



## **Seesaw politics in Japan** by Brad Glosserman

With Ozawa Ichiro's decision to resign from the presidency of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and his subsequent reversal and agreement to stay on, Japanese politics has descended from drama to farce. The confusion and bumbling in the leading opposition party, on the heels of a landslide victory in Upper House elections, nullifies that dramatic step toward the reordering of Japanese politics, and hands the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its leader Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo a sensational gift.

Ozawa and the DPJ have been riding high since their July electoral victory, a win that plunged Japan into uncharted territory: divided governance with the opposition controlling the second chamber of the Japanese legislature. Although the government's majority in the more powerful Lower House allows it to push legislation through despite Upper House opposition, the prospect of legislative stalemate forced then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to step down. Abe's resignation magnified the sense of transformation in Tokyo, prompting talk of a change in government and confirmed for many that Ozawa was a master political strategist, perhaps unequalled in contemporary Japanese politics.

Thus, it was with some shock that Ozawa announced last weekend that he would step down as head of the DPJ. His move followed the DPJ executive committee's rejection of a grand coalition of the LDP and DPJ that Ozawa and Fukuda had been discussing. Ozawa took that decision as a vote of no confidence and said he would step down.

Rejection should not have been a surprise. The DPJ is deeply divided: like the LDP, the DPJ is an amalgam of views and it is hard to identify a solid core of beliefs among its members. Most recently, the party has been split over Ozawa's readiness to challenge the extension of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law and split over the wisdom of joining the LDP in a grand coalition. On the first issue, there were two divides. One consisted of DPJ members who backed Japanese efforts to help in the Indian Ocean and saw them as an attempt to strengthen security ties with the U.S.; they were opposed by party members who felt such activism violated Japan's pacifist ideals and constitution. A second divide consisted of DPJ members who agreed with Ozawa that UN Security Council authorization overcame legal constraints on Japanese military deployments and would permit Japan to play a more active role in regional security and those who felt that the legal argument was wrong and that deploying Self-Defense Forces as part of the International Stabilization Force in Afghanistan would be a mistake – and unconstitutional to boot.

The DPJ is equally split over the prospects for a coalition. While details of the deal are confusing and contradictory – it is unclear who proposed the coalition and what it would consist

of; it has been called “a policy consultation framework” but other reports suggested Cabinet seats had been apportioned – it seems the very prospect of some form of association with the LDP was enough to raise the objections of party members.

The executive committee's rebuke exposes a core dilemma for the DPJ. Many in the party are uneasy with Ozawa, a notorious backroom dealer who is more comfortable with top down, behind the scenes maneuvering than he is with public and transparent leadership. He has long been seen as a brilliant electoral strategist and DPJ members acknowledge that only he could have engineered the party's victory in the July ballot. But, Ozawa's reversals in the last week make him look feckless and uncertain, the very opposite of the image he had cultivated and one that had compounded the sense that the DPJ's time had finally come.

Fukuda must be rejoicing at his good fortune. He took office on the heels of a bruising election defeat and its confusing aftermath, which culminated in his predecessor's surprising resignation. The DPJ enjoyed all the political momentum, and the question dominating discussion was when – not if – Ozawa would force a general election.

But these recent developments have reversed the momentum. They have reinforced the image of the DPJ as a party that is incoherent and immature. The rebuke of Ozawa exposed the party's divisions, long evident but never so plainly visible.

Ozawa's readiness to join a grand coalition sprang from his recognition that the DPJ needed experience to reassure the public that it was a credible governing party; joining a coalition would serve as a stepping stone toward real power. The repudiation of Ozawa's overtures to the LDP – or the LDP's overtures to him – made the DPJ look overeager and unwilling to compromise. This is always a risky strategy in a culture like Japan's that makes consensus an end in itself.

Being a shrewd politician himself, it is likely the prime minister anticipated the chaos that coalition proposal would create in the opposition camp. The fissures in the DPJ are well known and provide opportunities for the LDP. They provide a ready mirror in which the ruling party can demonstrate its stability, maturity, and political competence. If the July Upper House vote was a vote against the LDP, rather than a vote for the DPJ, then the opposition's recent fumbles could be very damaging, if not fatal. The LDP is now likely to woo disaffected DPJ members, and the attractiveness of those offers has increased significantly over the last week.

In other words, the long promised political realignment in Japan is likely to intensify. That promises more incoherence in Japanese politics – especially with the Diet still divided and the opposition plainly uncomfortable with working with the government. While this effectively precludes any policy shifts,

bold initiatives, or politically costly decisions – U.S. alliance managers need to be prepared for inaction – it is a win-win for Fukuda domestically. Either he gets the DPJ to overcome its hesitance and he emerges as the stable hand on the wheel of state, or they don't – in which case the prime minister looks like a spurned leader who tried to govern his country and was rebuffed. Christmas seems to have come early for Fukuda.

There may be one good outcome from this mess. The Diet contretemps has made plain the need for a permanent law that would make possible to dispatch the SDF overseas without a debate each time the subject arose. Fukuda has said he would push for this legislation in the next Diet session. Such a step would, hopefully, depoliticize such efforts.

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