**The Politics of Failure: The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party in Japan, 2009-2013**

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**The Rise and Fall of the DPJ.**

For 54 years, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dominated Japanese national politics. Except for the 1993-94 period, every cabinet was dominated by the LDP from 1955 to 2009. In 2005, the LDP won a landslide election under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, who then retired from politics and was followed by a series of one-year long prime ministers. The main opposition party, the Democratic Party (DPJ), benefited from the weakness of the post-Koizumi LDP leaders and it won a landslide victory in the August, 2009 House of Representatives (HR) elections. This was the first time the LDP had lost control of the national government as a result of a HR defeat. The DPJ already had control of the upper house, the House of Councillors (HC), following the 2007 HC elections. It appeared as though the DPJ might be able to replace the LDP as Japan’s long term governing party (Aburi 2010; Itagaki 2008; Ito 2008; Udagawa 2009). Alas, it was not to be the case. The DPJ lost its majority in the 2010 HC elections and then it was nearly destroyed in the December, 2012 HR elections. This paper will explore some of the reasons for the rise and fall of the DPJ and its prospects for reasserting itself in the upcoming HC elections to be held in the summer of 2013.

The past three elections for the Japanese House of Representatives have been electoral landslides. Two won by the LDP (2005 and 2012 ) and one won by the DPJ (2009). One of the questions we will be addressing in this paper is why have landslide election victories become the normal in the past eight years in Japan when for the preceding 50 years they were quite rare?

We have identified a number of factors that seem to have contributed to the new pattern of alternating party winners in Japan. First, we wish to note, as have many of the best political scientists studying Japanese politics, the great significance of the fundamental change in the House election system after 1994 (Stockwin 2008; Inoguchi 2011; Rosenbluth 2010; Kabashima 2010; Reed 2009; and Schoppa 2011) . The previous multiple seats districts (from one to six seats in each district elected) was replaced by a combination of 300 single seat districts and 180 proportional representation members. This has tended to move the overall party system in the direction of a two party system with smaller parties surviving largely from the effects of the proportional representation seats. This new electoral system also is a cause for the series of landslides since 2005. The major parties have shallow roots in the electorate and shifts in public opinion causes by short term events or particularly effective or ineffective or charismatic party leaders are likely to result in massive shifts among the large mass of so-called floating voters and thus produce a pattern of landslides. Japanese elections are now dominated by party leaders personalities and party images. This is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Among the causes for the 2012 DPJ defeat we will explore in this paper are the lack of effective leadership in the DPJ; the lack of administrative experience in the party; the inability of the party to work with and cooperate with Japan’s powerful national level bureaucracy; its serious policy mistakes in the areas of national security, disaster response, and tax policy; and its destructive internal party factional divisions. Perhaps in a quiet period of contemporary politics, the DPJ might have been able to survive its initial period in power (2009-2012), but this period was marked with several extraordinary events that exposed the weaknesses of the DPJ clearly to the Japanese electorate who then sent the party to one of the worst electoral defeats in modern political history.

In addition to our survey of the various forces we have identified as contributors to the outcome of the 2012 HR elections, we have also included a mini-case study of the US-Japan military negotiations on the American bases in Okinawa as an example of how the DPJ prospects for political success quickly disappeared in their pattern of leadership ineptitude and inexperience and poor policy decision making.

**Background to the House Elections of 2012**

The Fall of the LDP in 2009

The Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partner, the Komeito, had won a huge electoral victory in the House elections of 2005 and that term in office would carry them to August, 2009 if the party leadership desired. But, the popular and arguably successful prime minister Koizumi quickly retired and he was succeeded in the office by three LDP leaders who each lasted about a year and were, by and large considered to be unsuccessful regimes. By the Fall of 2009, the Japanese economy had suffered through two decades of stagnation and deflation and the world-wide financial recession that began in 2008 was just making any attempts to kick start the Japanese economic recovery even more difficult. Given the disappointment of the post-Koizumi LDP prime ministers, the Japanese electorate was ready for a change in ruling parties and its was the DPJ’s fortune that they had gotten their act together to the point that they appeared in 2009 to be a reasonable alternative ruling party.

The LDP had run out of highly attractive potential prime ministers and, even more important, any serious ideas on how to break Japan free from the economic doldrums. So, the collective feeling of the Japanese public was,” Why not give the DPJ a chance to see what they can do?” And, moreover, a spell in the opposition, might force the LDP to reform its party manifesto, reform its factional patterns and find some new and younger leadership for a future LDP cabinet.

