

On structural developments, Koizumi reforms, and the collapse of LDP rule

Introduction

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This volume is a collection of papers presented at the *Todai Horiba* International Conference, titled “A Tectonic Shift? Structural developments, Koizumi reforms, and the collapse of LDP rule.” The conference was held at the University of Tokyo on August 2010 and came on the heels of a preparatory conference at Yale University five months earlier. In this introductory note, I will briefly introduce the purpose, the distinct perspective, and the current developments of our collaborative project. Since the papers speak for themselves, made accessible by the abstracts, I will refrain from a redundant summarizing of each paper.

The basic interest that sparked our collaborative project is nothing special. It is an intellectual and professional response to the chain of events that led to the extraordinary changing of political hands in the summer of 2009. The significance of this event cannot be exaggerated, and no serious student of Japanese politics can avoid asking what caused the political jolts of this magnitude to take place. Indeed, there are a number of early assessments of this historical incident in both Japanese and English. We all expect more to come, analyzing and debating this epoch-making event for some time. Our project is merely one such attempt.

However, we hope our particular attempt is significant enough to make a distinct impact on the study of Japanese and comparative politics. Our claim to originality lies in how we framed our research question: we asked, in confronting the two major structural constraints since the 1990s, why did the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments’ struggle prove futile? We identified the new electoral system and long-term economic stagnation as the two forces with which the LDP had to contend in devising its electoral strategies and policymaking. We examined how the LDP used its policymaking power to cope with economic downturns as a means to preserve its electoral advantage, and we examined why it proved to be self-defeating. By scrutinizing the factors that caused the transformation of Japan’s somewhat unique but deeply entrenched one-party dominance, we aspired to gain an empirical sense of how much change had taken place in Japanese politics since the heyday of LDP rule in the 1980s. In doing so, we aimed to grasp the nature of the acute dilemmas ruling parties are facing in a world of increased economic bleakness and political volatility.

Our account of the LDP governments' adjustment, or the failure thereof, in the face of structural developments can be summarized as the following: On the one hand, the electoral and campaign reforms of 1994, which introduced single member districts and state subsidization of party funds, facilitated the reorganization and amalgamation of the non-LDP parties, resulting in the emergence of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) as a viable alternative to the LDP. On the other hand, the cycles of public works spending, during recurring economic downturns, increased the dependence of LDP's rural constituency groups on stimulus spending, who were forced to face relative deprivation as the ballooning public debt made new fiscal stimuli stringent and fiscal reconstruction and structural reform urgent. Thus, the center of our investigation is the transformations at the district level, where the LDP's once formidable mode of voter mobilization started to hemorrhage, particularly in rural districts, creating an opening for the mostly urban DPJ to penetrate and expand.

Ironically, this development did not result in the expected consolidation of the DPJ's urban base nor the intensification of two party competition along the urban-rural cleavage. On the contrary, recent electoral analysis indicates that since the LDP's landslide in 2005, the two major parties have become relatively rootless in terms of local constituency organizations, putting both parties at the whim of an increasingly independent and judgmental electorate, resulting in large electoral swings. The reverse side of the parties' weakening ties with civil society at the district level is the enhanced power of party leaders, and the Prime Minister in particular. As such, the Japanese party system has become competitive but volatile, and its major parties weakly embedded socially but strongly controlled at the apex. We suspect governments in the near future will be compelled to make hard policy decisions in the face of hypercritical voters, causing frequent cabinet changes and volatile election results.

In fact, our findings do not contradict recent accounts that also point to the strengthened influence of floating voters, causing large electoral swings, made mostly by students of institutional electoral studies on the one hand, and the more visible role of the Prime Minister in policymaking, claimed by political economic analysis on the other. However, our investigation is the first to synthesize the two apparent claims made by contemporary observers of Japanese politics by showing how they can be bridged and integrated into a coherent explanation. Our account goes beyond existing ones by identifying the public policy causes of the decline in the LDP's traditional mode of organized voter mobilization. Granted that our findings crosscut two well established but rarely interacting fields of electoral institutional and political economic studies, it is easy to understand why our project necessitated the collaboration of specialists working in two different areas of political science. We think our exercise in crossbreeding has been rewarded.

Yet, in order to refine and further clarify the above argument, the paper authors of this volume are currently undertaking another revision of their papers in preparation for an edited volume. Although the published volume may be more coherent and focused, the benefits may

come at the cost of each paper losing their individuality as finished and self-contained articles. Such is the reason why we think it is desirable and appropriate to publish the papers in their original form as a conference proceedings volume.

Last but not least, any organizer of academic conferences knows that such events can only succeed with the help of a larger number of people. These people richly deserve our thanks. Among them are participants and discussants who attended one or both of the Yale and Tokyo University meetings, namely, Matthew Carlson (University of Vermont), Jennifer Holt Dwyer (Hunter College of the City University of New York), Shinju Fujihira (Harvard University), Yoshihisa Godo (Meiji Gakuin University), Mary Alice Haddad (Wesleyan University), Koichi Hamada (Yale University), Shigeo Hirano (Columbia University), Takeo Hoshi (University of California, San Diego), Masami Imai (Wesleyan University), Junko Kato (University of Tokyo), Sadafumi Kawato (University of Tokyo), Edward Lincoln (New York University), Patricia MacLachlan (University of Texas at Austin), Steve Reed (Chuo University), Masaki Taniguchi (University of Tokyo), Shinichi Tanioka (Director General, Economic Affairs Department, Toyooka City), Michael Thies (University of California, Los Angeles), H.E. Masaru Tsuji (Consulate General of Japan in Boston), Yu Uchiyama (University of Tokyo), Masahiro Yamada (Kwansei Gakuin University).

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