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**The July 12 Elections: A New Page in Japanese Democracy?** by Christopher B. Johnstone

Conventional wisdom predicted that the Liberal Democratic Party would reign supreme in Japan's July 12 Upper House elections. Public opinion polls taken a week before the election gave little cause for doubt: major newspapers projected that an indifferent electorate would allow the LDP to at least preserve its position, and the LDP boastfully predicted that it would win enough seats to recapture a majority in the chamber. A return to the days of one-party rule was just around the corner.

Instead, the LDP is reeling. Out of 126 contested seats, the LDP secured just 44, although this was easily the largest single-party total. Among the party's 17 lost seats were well-known figures expected to win easily – such as Hiroshi Ohki, who held a Cabinet seat as Director General of the Environmental Agency. Even more notable, the party performed abysmally in the proportional representation race, where voters choose a party rather than a candidate, a process that encourages a focus on policy differences. The LDP won 14 of 50 contested seats – only two more than the Democratic Party of Japan, the nation's largest opposition party. Stripped of the benefits of local personality politics, the LDP had little broad appeal.

But the LDP was not the only loser; voters rejected all the major parties that formed the core of Japan's post-war political system. The Social Democrats (formerly the Japan Socialist Party) continued their slide toward extinction, losing seven seats; the Socialists, once a vibrant opposition party that lost support after an ill-advised alliance with the LDP, now number only 13. Sagikake, a relatively new party that also chose to align with the LDP, failed to return a single candidate. Even the Komei Party, the long-time conservative opposition force affiliated with a lay Buddhist organization, was unable to hold its ground.

**What's Next?**

The election was a condemnation of LDP leadership – but not an endorsement of any particular alternative. Despite the ruling party's unpopularity, opposition forces remain fragmented and lack a distinct message. The obvious victors were the Democrats and the Communist Party, which each gained nine seats. Support for both can partly be seen as a protest vote; more than 50 percent of respondents in a post-election poll stated they thought that the Democrats gained seats because there was "no other party to vote for." In keeping with this anti-LDP sentiment, independent candidates were also successful, adding 13 seats. Most opposition campaigns centered on criticizing LDP management of the economy, without offering clear prescriptions. The LDP's repeated flip-flops on permanent income tax reductions attracted headlines in the final week of the campaign, but Democratic tax proposals were also vague and ill-defined.

The LDP therefore remains firmly in the driver's seat of Japanese politics. LDP ranks in the Upper House are more than twice the size of the largest opposition force -- and the party controls a majority in the far more powerful Lower House. The challenge for the opposition is to unite around a policy platform that is a clear alternative to the ruling party. Until they do so, Japanese voters could well experience a repeat of the short-lived euphoria that followed the LDP defeat in 1993.

Nevertheless, absent a change in strategy, the LDP's long-term future does not appear bright. The party was decimated in urban areas, failing to win even a single seat in the high-population constituencies of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Aichi, Kyoto, Osaka and Hyogo. Indeed, the LDP should be grateful for the seats it won: without the benefit of the current districting system, which gives rural constituencies disproportionately high representation in the Diet, the results could have been far worse. The party's support is also increasingly limited to older voters. Public opinion surveys indicate that working professionals under age 50 voted solidly for the Democrats over the LDP. These trends ominously suggest that the ruling party is increasingly out of touch with the majority of Japanese society. Elderly farmers and shopkeepers may still be a powerful force in Japan, but they hardly represent the political constituencies of the future.

The pre-election predictions – this author included – dramatically underestimated the Japanese public's sophistication. Rather than suffering from apathy, voters turned out in higher numbers than in any Upper House poll since 1989. Instead of a return to the conservative fold, the expected pattern of behavior during an economic downturn, the Japanese electorate dealt a staggering blow to the political establishment. Japanese voters apparently understand the country's problems better than the current leadership, despite assertions that average households have gone largely untouched by the financial crisis. Although it is dangerous to extrapolate from a single election, Japanese voters appear to be demanding greater government accountability.

**Implications for U.S.-Japan Relations**

The impact of the election on U.S.-Japan relations will be relatively minor. Prime Minister Hashimoto's trip to Washington; planned for two weeks after the election – in retrospect, an astounding display of LDP arrogance – has been canceled, but his successor will depart little from past practice. The security relationship in particular will be largely untouched by the domestic political turmoil. Defense issues were distinctly missing from campaign discourse, despite pending legislation to implement the new bilateral defense guidelines. Apparently opposition parties saw little to be

gained from taking issue with the proposed measures, a fact that bodes well for passage of the legislation – although domestic economic concerns may delay Diet action. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party has attracted attention in the past by calling for an alliance without American troops based on Japanese soil. The party's long-term success, therefore, may have implications for future alliance dynamics.

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