DPJ History.

The DPJ is a relatively new party which traces its history back to its founding in 1998. It was the merger of four smaller opposition parties that enabled it to become the second largest party in the Japanese Diet and possible alternative governing party to the LDP. All of these parties came from the left wing of the Japanese ideological spectrum. The DPJ moved in a different direction when it merged with the more conservative Liberal Party and its leader, Ozawa Ichiro. Beginning with 93 HR members in 2003, it surged to a new total of 178 HR seats in the 2003 HR elections. The DPJ then appeared to be on the road to becoming a majority party. Prime Minister Koizumi’s LDP won a big victory in 2005 when it cut the DPJ’s HR total by 62 seats. But in 2009, the DPJ won a great victory with 308 seats to the LDP’s 119 seats in the HR. But the DPJ was still short of a majority in the HC and held even fewer seats in the chamber after the 2010 HC elections. The HC is important for smooth passage of a party’s manifesto or agenda. The DPJ was thus forced to seek a coalition with the Social Democratic Party and the People’s New Party to try to manage the HC despite its huge majority in the HR.

The DPJ has followed the LDP pattern of having short term party leaders:

Kan, Hatoyama, Kan again, Okada, Maehara, Ozawa, Hatoyama, Kan again and Noda. With the exception of Ozawa from 2006 to 2008, each of the DPJ leaders held power for about a year before being forced out of office. Following the disastrous 2012 defeat, the DPJ turned to Kaieda Banri, a very low profile former minister for the economy and trade who was previously supported by Ozawa Ichiro for party president, to be its 10th party president.

While the DPJ does not have a pattern of internal party factions that date back to the 1950s like the LDP’s factions, it has exhibited internal factions that have contributed to its poor performance while in power. Its largest and most powerful faction up to mid-2012 was led by Ozawa Ichiro and the Ozawa faction challenged the party leadership in the 2010-12 period and finally left the party in mid-2012. The party’s other factions either stem from the previous parties that merged into the DPJ or have formed to follow rising DPJ leaders, but are more flexible than those in the LDP have been. The various subgroups within the DPJ range from moderate to more left socialists defectors from the old Japan Socialist and Democratic Socialist Parties to a majority of former LDP members who are centerist to quite conservative as well as a large number of new Dietmembers recruited by then election coordinator Ozawa Ichiro to run and win in the 2009 elections. This is one of the DPJ’s weakness----a party without a common core of ideology or policy preferences.

Japan’s Party System during the DPJ cabinets. (2009-12)

Chaos has been the primary characteristic for the nature of the Japanese party system from 2009 to 2013. What seemed to becoming a two party system has splintered into a 13 party system. There are four major parties; another four minor parties; and another five micro parties:

The major parties are:

* The Liberal Democratic Party. Since December, 2012, Japan’s ruling party. Conservative. Japan long term, rullng party 1955-1993; 1995-2009. Close to Big Business and the Japanese governmental bureaucracy.
* The Democratic Party of Japan. The ruling party between the end of 2009 to December 2012.
* Japan Restoration Party (JRP). A new party in 2012 headed by former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro and former Osaka governor Hashimoto Toru. Conservative, but in favor of administrative reforms.
* New Komeito Party. :Clean Government Party” (CGP). Dates back to the 1960s. Originally, somewhat leftist and opposed to the LDP; later joined the LDP in coalitions in multiple cabinets and election campaigns. Supported by the new Buddhist religion, Soka Gakkai.

The minor parties (minimum of 5 Dietmembers to be a party) are:

* Your Party. “Everyone’s Party” Center-conservative. Economic reforms.
* Japanese Communist Party. Left, old style Communist party.
* People’s Life Party. Founded by Ozawa Ichiro, former member of the LDP and DPJ, after 2012 elections. Conservative.
* Social Democratic Party (SDP). Remnants of old Japan Socialist Party. Feminist today.

The tiny minor parties (fewer than 5 Dietmembers) are:

* People’s New Party (PNP) Conservative. Anti-postal reform.
* New Party Daichi-True Democrats. Founded Dec. 2011. Hokkaido Regional.
* Tomorrow Party of Japan. Remnant of previous Ozawa party.
* Green Wind. Opposed to TPP, VAT tax increase and nuclear power.
* New Renaissance Party. Conservative splinter party.

