

Is Japan changing after the fall of LDP? Hatoyama and the DPJ's new 'politics in command'

MUTO Ichiyo

Dear Muto san and friends in Japan,

Suddenly, with the election results in Japan, there is a flood of memory about all you friends. The results look pretty unprecedented sitting here in India. But one has no idea whether it comes anywhere close to what you all have been struggling for all these years?! Or whether one should even hope for any changes, even mild ones. If anyone has written anything on it in English, or has the time to pen a small paragraph, it would really help to reconnect again.

In admiration and with regards,

Vinod Raina
Delhi, India
September 1 2009

Dear Vinod,

I thank you for prompting me to write on this matter. The August 30 general election here has brought on the decisive downfall of the Liberal Democratic Party, ushering in a new dynamics in Japanese politics. I felt that this change of situation would require a full analysis to be shared by friends overseas, but it was the heavy task that deterred me – an old, feeble soul – from the challenge. Then, your mail arrived. With your prodding I have sat up and will try a sketch, not a full analysis, of what I personally perceive has happened and is happening. Your questions are directed to four people, and of course what I am scribbling below reflects only my observation.

Yes, Vinod, as you say, this is unprecedented. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for the first time tumbled from its position of power. And this occurred because an overwhelming majority of Japanese voters felt enough is enough after a half-century of one-party rule by the LDP. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the major opposition party, saw its Lower House numbers increase from 115 to 308 seats, and the LDP's strength shrank from 300 to 119. The New Komei Party, LDP's coalition partner, lost all its seats from single seat constituencies – its total seats were cut from 31 to 21.

Isn't this impressive? The voters rejected the LDP rule, particularly one led by such an incredibly vulgar, insensitive politician as the prime minister, by massively voting for the DPJ. This, however, worked against the Communists and Social Democrats, the left on the political spectrum. The Social Democrats, facing the danger of being erased from the national political map, clinched an unequal partnership with the DPJ and succeeded in returning seven seats, the same number as before. The Communist Party silently retracted its critique of the DPJ as another conservative party and pledged to be a 'constructive opposition party,' merely to say yes, yes, or no, no, depending on issues. The party barely maintained its previous strength, nine seats.

Now, Vinod, you have asked me two good questions – if what happened can mean any change, even if mild, and if 'it comes anywhere close to what you all have been struggling for.' My answer to the first

question is yes. It does represent a major change, even a drastic change. As for the second, my answer is that we have come closer to it, in the sense that the political dynamism that the election ushered in has created new possibilities as well as new dangers.

Why then do I say this is a major change? Is this not a mere shift of power from one conservative party to another? Yes, generally speaking, it is. The DPJ is not a left or progressive party. Nevertheless, the dislodging of the LDP from the position of power carries a greater significance than might be apparent. I say so because the LDP was not just a strong conservative party, but rather the entrenched institutional ruling machinery of this country. You may perhaps draw a parallel with, say, the Institutional Revolutionary Party of Mexico (PRI) that ruled practically from 1920 through 2000. Or think of what the downfall of the Suharto-Golkar regime meant in Indonesia. Am I correct, Vinod, if I say that the Indian Congress Party from 1947 through to 1977 was the Indian parallel to the Japanese LDP? Maybe we can put the Chinese Communist Party since 1949 in the same bracket? Their histories and colors differ, and greatly, from one to another, but they are all monster parties fused with the state machinery. People voted for or against them, but the machineries remained immune.

The major significance of the 2009 August election is that this machinery has fallen apart. One interesting feature of this development is that more than half of those who voted for the DPJ did not support some of the main policy contents of the party's election platform, such as abolishing speedway tolls. First and foremost, Japanese voters rejected continued rule by the LDP machinery. You can say that in this country, too, 'change' became the major slogan. But unlike in the United States, there was no personal enthusiasm for the DPL leader Hatoyama Yukio. He was not a Japanese Barack Obama.

How has this happened?

