



Japanese Election Results: 'Missing the Big Fish'

by Ayako Doi

The message Japanese voters delivered last Sunday could hardly be clearer: They don't much like the LDP and its ruling coalition, but they don't have much faith in the opposition's ability to govern. So while some people voted to punish the LDP, too few did so to oust it from power. And while others sent cheers to the Democrats, they were insufficient to give them a turn at the helm.

Reading the outcome is a classic exercise in deciding whether the glass is half empty or half full. Though Prime Minister Mori's coalition managed to retain a comfortable majority in the 480-seat lower house, its strength fell 60 seats, from 331 to 271. Even so, that's 30 seats more than a majority – enough for Mori to declare he and the coalition had won a mandate. But he and his allies won something far less than a resounding victory and they know it. When the parties begin to focus on next year's ballot for one-third of the upper house, both the coalition and Mori's leadership may face renewed scrutiny.

No Strategy. The Democrats, all smiles, savored an impressive, 32-seat gain which boosted them from 95 seats to 127. But as a stinging *Nihon Keizai* editorial observed, they managed "to miss the big fish." Despite overwhelming public dislike of the ruling coalition, distaste for Mori, and stiff criticism of LDP's pork barrel politics that created an Everest of public debt, the Democrats didn't come close to ousting the government. That, says *Nikkei*, is at least in part because they had "no strategy" for taking power. Instead of organizing a counter-coalition with other opposition parties that might have presented the voters with a credible alternative, they let the LDP stir fears that they may bring in the Communists to take power; a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. It was the LDP, six years ago this week, that did a deal to make Socialist Tomiichi Murayama prime minister, just so it could get back in government. But instead of pointing that out, or saying things to quell voter fears, Democratic leader Yukio Hatoyama simply rejected any thought of a coalition with the Communists – and thereby ruled out any chance of creating an alliance that might have hoped for a lower house majority.

The Democrats also failed to present a clear policy alternative. Instead of attacking the coalition's ideas, they contented themselves with personal assaults on Mori's leadership qualifications. As a result, their platform was incoherent. And last but not least, Hatoyama himself lacked the kind of leadership quality that might have convinced people to unite behind him. Former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone once likened Hatoyama to soft ice-cream – "sweet and light" – meaning he lacks the toughness and imagination to lead a coalition, never mind a government.

Bitter Pill. To be sure, the Democrats showed bravery. It's a rare political party that can campaign on a promise to increase taxes and still come out ahead. Hatoyama unveiled a proposal to lower the income level at which taxes kick in, effectively raising the levy on lower income families. He argued that Japan must cut its enormous budget deficit and start paying off public debt, which now stands at Yen 493 trillion – about equal to GDP. He insisted that people are so worried about the effect of debt on the future of the economy and their own retirements that they're willing to swallow a "bitter pill" to start fixing it.

Whether the voters bought that is unclear. The Democrats didn't win power, but several candidates defeated well-known LDP veterans – two sitting cabinet ministers among them – in Tokyo and other cities. That may indicate that urban independents are fed up with the LDP's dip into the pork barrel. Several analysts said the country may be splitting into rival constituencies representing on one hand the rural folk who like big public works projects and, on the other, urbanites more interested in fixing the pension system.

Cold Feet. One puzzling outcome Sunday was a loss of seats by the Communists, who had gained consistently in recent elections. This time the party tried to make itself look like a responsible, potential partner in government. It may just be that this gave some voters a case of cold feet. But now that they've said they'll tolerate Japan's alliance with the U.S. and leave its capitalist economy intact, the Communists may find it convenient to go all the way – change their name and become a 'normal' party. If and when that happens – and some predict it won't be long – the political scenery may change some more.

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