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'Safe Choice' May Be the Wrong Choice
by Brad Glosserman

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Former Finance Minister Noda Yoshihiko is the new prime minister of Japan. Noda is something of an anomaly: one of those self-deprecating politicians – he likens himself to a "loach," a scavenger that is kin to the catfish – who commands respect for having a steady hand and even temperament. Some observers liken him to former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, a genial but bland politician who is perhaps best known for being said to have "all the pizzazz of cold pizza." A steady hand is a good thing – and a marked departure from his immediate predecessors as PM – but it isn't going to be enough. Remember Fukuda Yasuo? Japan needs vision and energy; a self-styled "man of mediocrity" isn't likely to provide it.

Noda's victory in Monday's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) presidential election was a surprise: he came in third in most polls of the five candidates and claimed just 9 percent of voters in a national poll taken before Monday's vote. Still, he is a five-term Diet member, a graduate of the first class of the Matsushita Seikei Juku (a training school for politicians), and a black belt in judo – testimony to his commitment and competitiveness (and surely the source of some metaphor about political style). Significantly, he is the first DPJ president who was not one of the party's founding members. His election represents the rise of a new group of DPJ players, even if, at 54, he is a little long in the tooth to be called "next generation."

His policy profile will comfort conservatives. He is a supporter of the US-Japan alliance and hawkish on China, criticizing its defense buildup and its "high handed foreign posture." His views on history veer uncomfortably to the right: he has said that the wartime leaders convicted after World War II weren't criminals and that visits to Yasukuni Shrine should not be controversial. Difficulties in relations with China and South Korea look inevitable. On economic policy, he is a fiscal conservative, endorsing higher taxes to get the country's books in order. He insists that the triple catastrophe of March 11 shouldn't be an "excuse" to postpone efforts to rein in the country's debt burden.

If I'm pessimistic about Noda's chances, it isn't his fault. Rather, for all the flaws of Prime Minister Kan Naoto – and he *was* flawed – his tenure was undone by larger forces that will dog his successor. The next prime minister must contend with a deeply divided party, a dysfunctional political system, and a public confounded by its choices. The tragic events of March 11 were triggered by the unprecedented (yet predictable) confluence of natural disasters and human failings; Japan's new prime minister faces an equally formidable "perfect storm" of politics.

Kan's tenure was crippled by the same problems that undermined the first DPJ government (even without the idiosyncrasies of Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio). While it is improving, the DPJ government continues to have a rocky relationship with the bureaucrats who have experience in running the country. In retrospect, the historical political transition in 2009 was more difficult than anticipated: the DPJ knew less about the substance of issues and how to govern than most observers anticipated. Yet its readiness to attack bureaucrats alienated a key constituency and effectively prevented the new government from functioning.

The nature of the DPJ has contributed to the prime ministers' difficulties. The party is deeply divided between factions loyal and opposed to master strategist, manipulator, and former party President Ozawa Ichiro. Despite his recent troubles, Ozawa remains a powerful force in the DPJ, able to cause trouble and block programs even if he can't get his own agenda passed. The threat of him and his supporters leaving the party is ever-present.

But divisions in the DPJ transcend the simple divide between pro-and anti-Ozawa groups. The DPJ has, like the LDP, members who span the political spectrum. Neither party has an ideological center, while both have been opportunistic when it comes to platforms, moving to capture voters that lack a champion, regardless of policy consistency. This may make sense on a tactical level, but it confuses voters and contributes to growing cynicism and apathy among the electorate. It isn't clear what either party stands for or believes in.

The DPJ's troubles are compounded by the "take no prisoners" mentality of the opposition. After the 2009 vote that brought the DPJ to power, a leading member of the LDP confided over lunch that his party "would enjoy being a bit irresponsible" now. The record since then suggests they have an expansive definition of "a bit." Granted the DPJ has made a hash of things, but the LDP has worked to make governing as difficult as possible. Politics is a competition, but the LDP's zero-sum approach seems to have completely ignored any notion of national interest. The party seems focused on the destruction of the DPJ government, rather than compromise to get the nation back on its feet.

The greatest challenge for the next prime minister is articulating a vision that can unite the country and lift it out of the swamp it now inhabits – a predicament that predated March 11, but which has become more pressing since that fateful day. That is difficult if not impossible when a prime minister can't be sure that his own party is behind him and the opposition is going to torpedo those efforts regardless of merit. Energy is devoted to the day-to-day task of political survival rather than resuscitating the country.

Some argue that a grand coalition of the DPJ and LDP is the solution, a notion reportedly backed by Prime Minister Noda. While a temporary truce may make sense, an enduring coalition is perhaps the worst option for Japan. I have heard suggestions that this would be accompanied by a roll back of election laws and a return to the old multiple-seat constituencies. I fear this would trigger a reversion to lowest common denominator policies that would encourage rent-seeking and inhibit reform. It would blunt the intellectual and ideological competition that Japan desperately needs, reinforce entrenched interests, and likely perpetuate the status quo.

If Japan needs to chart a new course, then creativity is indispensable to fostering the vision needed to lift the country out of the doldrums. But in today's political environment, such creativity is instead a liability because it risks alienating important supporters.

All of these difficulties are magnified when the public doesn't trust its leaders or the political system. That is perhaps the greatest tragedy because if nothing else, the events of 3.11 have proven that the Japanese people retain an extraordinary capacity to endure great hardship and maintain the bonds of civility, respect and support for each other. Their quiet dignity and endurance in the face of the triple catastrophe have sobered and impressed the rest of the world.

Twice in their country's modern history the Japanese people have rallied behind their leaders to change course and overcome pressing and seemingly insurmountable problems. All that is lacking today is the vision and the leadership to rally them. No Japanese politician seems capable of providing either. Good luck, Prime Minister Noda. You will need it.