Of course this did not happen all of a sudden. The LDP-state complex began to

erode at its base under the neoliberal 'reform' launched by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro back in 2001. Vinod, as you have visited this country at some intervals, you must have witnessed how local towns have been depopulated, small shops closed, and homeless people's cardboard huts and tents increased in parks. Big business profits soared during and beyond the Koizumi era until the current financial crisis broke out, but workers' wages continued to fall year after year, their job situation rapidly became precarious, with the worker-dispatch system spreading to practically all industrial sectors, including manufacturing. Farmers were hit hard as farm product prices went down. Over-aged rural communities are on the verge of extinction.

All this was brought about by neoliberal reform carried out by Koizumi Junichiro and his government from 2001 to 2007. Koizumi mercilessly carried out neoliberal reform, centered on privatization of the postal and postal savings services, cutting subsidies to local governments, cutting social security benefits, changing labor laws to give almighty power to big business to hire and fire, and so on. This politician, wielding a magic wand of agitation and performance successfully diverting public eyes from destructive effects of his reform, continued to enjoy extreme popularity throughout his rule. When he harangued, 'I will destroy the Liberal Democratic Party if it resists my reform,' people applauded as they felt the party was the problem. Free trade will benefit consumers, urban middle class citizens were told. Repeated demagogic appeals like, 'No reform, no growth,' mesmerized the majority of the people. The apex of Koizumi's leadership occurred when he called a snap Lower House election in July 2005 to railroad the postal privatization bill opposed by many of his own party members. In that election, the LDP won 300 Lower House seats, defeating the DPJ. How and why this magic worked is a topic to be seriously studied, but I cannot go into it here.

With the expiry of his term of office in September 2006, Koizumi retired. What followed was both unexpected and unprecedented – the two succeeding LDP prime ministers, Abe Shinzo and Fukuda Yasuo, abandoned office one after another after serving for just one year each. When Koizumi handed power over to Abe Shinzo, a dedicated ultra-rightist glorifying Japan's imperial past, the LDP had a two-thirds Lower House majority, large enough to validate bills rejected by the Upper House.

Rightist Abe suffered a shattering defeat in the Upper House election in July 2007, the ruling coalition losing a majority and the DPJ winning the largest representation in the Upper House. Obviously, the Koizumi-generated 'reform' illusions had faded. Now the opposition-dominated Upper House was able to reject bills sent from the Lower House. After his election defeat, Abe pretended not to care, declaring he would stay on as prime minister, but in September he abruptly stepped down, giving no convincing reasons. In total disarray, the LDP appointed cynical middle-of-the-roader Fukuda Yasuo as Abe's successor. He was obviously a stopgap prime minister and, understandably, his approval rating slipped fast, indicating the LDP would lose if a general election was held under his cabinet. So Fukuda too resigned and the LDP seated rightist Aso Taro as prime minister, speculating that this erratic '*manga* maniac' might excite the people and lead the party to a victory in the coming general elections. Alas! People were not fooled. Ignorant and insensitive, Aso earned only disdain, his approval rating slipping every passing month. The public was angry at the LDP's passing around the premier's post amongst its leaders, as if it were their private property. Aso did not care about what the people felt, clung to power, postponed going to election, and initiated an extravagant deficit-spending spree in the hope of buying off big business and people. But to no avail. Already, people had become aware of the serious social injustices caused by the neoliberal package.

'Market fundamentalism' and 'neoliberal policies' had become negative symbols even in the mainstream media. By early summer, the LDP was in total disarray, and its once-formidable community-level and business association-based election machinery no longer functioned. Traditional LDP sympathizers massively walked away, some expressing support for the DPJ. Various surveys showed about 30% of the traditional LDP constituency moved from the LDP to the DPJ.

The LDP's position as the entrenched ruling machinery crumbled in this manner.

Well, Vinod, I began to write this letter a few days after the elections. And by now, the new government headed by Hatoyama Yukio is in place and extremely busy at work. The new government is a coalition of three parties, with the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party as the DPJ's minor partners. The DJP asked for their participation because, in the Upper House, the DJP alone is short of a majority and needed seven Social Democrats' and nine People's New Party's seats to facilitate the passage of bills.

