

### **Casting Off the Old Regime: The DPJ's Real Challenge**

by Haruko Satoh

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Kan Naoto's re-election as leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has given him the mandate to continue as prime minister. Most Japanese welcomed this outcome. They are dismayed by the state of national politics and the country's inability to produce stable leadership since Koizumi Jun'ichiro left office in 2006. Kan is the fifth prime minister since then.

But the path of political renewal in Japan is not over yet. For Kan's re-election to become truly meaningful and restore the public sense that the change of power last August was the right choice, Kan needs to cast off the legacies of the 1955-regime of left-right tension within his party. They prevent the DPJ from becoming a truly new political party, liberated from Liberal Democratic Party-style politics and the socialist/leftist mindset toward the security alliance with the US.

#### **The Twin Legacies**

Last August Japanese voters gave a decisive "no" to the LDP but that wasn't an enthusiastic "yes" to the DPJ. The new ruling party has struggled to convert these anti-LDP voters and get them to cast a vote of confidence for the DPJ. Sadly, the DPJ failed to secure a majority in the Upper House after the July mid-term elections. Without a majority in the two houses, the impact of the change of power diminishes.

There are three causes for this failure. First, Hatoyama Yukio, the DPJ's first prime minister, bungled the issue of the relocation of the US Marines' Futenma airbase in Okinawa by using it as the showcase to demonstrate how his administration would do things differently from the LDP. Second, allegations of dirty money haunt Ozawa Ichiro, undermining his image as an otherwise strong leader who orchestrated the change of power. The resignation of Hatoyama and Ozawa in May brought Kan to office. He initially inspired those disenchanted with the Hatoyama government, but Kan himself became the third factor by committing a tactical blunder in the election campaign: he mentioned a tax hike before the elections. These setbacks undermined coherence within the DPJ itself, especially after Ozawa, who controls the largest group in the party, decided to challenge Kan for party leadership.

Nevertheless, the bigger problem for the DPJ was Hatoyama and Ozawa, who each manifested structural elements of Japan's "old regime."

#### *Hatoyama and Futenma*

Hatoyama's Futenma policy was sucked into the maw of postwar Japan's security identity dilemma, which is caused by the juggling of the real-world politics of the US-Japan

security treaty (represented by the LDP) and the ideal world of lasting peace envisaged in the "peace" Constitution of 1947 (represented by the former Socialist Party and public sentiment).

Hatoyama might have wished to lessen Japan's structural dependency on the US, and might have wished for more balance between Japan's relations with the US and China. But having picked the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as a coalition partner—ostensibly to secure its support in the summer's Upper House elections—and then trying to co-opt rather than override the SDP on the Futenma issue, his Cabinet fractured. The SDP had inherited the former Socialist Party's platform to defend Article 9 of the Constitution and to be anti-US bases. The tail wagged the dog as the SDP's pacifist identity raised its head to its leadership to make a stand, even though the party's parliamentary influence was negligible. By allowing Fukushima Mizuho, SDP leader and Cabinet minister for social issues, to express party views that echoed Okinawan sentiment against US bases, and then letting her pull the party from the coalition, Americans and Japanese came to doubt both Hatoyama's leadership and the DPJ's ability to manage the alliance as a ruling party.

#### *The Ozawa problem*

Ozawa's problem was simpler: he continued to practice LDP-style politics of money, bullying by numbers, and pork-barrel politics. Although prosecutors have been unable to implicate him in any of the cases that involved his office staff, Ozawa has remained in the "grey zone" in the eyes of the general public. Kan, on the other hand, was not a former LDP member and represented a DPJ that was transparent and practiced clean politics.

Cleaning up and slimming down the governing machinery of economic growth that turned corrupt and ineffective are critical parts of the DPJ agenda. Ruthless administrative restructuring, so-called "shiwake," has been one of the hallmarks of DPJ rule; one might say that "shiwake" kept the DPJ afloat despite Hatoyama's poor leadership. As Kan said, the DPJ needs to go back to its roots: clean and transparent political processes.

The leadership race between Kan and Ozawa was, therefore, essentially a choice between old style and new style politics. The DPJ's rank and file—local politicians, grassroots party members, and registered supporters—overwhelmingly voted for Kan, which gave him a mandate when Diet members were split in half. More attuned to the views of the general public that wants stable leadership and a prime minister who believes in accountability and transparency, the grassroots rejected Ozawa. The people's expectation of politics and politicians has decidedly shifted away from the old ways.

## Farewell to Old Ghosts

Having cleared another hurdle in Japan's democratic evolution, one hopes that Kan can last as prime minister for at least two years until the next party leader election, or even until the next general elections in 2013, if only to give the Japanese time to absorb and adjust to the shock of the change of power. While Kan's leadership remains untested, he is not in an enviable position; Ozawa is not known to concede easily and he still commands sizeable influence within the party. And, there is no policy issue that can be singled out as more important than others, from the economy or social welfare to foreign and security policy. The Cabinet must be an all-rounder.

Nevertheless, if Kana has one crucial job, it is to forge a DPJ foreign and security policy identity. The ghostly re-appearance of the old "left-right axis" in the context of coalition politics over Futenma exposed the DPJ's inability to build a consensus on foreign and security policy issues, such as the constitutional restraint on the right to collective defense or Japan's role in the security alliance with the US.

Defense policy and alliance politics in postwar Japan has never been the product of open and democratic decision-making, particularly during the Cold War, in part because Japanese security was (and still is) ultimately dependent on the US, but also because the LDP's old nemesis, the Socialist Party, was ideologically incapable of recognizing the alliance or of accepting the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) as constitutional. As a party formed by defectors from these two parties (the Socialists and the LDP), united in opposition to LDP dominance, the DPJ has internalized that left-right divide. Had the DPJ consolidated its position on security policy and offered its vision of a new security identity for Japan before it took charge (and it had ample time to do so), Hatoyama might not have looked suspiciously anti-alliance.

Japan can no longer afford to keep the dichotomies — between militarists and pacifists, conservatives and leftist, or pro-U.S. and pro-UN — that keep it from building a national consensus on Japan's core security identity, one that does not sway from one administration to another. This is all the more imperative if a change of power is to become a regular occurrence in Japanese democracy.