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Japan's General Election: A Political "Zugzwang"?²

1. An LDP red card election?

Japan's general election marked the tragic end of post-war dominance by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) achieved a lopsided victory.³ The DPJ won 308 seats and secured an absolutely stable majority without forging any alliances (See Tables 1 and 2). The LDP, in contrast, had a disastrous collapse, losing 181 seats; the LDP's defeat might fit a metaphor—*red card* (i.e., a soccer player is ordered not to play any longer at a game)—a harsh punishment by the referee (this time, the Japanese electorate) against the soccer player (the LDP) who caused commotion by breaching the code of behavior. In the eyes of the Japanese people, the DPJ does not deserve credit for its historic victory though it gained 193 seats (See the first two columns of Table 2). Instead, the results of the election are seen as a humiliating loss for the LDP that had already self-destructed as a result of lamentable political mismanagement under the last three prime ministers—Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda, and Taro Aso, all of whom had either a grandfather or father who had served as a prominent prime minister of post-war Japan.

Table 1. General Election (August 30, 2009): Key Numbers to Understand Lower House Majorities

Types of majority	Number of seats required	Comments
Unanimity	480	
Two-thirds	320	Make all bills pass by a majority of two-thirds of the lower house even in case of conflict between the upper and lower houses
Absolutely stable majority	269	Occupy a majority of all standing committees with chairmanship at each standing committee
Stable majority	252	Occupy half of seats of all standing committees with chairmanship at each standing committee
Majority	241	

Table 2. General Election (August 30, 2009): Election Results

	Total seats			Single-seat constituencies		Proportional representation blocs	
All parties	480			300		180	
Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)	308	115	(113)	221	(52)	87	(61)
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	119	300	(296)	64	(219)	55	(77)
New Komeito	21	31	(31)	0	(8)	21	(23)
Japan Communist Party (JCP)	9	9	(9)	0	(0)	9	(9)
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	7	7	(7)	3	(1)	4	(6)
Your Party (YP)	5	4	-	2	-	3	-
People's New Party (PNP)	3	4	(4)	3	(2)	0	(2)
Other parties incl. independents	8	10	(20)	7	(18)	1	(2)

Notes: The figures in the second column of the total seats are those just prior to the election while the figures in the parentheses are those at the previous election; The Lower House has 480 seats—300 being elected from single-seat constituencies, while the remaining 180 elected from 11 electoral blocs under proportional party representation.

Prior to the election, the Aso cabinet, without its awareness of an imminent defeat, plunged itself into a state of

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² *Zugzwang*: In chess terms, a situation in which a player is forced to make an undesirable or disadvantageous move.

³ The LDP's reign was briefly interrupted between 1993 and 1994.

political quagmire. A series of cabinet member resignations—the minister of land, infrastructure, transport and tourism (Nariaki Nakayama), the finance minister (Shoichi Nakagawa), and the minister for internal affairs and communications (Kunio Hatoyama), coupled with a pile of twisting remarks made by the gaffe-prone prime minister, revealed an appalling lack of leadership as well as the cabinet’s mismanagement. Public approval ratings thus suffered a six-month consecutive decline since September 2008 when the cabinet started with a low approval rating of 49.5%.

Table 3. Opinion Poll: Aso Cabinet Approval Ratings (%)

Sept., 08	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan., 09	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.
49.5	45.9	40.5	20.9	20.4	19.7	17.4	24.3	28.7	29.5	19.7

Source: *The Yomiuri Shimbun* (newspaper with the largest circulation in Japan)

2. What Lies Ahead? The DPJ’s Three Behavioral Characteristics

Japan, now led by Yukio Hatoyama and Ichiro Ozawa, is about to experience a mixed blessing. The DPJ has undoubtedly secured a public mandate for both houses of the parliament (the Diet). Accordingly, the DPJ is relieved, to a larger extent, from the cumbersome logrolling required to pass legislation. The DPJ can therefore use its time and energy to develop better policies. Even so, some political observers note the DPJ should not be met without some skepticism. Both of Hatoyama and Ozawa are former LDP members and used to belong to the party’s Tanaka faction known as the epitome of “money power politics.” Furthermore, Hatoyama, like Taro Aso, was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He is a grandson of LDP prime minister Ichiro Hatoyama. For this reason, there might be a risk of history repeating itself, or *da capo* (in music terms, repeating from the beginning) of which many Japanese are cognizant.