The night the new cabinet ministers were appointed, I was watching TV and saw them appear one by one before the press and present their respective credos and policies. Frankly, it was a bit moving. Everyone, presenting somewhat naively his/her policy focuses, appeared dead serious. I have seen many such post-appointment press conferences of LDP cabinets, all dull and tedious. This time, the ministers did not read from statements prepared by bureaucrats, and I felt that these people really meant what they were saying. Certainly I sensed that they shared a common political will.

What is this political will I sensed? It is a resolve to place the state management under their control. Good or bad, the DPJ appears serious about destroying the LDP-type state-party complex, dominated by a central bureaucracy. They want to deprive the bureaucracy of its self-serving autonomy and subject it to the party and cabinet. They say this is how 'politics with the

people as the masters' can be introduced. The catchword is de-bureaucratization (*datsu kanryo*) of politics, complemented by another slogan, *seiji yusen*, or 'politics in command.' Party President Hatoyama calls this a 'revolutionary change' in the Japanese statehood, to be carried out 'for the first time since the Meiji period.' Revolutionary or not, this is a remarkable change. But what does this change mean?

The LDP ruling machinery, according to the DPJ perception, is built around the central government bureaucracy whose agencies represent the particular interests of industries, pressure groups, sectors, and other segments of interest. Most LDP politicians having these business and other groups as sponsors would intervene in bureaucratic policy making processes on behalf of their interests. The LDP politicians also obtained votes by pork-barrel politics with subsidies promised to local communities. It was in the interplay of these various interests that the national budget was organized. After all it was the bureaucracy that coordinated these interests and formulated the budget that the cabinet rubber stamped. On the other hand, this LDP-bureaucracy symbiosis served the bureaucracy's interests too. Each government agency had set up numerous government-subsidized semi-official agencies where retired ranking officials are re-employed and receive high salaries and severance pay. Those who often do agency-hopping receive exorbitant retirement allowances every time they move. This notorious practice, known as 'descent from the heavens,' is said to involve 4500 semi-public entities with 25,000 parachuted ex-officials who receive subsidies amounting to 12 trillion yen (US\$120 billion) every year. The LDP state machinery, according to the DPJ, lies in this corrupt triangular collusion of LDP, bureaucracy, and big business.

Under LDP rule, the national budget therefore was made not by a single political will of the state but as an eventual outcome of the interplay of the self-interests involved. This is how the DPJ perceived the secret of the Japanese party-state complex.

The DPJ says it is determined to disintegrate this whole entrenched mechanism by concentrating the powers of budget compilation in the hands of the cabinet itself and placing the whole administrative mechanism directly under the command of the party. For this purpose, a new bureau, the State Strategy Bureau, is to be set up, vested with the powers to prioritize state policies and budget allocations.

Can this approach as such succeed in turning the huge, smart, and self-serving bureaucracy into public servants loyally carrying out DPJ policies? It is hard to predict at this stage. But watching what DPJ young Turks and veterans have started to say and do, I am impressed with their terrific enthusiasm to pursue this goal. Hatoyama has appointed some of these people to key positions in the government.

I appreciate particularly their bold steps to retroactively cancel and rescind negative decisions and achievements. In Japanese politics, people may begin some good things but would never dare remove fait-accompli. The new government seems to be breaking from this inertia by undoing some of what the LDP government has done. It has frozen the Aso government's supplementary budget, suspended outlays under it, and is going to appropriate the recovered money in accordance with new priorities. In addition, the postal service privatization program is to be put under review. Major dam projects already under construction are also being suspended or cancelled.

The image of a semi-finished useless concrete structure being hammered, smashed, and removed evokes in me the image of the Berlin wall being hammered and pulverized. As it was in Berlin, what are smashed and removed are not just physical but political structures.

But, OK, suppose the DJP puts politics in command. What kind of politics is it going to advance? Where is the new government situated on the political spectrum?

