

D-Constructing Japanese Politics

by Brad Glosserman

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TOKYO – At the best of times, Japanese politics are complex, confusing, and conspiratorial. Yet even by this byzantine standard, today’s political environment in Tokyo is especially treacherous. Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko has promised “*kimereru seiji*” – decisive politics – but it is unlikely that even he understands how decisive events this summer may prove to be.

When Noda took office, the usual comparison was to Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, who was once famously said to have all the pizzazz of cold pizza. He was a colorless, workhorse politician who avoided the limelight. Noda has proven to be like Obuchi, not only in his ‘ordinariness’ but also in his ability to work the system to get things done. In recent meetings here, Noda was repeatedly likened not to Obuchi, but to former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro for his *determination* to realize a clear set of policy objectives.

The prime minister has pressed for raising the consumption tax to begin to fill the hole in the country’s finances. He is pushing to change the interpretation of the constitution to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self defense. He has okayed the restart of nuclear reactors to ease energy shortages.

Noda’s readiness to spend political capital on hard choices may yet produce political dividends. But those goals look a lot like those of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and his dogged pursuit of them has alienated the prime minister’s own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). It prompted the *departure* of Ozawa Ichiro, strategist, elections mastermind, and one of the DPJ’s founders (and scandal magnet). He bolted last month, taking nearly 50 legislators with him to form “People’s Lives First,” a party that he says will fight for principles that Noda is accused of betraying.

Other DPJ politicians have also left the party. Antagonized by Noda’s policies, they are unwilling to join Ozawa and have formed smaller groups of their own. It was thought that the DPJ’s slim majority in the Diet left it vulnerable to a vote of no confidence, but backroom maneuvers last week secured LDP support for the consumption tax vote in exchange for a pledge to *dissolve* the Lower House “soon” (while leaving the exact date open). That torpedoed a no-confidence vote offered by six small opposition parties, Ozawa’s among them.

Two other elements compound the confusion. The first is Hashimoto Toru, the mayor of Osaka, who is riding a tide of public *dissatisfaction* with established parties. Last year,

Hashimoto launched a political party that some hope/fear could link up with like-minded groups to become a third national party; he might even be a dark horse candidate for prime minister. With one recent opinion poll putting the number of unaffiliated voters at 55 percent – a drop from 60 percent in the previous poll – that is no idle fantasy. And last week’s Diet maneuverings reek of an opportunism that is sure to alienate more voters.

The second element is the public *demonstrations* that are held outside the Prime Minister’s Office every Friday afternoon. They began in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident and protest the decision to restart the shut-down nuclear power facilities. Attendees are ordinary citizens, with a high number of mothers and young children; the professional protestors of the left are conspicuously absent, although many of the usual suspects did turn out for the mass demo – estimated at either 75,000 or 200,000 people; either way, the largest mass protest since the ‘60s – that was held July 17. Some observers liken them to the Arab Spring because of the use of social media to get people to attend. For many, the demonstrations symbolize a new political spirit in Japan; for others, the participants are dilettantes. Plainly, no one knows what they mean.

Finally, like a match to kindling, there is the *deployment* of *Ospreys*, vertical takeoff and landing aircraft used by US forces in Japan with a troubling safety record. The first shipment of 12 *Ospreys* arrived late last month in Iwakuni, triggering yet another controversy for the Tokyo government. The public is alarmed by two crashes earlier this year – both during training missions, one in Florida (cause under investigation) and the other off the coast of Morocco (attributed to human error) – and the Noda government has promised they will not be deployed until it can confirm that they are safe and pose no threat to the environment. US military deployments are almost always controversial in Japan but the arrival of the *Ospreys* coincides with the erosion of the DPJ. One party member warned it could be the proverbial straw that costs the party its grip on power.

The LDP smells opportunity: some party members believe that they can reclaim the Prime Minister’s Office. That is a long shot, as LDP approval ratings are little (if at all) better than those of the DPJ. Those DPJ defectors have no affinity for the LDP either, especially after last week’s no confidence vote, so the prospect of an LDP-led coalition looks bleak.

More intriguing is the prospect of another round of the long-anticipated reshuffling of Japanese politics. While Ozawa may be a spent force, his presence in the DPJ prevented a more ideological alignment of politics: LDP politicians who may have shared DPJ views (and who would be eager to take government positions and the funds that go with it) were prevented from joining the party because of animus toward

Ozawa. They still blame him for leaving the LDP in 1993. His departure from the DPJ could allow them to join the DPJ.

Japanese politics are notoriously opaque. Quite often, however, common sense calculations of immediate benefit are a good guide to what is likely to unfold. Today, however, the number of variables in politics is expanding and the influences more diffuse than ever. Events this summer may prove decisive for the DPJ, but there is little indication that any individual has the power to decide Japan's future, no matter how decisive he or she wishes to be.

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