Events that impacted the era of DPJ rule.

The three DPJ prime ministers of the 2009-12 era were Hatoyama Yukio, Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko. The first two had major political and security crises to deal with and the latter had to try to survive the wreckage he inherited. The Hatoyama cabinet’s main headache was the agreement with the Americans regarding base realignments in Okinawa. The Kan administration tried to deal with the Great Tohoku Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima nuclear power catastrophe. Finally, the Noda administration could never climb out of the hole the first two DPJ prime minister had dug, the bottoming out of the party’s public opinion support by late 2012 and the LDP-Komeito’s obstructionism to the DPJ’s rule. In the following section, we will examine the three prime ministers, their cabinets and the problems they unsuccessfully wrestled with and their impact on public opinion and subsequent voting behavior.

**The Causes of the Fall of the DPJ**

As we noted in the introduction, there are several causes that have contributed to the rise and fall of the Democratic Party of Japan in 2012. These include the party’s poor leadership, lack of experience in administration and policymaking of many of its Diet members, its internal instability, its failure to effectively deal with the political, security and disaster challenges and the inability to devise an effective strategy to survive politically when the Japanese electorate is so loosely attached to it and all the national level political parties.

DPJ Leadership problems.

Since the it had dominated nearly all the Japanese cabinets since 1955, the LDP had lots of diet members with minister and vice minister experience. The DPJ was woefully short on such experience and even its top leadership’s experience was largely based on leading small opposition parties and not running huge bureaucracies as ministers or vice-ministers. Three DPJ presidents were elevated to the role of prime ministers and two were forced to resign as a result of their leadership failures and the third, Noda, left the office after his party was crushed in the December 2012 elections. One of the constant problems faced by these DPJ leaders was the constant undermining of their authority and legitimacy by Ozawa Ichiro and the largest faction in the party he led. Often, the loudest voices of opposition to the DPJ prime ministers were heard from Ozawa or his faction’s spokesmen. In 2010, Ozawa challenged Hatoyama directly in the party’s presidential elections and lost a rather close and divisive battle. Later, Ozawa constantly challenged Kan and the cabinets’ policies after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and then bolted the party when Noda became prime minister threatening to so reduce the DPJ diet member numbers in the House of Representatives to the point that a successful vote of no- confidence against the cabinet was nearly possible. How can you run a ruling party when your former party president and largest faction is trying to undermine you at every opportunity?

DPJ policy making problems.

The DPJ during its days as the party of the opposition had developed an attitude about how policy making in government should be done. Since the LDP had a 50 year “partnership” with Japan’s national bureaucracy, the DPJ decided to take a position of hostility toward the national bureaucracy and demanded that future policy be determined by the elected political diet members and not the unelected bureaucrats (Tatsumi 2012). So when it achieved power, the DPJ tried to sharply reduce the traditional role played by the bureaucrats in Japan’s various ministries. One of the traditions during the LDP dominated decades were the weekly meetings of the senior bureaucrats to coordinate the bureaucratic policies they would recommend to the political ministers. Hatoyama ended those coordination meetings. Due to this and other instances of DPJ hostility toward the bureaucrats, the latter appeared to adopt a policy of passivity toward their political masters and allowed them to make one serious mistake after another in the areas of foreign policy, security policy, disaster response, welfare policy and tax policy. The bureaucrats seemed to decide to wait out the DPJ cabinets until the next scheduled HR elections in 2012 and the hopeful return of their old partners in the LDP to power. Hatoyama even decided to undermine his own internal party policy making deliberation processes. He wanted to differentiate the DPJ from the LDP and concluded that one way to that was to break the mirror image of the DPJ’s major internal organizations from those of the LDP. Hatoyama thus eliminated the Policy Affairs Committee that had as its major tasks the deliberation of future policy and the establishment of links to key interests in Japanese society to advise the party on policy. When Noda tried to rebuild the party by reestablishing the PARC it was a case of “too little-too late.”

By alienating the professional bureaucracy, eliminating the internal policy making organizations and not fostering good relations with major Japanese interest groups, the DPJ followed a course that was fraught with lots of political dangers. We will examine several of the policy areas the DPJ struggled with during the 2009-12 years in power such as security and tax policies.

