



Opposition collapse: opportunity for rationality? by Masato Kamikubo

Masato Kamikubo (masatok@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp) is a professor at the Graduate School of Policy Science, Ritsumeikan University, Japan.

In Japan's Oct. 22 general election, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo won his fifth consecutive victory. At the last minute, Maehara Seiji, leader of the Democratic Party (the DP, the then leading opposition party) tried to get all DP candidates to join the Party of Hope (led by Tokyo Gov. Koike Yuriko) for the election. Koike invoked the "logic of exclusion," and used her own criteria to select DP candidates. Koike and Maehara were severely criticized for causing the disintegration of the opposition. The Party of Hope suffered a disastrous defeat, ending up with only 50 seats.

Leftwing Diet members rejected by the Party of Hope formed the Constitutional Democratic Party (CD), and won 55 seats. However, the entire left, which included the Japanese Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party, took only 67 seats with their platform of support for the constitution and opposition to security legislation. Since the left held 114 seats before the election, the results were a humiliating setback.

Although Koike and Maehara are blamed for the opposition's crushing defeat, their actions have great long-term significance. There is strong public distrust of the opposition, a motley collection of politicians with different policies. During the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration from 2009-2012, the DPJ was internally divided over basic policies such as the constitution, security, and fiscal and taxation systems; that administration collapsed as a result. Since then, the opposition has been on a long losing streak in national elections.

In this situation, it is wrong to think that the Abe government could be overthrown if the opposition could only unite. The most important issue for the opposition group is overcoming the public's distrust of its seemingly random collection of politicians. The actions of Koike and Maehara divided the opposition into two parties over basic constitution policy and security, with the Party of Hope being "pro constitutional amendment and security legislation" and the Constitutional Democratic Party endorsing a policy of "maintaining the constitution while opposing security legislation." This policy-based restructuring of the opposition is a first step for the opposition to recover public trust and to recapture the reins of government.

Another significant aspect of the actions of Koike and Maehara is that it was an attempt to shape a political position that is not centered on security policy, a political strategy that is natural in democratic countries in Europe and the United States. For example, in the UK, opposition parties fiercely criticize the government and the ruling party on domestic policy issues on a

regular basis, but they tend to rally behind the prime minister when a decision is made regarding the overseas dispatch of troops. In Western democracies, opposition parties tend not to generate security policy conflicts that could hurt the national interest. Instead, they work for a change in administration, emphasizing continuity and political stability. Even in Japan, as the opposition parties broke up in this election, those who sought to protect the constitution and oppose security legislation fell to fewer than 20 percent of Diet seats, a drastic drop in support for the position of opposing everything proposed by the government and refusing discussion in the Diet. Moreover, in addition to the ruling party, the Party of Hope and the Japan Innovation Party weighed in on the side of constitutional amendment and approval of the security legislation.

Currently, the allocation of question time in the Diet is 20 percent for the ruling parties and 80 percent for the opposition. The CD and the Party of Hope, the first and second opposition parties, are in balance in the House of Representatives. It is likely that the future balance will be 20 percent for the ruling party, 40 percent for the Party of Hope and 40 percent for the CD. Until now, 80 percent of question time in the Diet has been taken by opposition parties that oppose every move by the government. In the future, 60 percent of questions will be constructive and realistic ones raised by the ruling party and the Party of Hope.

In the Diet, revision of the constitution will no longer be a topic for discussion. Instead, if the initiative to amend the constitution does move forward, there will be extensive discussion of amendments to incorporate provisions for political and administrative systems such as human rights, decentralization, and the bicameral system, as well the war-renunciation provision, Article 9.

There will be a halving of time allotted to Diet discussion of the leftwing claim that "security legislation should be discarded because invoking the right of collective self-defense is unconstitutional." Realistic discussions can be developed on the premise adopted by the ruling party and the Party of Hope that collective self-defense is constitutional. Those discussions should make it possible for Japan to respond more quickly to demands from outside parties, including the United States. Depending on the circumstances surrounding North Korea's missile development, discussion of nuclear armament may no longer be taboo. That, and other serious issues including China's maritime territorial expansion and the spread of global terrorism demand attention. Hopefully, significant changes will be seen in the National Diet.

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