The DPJ publishes a list entitled “Members of the Next Cabinet (Shadow Cabinet)” on its website. While it does not necessarily become the list of soon-to-be-appointed cabinet members (See Table 4), a glimpse at it provides us with the impression of a group that is generally “(1) left-leaning, (2) domestically oriented, and (3) inexperienced.”

“Left-leaning”: Some key figures—especially, Hachiro—originally belonged to the leftist Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and have special attachment to such policies as unarmed neutrality, abandonment of the Japan-U.S. alliance, and closer relations with Asian states. Seeking resolutely an electoral victory, the DPJ, spearheaded by the election-savvy Ozawa, devised an overtly leftist compromise within the party by openly arguing a reexamination of Japan-U.S. relations. The sudden departure of the DPJ’s shadow defense minister (Keiichiro Asano) from the party just before the election was attributed by some observers to an unfathomably deep and unbridgeably wide chasm between the pro-U.S. Asano and other DPJ members. Setting aside the validity of this speculation, some experts argue that the DPJ’s crushing victory downplays electoral exigencies, leading to a right-leaning reversion. Therefore doctrinal differences in foreign policy within the DPJ may reemerge, being accompanied by harsh infighting.

“Domestically oriented”: The DPJ’s strong electoral support comes from labor unions—Japan Teachers Union (Azuma Koshiishi), Toyota (Masayuki Naoshima), and Kansai Electric Power (Masaaki Fujiwara), to name a few. The DPJ’s views basically dovetail with those of labor unions, which are inclined to protect employment against free market principles both at home and, especially, abroad. They also maintain focus on domestic issues, such as reforms in the

areas of the bureaucrat-dominated policy-making processes, pension funds, medical services, and education. Accordingly, there may be a risk of reemerging protectionism and reduced international peacekeeping efforts.

Table 4. Key Shadow Cabinet Members of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) as of August 30.

Names of Key Figures	Comments
Prime Minister Yukio HATOYAMA (鳩山由紀夫)	Former LDP member, deputy chief cabinet secretary (1993), grandson of prime minister Ichiro Hatoyama (1883~1959; Prime minister: 1954~1956); (born Feb. 11, 1947)
Vice Prime Minister Ichiro OZAWA (小沢一郎)	Former LDP member, minister for home affairs (1985~1986); (born May 24, 1942)
Vice Prime Minister Naoto KAN (菅直人)	Former member of Social Democratic Federation, minister of health (1996); (born Oct. 10, 1946)
Vice Prime Minister Azuma KOSHIISHI (興石東)	Socialist-leaning politician backed by Japan Teachers Union; (born May 14, 1936)
State Minister Katsuya OKADA (岡田克也)	Former METI (Economic Ministry) bureaucrat; (born Jul. 14, 1953)
Foreign Minister Yoshio HACHIRO (鉢呂吉雄)	Former Socialist Party member; (born Jan. 25, 1948)
Vice Foreign Minister Koichi TAKEMASA (武正公一)	Graduate of the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management; (born Mar. 23, 1961)
Vice Foreign Minister Shinkun HAKU (白眞勲)	Acquired Japanese citizenship (2003); (Korean name: 백진훈), son of a Korean father and a Japanese mother; (born Dec. 8, 1958)
Defense Minister Masayuki NAOSHIMA (直嶋正行)	Former key member of Toyota Motor's labor union; (born Oct. 23, 1943)
Vice Defense Minister Tsuyoshi YAMAGUCHI (山口壯)	Former diplomat, graduate of SAIS; (born Oct. 3, 1954)
Vice Defense Minister Yasuo ICHIKAWA (一川保夫)	Former LDP member and a bureaucrat of the Ministry of Agriculture; (born Feb. 6, 1942)
Economic Minister Teruhiko MASHIKO (増子輝彦)	Formerly served as secretary to an LDP politician; (born Oct. 8, 1947)
Vice Economic Minister Atsushi OSHIMA (大島敦)	Formerly worked at Nippon Kokan (NKK, now JFE Engineering Corporation); (born Dec. 21, 1956)
Vice Economic Minister Masashi FUJIWARA (藤原正司)	Formerly key member of Kansai Electric Power's labor union; (born Apr. 1, 1946)
Finance Minister Masaharu NAKAGAWA (中川正春)	Graduate of Georgetown University; (born Jun. 10, 1950)
Vice Finance Minister Yorihisa MATSUNO (松野頼久)	Grandson of prominent LDP politician Tsuruhei Matsuno (1883~1962); (born Sept. 19, 1960)
Vice Finance Minister Kohei OTUKA (大塚耕平)	Formerly worked at the Bank of Japan; (born Oct. 5, 1959)
(Other key member: former DPJ leader) Seiji MAEHARA (前原誠司)	Graduate of the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management; (born Apr. 30, 1962)
(Other key member: Defense expert) Takeaki MATSUMOTO (松本剛明)	Former MOF (Finance Ministry) bureaucrat, Born into the family whose blood line can be traced back to Japan's first prime minister Hirofumi Ito; (born Apr. 25, 1959)
(Key supporter: Economist) Eisuke SAKAKIBARA (榊原英資)	Former vice minister of finance for international affairs, Professor at Waseda University; (born Mar. 27, 1937)
(Key supporter: Commentator) Jitsuro TERASHIMA (寺島実郎)	Chairman of Mitsui Global Strategic Studies Institute, President of Tama University; (born Aug. 11, 1947)