The March 11, 2011 Great Tohoku Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear catastrophe also seriously undermined the DPJ claim that they could govern Japan effectively. Prime Minister Kan was indecisive but meddling in the crucial hours after the earth quake-tsunami and the DPJ cabinet and administration failed to appear to take decisive and effective action in dealing with the loss of life and property destruction. It was, to put it simply, an opportunity and a test for the new party and as it did in the Okinawa negotiations that we will discuss later, it largely failed the test.

Poor DPJ Election Strategies

The DPJ won power in 2009 by emphasizing its anti-LDP identity, but never managed to create a significant justification for being granted a second term in power. Its post-2009 election strategies seemed to be anti-LDP and pro-DPJ in both 2010 and 2012. The DPJ relied on its election boss, Ozawa Ichiro, to recruit new candidates and to allocate money for the 2009 successful HR elections. Many of the DPJ winners owed their seats to Ozawa and when he left the party in 2012, a good number of them went with him. The DPJ was left to face the very unhappy Japanese electorate in 2012 without the “genius” or the money of Ozawa. Unfortunately for the DPJ, it had to run new candidates against former DPJ Ozawa incumbents in 51 single seat constituencies. They tended to split the DPJ vote and allow LDP member or candidates from some of the new minor parties to win.

Ties to the various previously pro-DPJ interest groups had weakened and that cost the party financial support and votes. The DPJ core supporting group had always been the Rengo Labor Union confederation. But in 2012, the labor union for Japan’s electric power generating companies indicated their opposition to the DPJ’s position on ending all nuclear generated electric power in Japan and turned to support the LDP that offered to re-open the nuclear plants by the summer of 2013. The Japan Medical Association had allowed its prefectural affiliates to make their own party endorsements in 2009, but the JMA had already indicated that the group’s candidate for the upcoming HC elections would run as a LDP candidate (Asahi Shimbun 2012c). .

As the newspaper polls clearly indicated in the run up to the elections, the DPJ was in deep trouble and would lose most of their remaining seats (after the Ozawa group had left the party.) Consequently, Noda and the party leadership had to carefully evaluate when to call for new elections in the remaining time before elections had to be call in the Fall of 2013. The leadership concluded that the opposition of the LDP-Komeito to any policy initiatives other than the approval in the increase in the consumption tax meant that an election in the Fall of 2012 might save some of the DPJ seats. That may or may not be true, but given the party’s steady decline in public support during 2012, it seemed to be a reasonable conclusion.

The nature of the DPJ 2012 campaign was also curious. It was a very passive campaign with few accomplishments to take credit for and almost no aggression against the former ruling party, the LDP. It was not the type of campaign run by a ruling party trying to stay in power. But, it was the first time the DPJ found itself in that situation and thus, perhaps it was a learning situation for the party.

**DPJ Policy Failures:**

Prime Minister Hatoyama and American Okinawa Bases and Foreign Policy

As in other issue areas, the DPJ lost public support for its foreign and defense policy by failing to fulfill promises it had made before the 2009 election and by responding to crises poorly. The most visible discrepancy between the DPJ’s promises and policy outcomes can be found in its handing of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

In the 2009 Manifesto, party platform, DPJ promised to develop “close and equal relations” with the United States, which included “proposing the Status of Forces Agreement” and “possible revisions” of the U.S. military bases in Japan (Minshuto, 2009). Although the Manifesto was not specific enough, it was obvious that the “possible revisions” included the Futenma Air Station. The DPJ had started a study group on wide range of policy issues of Okinawa in 1999 and issued a research titled “Okinawa Vision” in July 2008. The research proposes that the Japanese government “should seek an alternative location (for the Futenma Air Station) outside Okinawa. If the strategic environment should change, a location outside Japan should be an option, too” (Minshuto, 2008). And on July 19th, 2009, then President of DPJ, later Prime Minister, Yukio Hatoyama announced that he would relocate the Futenma Air Station to “at least outside Okinawa” not to say outside Japan, in the political rally in Okinawa (Green & Szecheny, 2010).

