹⁷. The Japanese public were disappointed with the DPJ performance and wanted to vote them out of office, yet were not excited by the LDP either. Although recent polls show that the new cabinet's popularity has increased since the elections, Abe and the cabinet have a difficult task ahead especially when it comes to economic revival and Japan's nuclear policy¹⁸. Since the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear disaster, the majority of Japanese citizens want reduced reliance on nuclear energy, yet the Abe administration so far is non-committal on the issue¹⁹. It also remains to be seen whether Abe's economic recovery program focusing on public works and fiscal stimulus will work.

Even a poor performance by the LDP does not necessarily mean that the DPJ will be the party capitalising, however. Aurelia George Mulgan argues that the prospect of the two-party system in the short-term seems unlikely and there is a possibility that the "new main divide in Japanese politics could now fall between the centre-right (the LDP core) and the 'new' right led by JRP nationalists, such as Shintaro Ishihara and Toru Hashimoto, and the economic neo-liberals" of Your Party, with the left and centre-left parties splintered into various small groups²⁰. There is a chance in this bleak scenario that the DPJ form a coalition with smaller leftist parties, forcing them into more radical policy positions which would alienate the party from the majority of the electorate in the centre.

The future of the DPJ is difficult to predict in the current volatile environment of Japanese politics. Despite the heavy defeat in the 2012 elections, the DPJ is still the second largest party in Lower House. With former Prime Minister Hatoyama retired, and power broker Ozawa resigning and forming another party with 49 members of the party, the DPJ may have actually become more coherent and less factionalised. Central to the prospect of the DPJ's return to power is whether the party was able to build a significant core support during its rise to power. Mulgan argues that the elections, if anything, have

shown that the LDP is a more balanced party after these elections, winning convincingly in both rural and urban districts²¹.

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