



Japan goes boldly – backward? by Brad Glosserman

No one predicted the size of Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's election victory last weekend. The landslide win has transformed the landscape of Japanese politics. Oddly, the new picture looks a lot like the old Japan: dominated by a single party – the familiar Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – without a credible opposition. The election itself was strangely familiar, too: driven by personalities – at least that of the prime minister – rather than any serious discussion of policies. The result is not likely to be great change, however: with Koizumi remaining as prime minister, the ship of state will maintain its present course. Things will get interesting in a year, when the time comes to pick a successor – if the prime minister keeps his oft-repeated promise to step down when his term is up.

After his cherished postal reform was defeated in the Upper House, Koizumi dissolved the Lower House and called a special election to get a mandate for reform. He got it – and then some. Sunday's ballot gave the LDP 296 seats, an absolute majority in the 480-seat legislature, up from 212, and the second highest figure in the party's 50-year history. With the 31 seats of coalition partner Komei, the government now has more than the two-thirds majority needed to overturn any veto by the Upper House.

The prime minister's supporters see the election as a turning point for Japan. Koizumi has a mandate for reform and he has pledged to use it. His first move will be the reintroduction of the postal bill, and he says he is prepared to move on to other pressing issues. His record thus far is mixed. Koizumi has been far better at proposing reform than seeing it delivered. Even the postal bill, one of the few issues he is truly committed to, has been criticized for being watered down.

Koizumi took office promising to reform the LDP or smash it. He ended up smashing the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ): it lost about a third of its seats in the ballot, plunging from 175 to 113. President Okada Katsuya dutifully resigned when the results were known. The frontrunners to replace him are two former party presidents, Kan Naoto and Hatoyama Yukio, neither of whom was able to turn the party's fortunes around in the past. This time is unlikely to be any different. The question now is whether the damage to the DPJ is fatal.

The results also do serious damage to the conventional wisdom about Japan's political evolution. For the past few elections, there has been talk of a move toward two-party politics. (I'm skeptical; to my mind, a more appropriate model is Germany's 2.5 party system.) These results push that outcome farther into the future – if ever. The LDP is as dominant as any time in the past, and seems to have transformed itself into an urban party, stealing the DPJ's base. Moreover, the adoption of single member districts was

intended to eliminate personality politics and get voters to focus on issues. Instead, this election was a confidence vote on the prime minister and there was little attention to any issues, other than the catch-all label of "reformer" and who best deserved it.

Voter support for the prime minister doesn't necessarily mean that he can steer his party, however. After all, it was Koizumi's "management style" – considered dictatorial by his detractors – that has been the primary cause of the rebellion within his party. The reelection of 17 of the 33 Lower House "rebels" – the LDP members who voted against postal reform – suggests that his critics will not be silenced by the results. Sheer numbers will magnify the difficulties: with nearly 300 members in the Lower House, policy coordination will be more difficult than ever, and, as noted in previous commentaries (see *PacNet* 36 and 36A), Koizumi has destroyed the factions that performed that internal function.

Optimists counter that Japanese policymaking will become more transparent. Again, I'm skeptical. The only certainty is that it will take time for a new mechanism to emerge, whether it be some new "backroom" where deals are made or whether Japanese will become comfortable with more transparent policy formulation.

That delay means the U.S. must be patient as it tries to restructure its alliance with Japan. Tough decisions will not be made as politicians throughout the country try to figure out how to assert their interests in the new political environment. Ironically, then, the "mandate" for the prime minister – which should facilitate bilateral relations – means that Washington is going to have to cool its heels for a while.

Japan's neighbors, especially China, must also reconcile themselves to this new political reality. While foreign policy was not an issue in the election, their objections to Koizumi's foreign and domestic policies – in particular, his visits to Yasukuni Shrine – are not shared by Japanese voters. Beijing and Tokyo must reach a *modus vivendi*; "regime change" will not remove the obstacles to improved Sino-Japanese relations. That relationship can be fixed if both governments genuinely seek a face-saving solution. Thus far, neither has shown much interest in that option.

The seeming reversal in Japan's political evolution is odd, but it reflects a failure of political analysts to understand the forces at work in Japan. The critical question is, do Japanese politicians understand them any better? The results seem to be a clear cry for change but there is no guarantee politicians will heed it. The seeming return of the old LDP could encourage them to resort to old habits. That could yield widespread disillusionment among Japanese voters. Yet even if Koizumi can mobilize his troops, will his successor? How will a party as large as the LDP pick its next president (and hence the prime minister) without reaching for the lowest common

denominator? It will be a fascinating year for Japan and Japan watchers, but much of the change will be subtle, glacial and often invisible. Some things never change.

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