Soon after Hatoyama became Prime Minister, he restarted the negotiation on the Futenma Air Station with the Obama administration. But unlike the LDP, the DPJ excluded bureaucrats of Defense and Foreign Affairs ministries form policymaking process (Ratner & Samuels, 2011). Ironically, the key bureaucratic positions dealing with U.S. military base issues in the Obama administrations were occupied by some of those who had agreed on the relocation of the Futenma Air Station under the Clinton administrations in the mid 1990s. For example, Assistant Secretary of State Curt Campbell under the Obama administration was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense under the Clinton administration was “the point man for U.S.-Japan security issues” according to Ambassador Walter Mondale (Funabashi, 1999). Prime Minister Hatoyama tried to persuade the leading expert of the Futenma issue in the U.S. government without much input from foreign and defense bureaucrats in his own government.

By mid April 2010, when Hatoyama visited Washington, D.C., President Obama seemed to be skeptical about Prime Minister’s promise to find an alternative location outside Okinawa. Reportedly, when Obama questioned the feasibility to meet the negotiation deadline in May, Hatoyama replied “trust me” (Green & Szecheny, 2010). But after a troubled search for an alternative location for the base, on May 4th, 2010, Hatoyama admitted that his plan to relocate Futenma Air Station off Okinawa would be difficult. Around the same time, it was reported that the Hatoyama administration would accept the 2006 plan to build an alternative airbase in Henoko, Nago City, Okinawa. Henoko is much less populated area than Futenma and the new air base would be build on the tip of a peninsula so that major parts of the airfield hang over the sea. Governor Nakaima of Okinawa Prefecture had not opposed to the plan when the LDP administration agreed on it with the Bush administration.

But after the DPJ had taken power, Governor Nakaima started opposing any plan to relocate Futenma Air Station within Okinawa Prefecture. Because of the heightened expectation for possible relocation of the most dangerous U.S. military bases outside Okinawa, Japanese public opinion also sharply turned against Prime Minister Hatoyama. Based on a Fuji-Sankei poll published late April, 72 percent of respondents thought that “Hatoyama’s approach to the Futenma issue had worsened the US-Japan relationship ” (Green & Szecheny, 2010). The DPJ’s handling of the base issue was not only criticized severely by the LDP, but also created the first major conflict within the governing coalition between the DPJ and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). In late May, SDP’s president, Mizuho Fukushima, was fired from her cabinet post as the Special Minister of Consumer Protection and Food Safety after she refused to sign the cabinet resolution on the Futenma issue. Ratner and Samuels explain the confusion surrounding the Futenma issue as a result of “the new political environment” in which “a small party…. could alter the dynamics of an important defense issue” (Ratner & Samuels, 2011). On May 30, the SDP officially left the governing coalition. In addition to the failure in the Futenma issue, Hatayama’s leadership was weakened by financial scandals of himself and of his Secretary General Ozawa. Hatoyama announced his resignation on June 2nd and Kan Naoto was elected new Prime Minister (Green & Szecheny, 2010).

Not only the DPJ failed to deliver the policy outcomes expressed in their manifesto, but also they poorly responded to foreign policy crises regarding disputed territories with Russia, South Korea, and most importantly China.

In their 2009 Manifesto, the DPJ pledged to develop stronger ties with other Asian nations and even aimed at creation of “ East Asian Community”. For these goals, the Manifesto listed “confidence building” with China and South Korea as one of three policy measures (Minshuto, 2009).

Hatoyama personally expressed his ideas on Asian policy;

“we need to work on how we can have a cordial interchange with Asia, particularly China……….Now the question is how can we become more respected in Asia. For that, we have to deal with issues of the past” (Sneider, 2011).

“I believe that the East Asian region, which is showing increasing vitality, must be recognized as Japan’s basic sphere of being . . . We should aspire to move toward regional currency integration as a natural extension of the rapid economic growth . . . We must spare no effort to build the permanent security frameworks essential to underpinning currency integration” (quoted in McCormick, 2010).

In spite of its hopeful foreign policy vision, the three years of the DPJ ‘s foreign policy was defined by territorial disputes with neighboring countries and the lack of solutions to them. Japan has had territorial disputes with its neighboring countries under LDP administrations and the DPJ did not start them. But the LDP administrations did not have to deal with territorial disputes with China, Russia, and South Korea almost at the same time. The territorial disputes with the neighboring countries under the DPJ administration include one over the Senkaku Islands with China, Kunashiri Island with Russia, and Takeshima with South Korea. Among the three, the dispute over the Senkaku Islands have turned most serious and will have a long term effects over not only Japanese national interests but also regional security environment in the Asia pacific region as a whole.