Source: Author based on information including the website of the DPJ.

“Inexperienced”: With the exception of a few senior members (Hatoyama, Ozawa and Kan), there are, for better or for worse, neophytes that have never experienced the harsh realities of political interplay vis-à-vis the bureaucracy and foreign countries. However cogent their arguments might be, they have been, in a sense, those made by Monday morning quarterbacks. In the political platform and other statements, logical weaknesses and inconsistencies can be easily found. Being a novice, however, is not necessarily bad at all. Historically political entrepreneurs have been criticized and ridiculed as novices. Furthermore, the DPJ's younger generation is extremely talented and enthusiastically reform-minded. Nonetheless, it should be noted that novice LDP prime ministers were recently blamed

for behaving based on flashes of intuition, and for causing policy gyrations.

Japan's political management is now in the hands of beginners. Most DPJ members are novice drivers on the country's long and winding political roads. Having punished the LDP for years of mismanagement, Japanese voters are now uneasy facing the potential danger of being led by unskilled drivers that are using old maps.

3. Conclusion: A Political “Zugzwang”?

Japan is undergoing a historic transformation as Asia's first democracy—moving from an “adolescent” democracy to a “mature” one. Since the consolidation of two conservative parties—Liberal Party led by Shigeru Yoshida (grandfather of Taro Aso) and Japan Democratic Party led by Ichiro Hatoyama (grandfather of Yukio Hatoyama)—resulted in the establishment of the LDP in 1955, a “long peace” in Japan's politics had, for more than 40 years, guaranteed the peace and prosperity of the Japanese people. Since the mid-1990s, however, there have been kaleidoscopic changes in the politico-economic environment. These changes ranged from the bursting of the domestic economic bubble and the demise of the Cold War to the advent of globalization and the spectacular rise of China. The LDP that had become overconfident during the “long peace” could not seriously recognize these changes.

The DPJ's historic victory provides the Japanese people with an opportunity for self-reflection—What kind of statecraft is suitable for an aging Japan in the protean world? In the age of globalization and the Internet, the Japanese populace should consider a Japanese-style of democratic society, from which Japan will derive the major resource of its “soft power.” Finding the right path will inevitably involve a try-and-error process. As a result, at this moment of the DPJ's victory, Japan may have arrived at a political “zugzwang.” Nevertheless, this situation is an unavoidable first step toward a mature and pluralist democracy. In this sense, Japanese voters should now carefully watch how the DPJ handles key issues, and remain mindful that they have further decisions to make at the time of the upper house election that will take place during the summer of next year (In the upper house, the DPJ has not yet secured a majority even though they are the largest party, with 109 out of the house's 242 seats. The LDP holds 81 seats.).

A DPJ-led Japan needs to revamp the whole gamut of policies, ranging from measures to raise the country's birthrate to the establishment of an institutional framework to nurture innovative new industries on Japanese soil. Today's Japan is confronted with such enormous challenges as (1) a hefty public debt (government gross debt in 2008 was 196.6% of GDP, compared with the United States (71.3%) and Germany (67.2%)), (2) a rapidly aging society (the elderly population aged 65 and over accounted for 23% of the total in 2008, compared with the United States (13%), China (8%), and Germany (20%)), (3) a deplorably elevated suicide rate (34.8 per 100,000 persons in 2006 compared with the United States (17.7 in 2005), China (13.0 in 1999), and Germany (19.7 in 2004)), and (4) a historic level of recipients for public income support (1.7 million people). Accordingly, a DPJ-led Japan will be faced with a cruel race against time. Though overthrown in the general election, the LDP for its part is still replete with competent politicians. Many Japanese hope that the LDP would, rather than engage itself in internecine struggles in the Diet, collaborate with the DPJ to build a more transparent and internationally attractive Japan that can wield its “soft power.”