Frankly, Vinod, I do not know. Not yet. 'Japan enters "the realm of unknown"' is the headline of the *International Herald*

Tribune (17 September 2009), reporting on the inauguration of the Hatoyama cabinet. I concur. While the DPJ's will to destroy the LDP-state mechanism is unmistakable, its political program is not so clear. Rather, it is a new kind of cocktail made up of diverse, even heterogeneous, ingredients, a mix no one has tasted.

The first sip however had a beguiling flavor. *The New York Times* carried a short op-ed article bearing Hatoyama's signature, entitled, 'A New Path for Japan.' Have you read it, Vinod? You will be surprised. Hatoyama sounds like a staunch anti-capitalist. It begins like a movement declaration. I will quote:

In the post-Cold War period, Japan has been continually buffeted by the winds of market fundamentalism in a U.S.-led movement that is more usually called globalization. In the fundamentalist pursuit of capitalism people are treated not as an end but as a means. Consequently, human dignity is lost. (Hatoyama 2009)

Wow, how nice! Can you believe that this is by a Japanese leader soon to be appointed Prime Minister? This article, it later became known, is not Hatoyama's original text but a summary made from his lengthy paper, 'My political philosophy' in the monthly journal *Voice*. This original article is devoted primarily to his key concept 'yuai,' or 'fraternity.' (I think he is using the term unaware of its gender implications.) I read the original and found that the summary did not go against the author's original logic, although emphasis was shifted away from 'fraternity.'

No wonder this article came as a shock to Washington. Has a party led by this anti-capitalist globalization leader really come to power in Japan?

Wait a minute! If so, why does the party's election platform (Manifesto) promise to promote conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement with the United States? Doesn't this contradict the party president's denunciation of 'neoliberal globalization'?

There is more. The Manifesto emphasizes that Japan will strengthen its Asia

diplomacy. But why then is there no mention at all of settling issues of Japan's aggression and colonization of Asia? It also promises to promote EPAs and FTAs within the Asia-Pacific region as though there were no problems with regard to EPAs with the Philippines and Thailand.

You can say that overall the DPJ-led coalition government is located left of the LDP government. In that sense, you can broadly call it a slightly center-left government. True, looking at the DPJ Manifesto, you find some good promises, measures to meet the keen livelihood needs of the most seriously suffering people. This clearly differentiates DPJ policy from LDP policy. The DPJ is going to directly subsidize the people while the LDP was subsidizing big business to 'enlarge the economic pie,' so people would benefit from the trickle-down effect. The DPJ promises to give uniform substantive child allowance, abolish high school tuitions, and raise minimum wages. Pro-labor measures are also promised, centered on the abolition of the notorious labor dispatch system in the manufacturing industry. The LDP program proposes drastic change in the public pension scheme, following the Swedish model.

One major question to be asked is if the new government is changing the Japan-US security relations in meaningful ways. This is the touchstone of the new government's will to change. In the post-Cold War period, Japan was brought into an even tighter US military embrace than at the height of the Cold War, as I have discussed in detail in past issues of the *Japonesia Review*. Especially during the Bush period, the US military transformation program turned Japan into a cog in the US global military apparatus, even institutionally subjecting Japanese military forces to American command. Confronting persistent resistance from local people, the Japanese and US governments were dead-set on imposing a new military base on Okinawa. In the 2009 Manifesto, the DPJ states that 'in order to create a close and equal Japan-US relationship, we will

propose amending the Japan–US Status of Forces agreement, and will consider revising the planned realignment of US forces in Japan, as well as reviewing the nature of US bases in Japan’ (translation by *the Japan Times* 2009). You may think this is a bold statement defying the American dominance. But I am not sure whether the DPJ government is going to seriously negotiate this matter with Washington.