The tension between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands started intensifying after Japan’s Coast Guard arrested Chinese fishermen in September 2010. The Chinese fishing ship repeatedly slamming itself against the Yonakuni and Mizuki, Japan’s Coast Guard ships near Kuba Island on September (MOFA, 2010). The Chinese fishermen were released without any penalty or punishment by mid-September. Although the Kan administration denied that Tokyo had put any political pressure over the local prosecutor in Naha, Okinawa, who was in charge of the case, the Japanese public believed otherwise. Based on the Asahi TV poll taken in October, 2010, 66% of the polled thought the Kan administration influenced the prosecutor’s decision. In the same poll taken in November, 77% of the respondents did not support Kan’s foreign policy (Ashahi TV, 2010).

But a more serious foreign policy crisis between Japan and China broke out in April, 2012. Then Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara announced that Tokyo Metropolitan Government would purchase some of Senkaku Islands from a private owner. Reportedly, the owner of the islands was concerned about recent developments over the Senkaku Islands between Japan and China and contacted to Governor Ishihara through a LDP Diet member.

Governor Ishihara had been known for his provocative remarks and actions when it came to the Japanese-Chinese relations. But this time, the targets of his criticism were not only China but also the DPJ. He did not hide his dissatisfaction to DPJ’s handling of the issue when, in Washington D.C., he announced his plan to purchase the island, saying “(w)ith this plan, I will make the (Japanese) government weep with a sense of defeat because the government did not do anything” (Asia & Japan Watch, 2012). Ishihara started collecting donations from citizens and revealed his plans to build an emergency port, a lighthouse, and other facilities in order to demonstrate and solidify Japanese sovereignty over the islands.

Responding to Ishihara’s announcement, anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out and some Japanese businesses in China suffered from serious financial damages. Some estimate the damages amount “few to ten billion yen” (Nikkei, 2012a). At the same time, the Chinese government started sending its fishing patrol ships to Japanese Exclusive Economic Zone (EZZ) and sometime even

The Noda administration started negotiations with the owner of the islands secretly while trying to communicate with the Chinese government. The Japanese government managed to arrange a 15-munite standing chat between Prime Minister Noda and President Hu Jintao at APEC meeting in in Vladivostok, Russia on September 9th. It was reported that Hu warned Noda not to nationalize the islands (Daily Yomiuri, 2012). But just two days after Noda talked to Hu, the Japanese government announced the nationalization of the islands.

In his interview with Nikkei Shimbun, former Japanese Ambassador to China Niwa Uichiro revealed that he and other Japanese diplomats in Beijing warned against purchasing the islands in September and suggested delaying the purchase until the Chinese Communist Party’s convention where the new leadership would be elected. But somehow, his advice did not reach or was ignored by Prime Minister Noda and the Japanese government officially announced the nationalization of the islands (Nikkei, 2012). Niwa was the first ambassador who did not have diplomatic or political backgrounds. He was on the board of director at Itochu Corp, one of the largest trading companies in Japan. Prime Minister Kan appointed him as a symbol of political leadership over foreign policy bureaucracy. But during the crisis regarding the Senkaku Islands, Ambassador Niwa seemed to have no direct communication with or power to give direct advise to Prime Minister Noda.

By November 2012, about a month before Prime Minister Noda dissolved the House of Representative to hold an election, 78% of the respondents to Fuji Sankei opinion poll lost confidence in DPJ’s foreign defense policy (Sankei, 2012). Like other issue areas, DPJ’s foreign policy suffered from lack of experience, which could have been made up for, had foreign and defense bureaucracy been given more chance to work with the party leadership. What has made matter worse, the DPJ administrations lacked a coherent foreign and defense policy visions, reflecting internal divisions within the party. As prime ministers have changed almost every year under the DPJ rule, negotiations and commitments to any important long-term foreign issues have been difficult even to start.

The Great Tohoku Earthquake and the DPJ Image of Failure.

Great and catastrophic events are often viewed by politicians as great opportunities to demonstrate their leadership and administrative skills to the electorate. Unfortunately, the leadership team of Prime Minister Kan was not adequate to deal with the triple crises of March 111, 2011. Kan appeared to be rigid in his desire to appear to be in charge and tried to micro-manage the crisis from the Tokyo government ops center and the various ministers who could and should have taken leadership roles under the advice of the appropriate bureaucrats also appeared to not up to the tasks required. It appeared the government either fought with Tokyo Electric, the owners and operators of the trouble Fukushima nuclear sites, or were intimidated by the company and valuable time was lost while the lives of hundreds of thousands of Japanese were in danger. Failure in time of disaster can severely hurt a political party in subsequent election campaigns. One would think the DPJ could have steered the blame for the Fukushima disasters on the long time ruling party, the LDP that had very close ties to the industry and the bureaucracy that was supposed to supervise the industry and prevent problems like those of March 11th. The DPJ, the new government party from 2009, had, as we note elsewhere in this paper, an adversarial relationship with the bureaucracy and little control over it. The recovery in Fukushima and the other affected Tohoku prefectures went slowly and almost two years late , the dislocated population was still unsettled as were basic decisions on what to do about nuclear power production in general. All the reactors in Japan except two were shut down for safety inspections and then upgrades, All this occurred in a situation of energy shortage and a rising public rejection of nuclear power, at least as it developed in Japan. But, the public generally concluded the DPJ government really did not have a firm plan to meet Japan’s energy needs while curtailing the role of nuclear energy. Ironically, the opposition LDP’s new president, Abe Shinzo, made the revival of Japan’s nuclear power industry a key part of the 2012 HR campaign.

Raising the Consumption Tax prior to the 2012 elections.

Prime Minister Noda and much of the DPJ leadership decided to gamble on raising the national consumption tax from 5% to a new total of 10% to help pay for the national government budget deficit, the extraordinary expenditures related to the rebuilding of Tohoku and possible additional expenditures related to rising tensions with China. Raising taxes just prior to a general election is not usually a very popular thing to do and the same proposed in 2010 was one of the reasons the DPJ lost its majority in the House of Councillors that year. However, for whatever reason, Prime Minister Noda made the raising of the consumption tax and LDP support to do it part of a promise that he would then hold elections in the late Fall of 2012. There are several possible explanations for this decision. Some note that Prime Minister Noda previous experience was as a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Finance and his commitment to raising the consumption tax during his watch came naturally to him as he recognized the crucial need to increase revenues in Japan’s difficult fiscal situation. Others have suggested that Noda wanted to do the “right governing thing” rather than the expedient “political thing.” Since the three DPJ cabinets had accomplished relatively little that they could point to with pride, raising the tax and reducing the financial stresses on Japanese government could be touted as “doing the right over politics” in future political campaigns.

**The Fall of the DPJ and Return of the LDP: The Landslide of 2012.**

The DPJ seats in the House of Representatives fell from 308 (out of 480) in the 2009 House elections to 57 in 2012. This represents the worst election defeat in post- World War II Japanese political history. Ironically, it follows its greatest victory in the 2009 elections---from unprecedented victory to crushing defeat in just four short years.

Japanese House of Representative’s elections have had three consecutive huge landslide elections. One of the reasons for this pattern is the relative lack of attachment or loyalty of most of the Japanese electorate with the nation’s political parties. Nearly half of the electorate refuses to support any of the nation’s major or minor parties. The Kyodo News poll for December 12-13, 2012 had the major parties’ support rates as LDP 23%; DPJ 11% and the new Japan Renewal Party at 10%. Thus only 44% of the electorate supported any of the three major Japanese party just prior to the HR election day. Conversely, the number responding that they are undecided or decline to answer the question was almost an identical 40%.

The Japanese media calls this almost half the electorate the “Floating Vote.” Actually, this is a very good description of the fluidity of Japanese voting patterns. The voters floated to the LDP in 2005; then floated to the DPJ in 2009 and then floated back to the LDP in 2012. In the 2009 HR elections DPJ candidates won 33.4 million votes in the 300 district contests and 29.8 million votes in the proportional representation party vote block districts. But, in 2012, the DPJ vote declined by nearly 8 million votes in the single seat districts and by more than 13 million in the PR block districts. That is how a party loses 173 seats.

Table 1. Japanese House of Representatives Election, Dec. 16, 2012.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Parties | Seats Won 2012 | Prior Seats | Vote Percentage:Block |
| Government Coalition |  |  |  |
| LDP | 294 | 118 | 27.8 |
| New Komeito | 31 | 21 | 11.9 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Opposition |  |  |  |
| DPJ | 57 | 230 | 22.8 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Other Parties |  |  |  |
| Restoration | 54 | 11 | 20.5 |
| Your | 18 | 8 | 8.7 |
| Tomorrow | 9 | 61 | 5.7 |
| Communist | 8 | 9 | 6.2 |
| Social Democrat | 2 | 5 | 2.4 |
| People’s New | 1 | 3 | 0.1 |

Note: Voting percentage is the party’s share in the PR block voting districts. This is a better indicator of party strength since the parties do not run candidates in all 300 single seat districts and Komeito especially asks its voters in many single seat districts to cast their votes for LDP candidates.

Such consecutive landslides are extremely unlikely in a nation with large number of loyal supporters of the major parties who are unlikely to stay home or vote for other parties. The American pattern of 47%-45%-4% (Democrats-Republicans-Independents) produces relatively little change in party voting in elections in year after year. But the huge numbers of “floating voters” in Japan can and does produce huge changes in national election outcomes.

The rise of so many new national level political parties is also a function of the tens of millions of Japanese voters who are dissatisfied with the existing parties. The 1990s and 2000s have seen new party after new party emerge, merge and disappear on the national scene with only the DPJ having any kind of sustained success. In the 2012 elections there were 12 parties competing for the 480 seats, but with the exception of the Japan Restoration Party (54 seats from a prior total of 11), the LDP and the DPJ won 351 of the 480 seats contested. The list of defunct parties in the past 30 years is a long one and is a sign the nation’s politicians cannot figure out just what the Japanese electorate wants in terms of leadership and policies.

The electoral reforms of 1994 changed the institutional environment of Japanese elections dramatically. Following the LDP split in 1993, the House electoral seats went from a multi-member district system to a single member district plus proportional representation seats. In addition to moving the party system toward a two major party system, it also profoundly impacted the style of election campaigns and the role of issues differentiation in solving policy problems.

Essentially, with a two major party system, the DPJ has moved closer to the LDP in its policy positions and in a competitive two party system, the DPJ has moved to compete with the LDP more in the conservative rural constituencies and thus further constrained its abilities to offer new and innovative policies. Consequently, the DPJ record of policy achievements during the 2009-2012 period in power is nearly non-existent. The Japanese voting electorate figured this out quite quickly and the DPJ were doomed to play out their three years in power facing an nearly inevitable defeat in the next HR election.

**The Rise and Fall of the DPJ: A summary**

As Yoshida Reiji put it the day after the 2012 election, the voters did not express confidence in the LDP, but expressed a strong lack of confidence in the DPJ to govern a Japan suffering from a variety of domestic and foreign crises. In fact, a list of the significant reforms and lessons learned by the LDP during their 39 months in opposition would be quite short. It was not a new LDP that returned to power, but essentially the same old LDP the voters hoped might have the “old magic” it had in the 1960s to the late 1980s. Clearly, the DPJ’s time in power was found to be lacking. The DPJ rose to power because of the failings of the LDP and then when the DPJ failed, there was really only one place to go for the Japanese voters, back to the LDP and hope for better results. The new LDP cabinet led by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo campaigned on a tough foreign and military response to Chinese and Korean challenges in the waters east and south of Japan. Abe also suggested that he could also achieve better cooperation with the Americans in dealing with these challenges. This was also coupled with promises to seek low levels of inflation to help get the Japanese economy re-inflated, a re-consideration of the role of nuclear power in Japan’s energy policies and a more effective and efficient set of policies regarding the damage caused by the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami. Frankly, it would not be difficult to deal with these various problems in ways that would appear to be better than the efforts made by the various DPJ prime ministers. Perhaps, Japan is in line for another era of LDP rule with the DPJ relegated to an extended period in the opposition? Such may be the DPJ’s price to pay for not being ready to govern Japan.

The next major electoral contest for the DPJ will be the 2013 HC elections to be held in July. While the LDP-KOM coalition holds a powerful 320 seats out of 480 in the HR, the DPJ still is the largest single party in the HC and the LDP-KOM is still 16 seats from winning a majority in the HC. With a 121 seats to be contested in 2013, the LDP-KOM needs to win 63 to control the HC and keep the DPJ from blocking its agenda, just like the LDP did to the DPJ after 2010. The DPJ needs to regroup from December 2012 setback, get its election coordination and candidates ready and work very hard to improve the party’s image among the Japanese electorate. It will not be an easy task to reverse its image of failed policies and failed leadership. It will also probably need significant failures by the LDP to regain power after they frittered it away the past three years.

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