There is an episode that may be prognostic. When negotiating terms of its coalition with the Social Democratic Party, then-DPJ Secretary General Okada Katsuya was reluctant to mention renegotiation of the Status of Forces agreement in the coalition accord. SDP Chair Fukushima Mizuho adamantly insisted on this point, and Okada only grudgingly and patronizingly agreed to include in the accord the exact phrase that had been printed and widely publicized in the party Manifesto. The negotiations dragged on and on because Okada said he did not want to provoke US President Obama. Okada was subsequently appointed Foreign Minister. Is this Foreign Minister going to negotiate with Washington, or just beg?

Vinod, this is why I say I don’t know what the DPJ’s actual behavior is going to be. The problem is that most of the DPJ’s major proclaimed policies are not based on principles. At the moment, they are different from the LDP policies, and mostly for the better. But having neither principles nor a total vision for the future, they may change, opportunistically, subject to diverse influences.

In fact, if you take a look into the composition of this party, you are surprised how it could say what it did in its Manifesto; in particular, criticism of neoliberal globalization or militarization. As you know, the great bulk of the party members are defectors of the Liberal Democratic Party. The recognized strongest man of the party, Ozawa Ichiro, former secretary general of the LDP, and now appointed Secretary General of the DPJ, is one of the major strategists who advocated ‘Japan as an ordinary country.’ His scenario of

turning Japan into a country having fully legitimate military forces through the revision of constitution is shared by all conservative politicians. True, the party has a ‘liberal wing,’ consisting of former Socialist Party members. But they have little say in party affairs, and for survival are said to be close to Ozawa. Hatoyama himself is an enthusiast for changing the constitution, pledging loyalty to his grandfather, Hatoyama Ichiro, who was Prime Minister from 1954 through 1956 and known for his failed drive to revise the constitution in order to remilitarize.

Alarming, the party has within its ranks quite a few die-hard ultra-rightists, some occupying key party positions. They never hide their extreme beliefs. In 2007, twenty of them issued a joint appeal for the creation of an intra-party caucus to promote revisionist views of history on the Nanjing massacre and ‘comfort women’ issues. The point is that the party let these rightist activities continue unchecked.

Besides, of all parties, the DPJ is the party having among its MPs the highest share of graduates from the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management, a private political education center set up by the late Matsushita Konosuke, the founder of Matsushita Electrical Co., now Panasonic. The alumni of this institute, now active in national and local politics, appear to have some common technocratic political philosophy that politics is management skills dedicated to cost efficiency. Judging from what they have done and said as politicians, they are generally neoliberal and right-leaning. Before the election, Matsushita alumni numbered more than 30 of the 115 DPJ representatives. How can the DPJ take a principled anti-neoliberal position when apparent proponents of neoliberalism are at the core of the party?

The Manifesto promises some positive things, which, however, do not result from a set of firm principles, as I earlier noted. The main pressure to have forced this party to adopt pro-people policies comes

from the cries of the people. To fight the LDP, the party must be responsive to the needs of the grassroots, including working people at the bottom. The party also counts on the organizational support of the major trade union federation, Rengo. In this context, the DPJ must follow a pro-people line on major issues. But it is also true that it does so largely for political convenience. So, Vinod, there is an alarming gap between what one says and what one is, a gap that unsettles, and even scares, me. For without principles, one can change from one to the other extreme without qualms. That is why I said that this change can entail dangers as well as possibilities.

The DPJ, in order to be consistent, needs to establish principled positions at least on the following issues: (1) the military alliance with the United States, (2) self-critical view of history, (3) neoliberal capitalism, and (4) the constitution. The party says a bit of something on each of these, but is articulate on none.

What about the status and future of the LDP? Its future is extremely dim. It ruled for too long as the state machinery. Therefore, expecting it to survive as an independent opposition is like asking a fish to live on land. What can the LDP out of power mean? How do they define themselves? How can they attract communities, big business, and interest groups when they have nothing to offer in return? By far the most powerful sponsor of the party was the Japan Business Association (Nihon Keidanren), which was using the LDP as a tool to execute pro-capital and anti-labor policies. Now that the party has no power, none of the former supporter groups have particular reasons to back it. First and foremost, the LDP finds it difficult to define its political identity. The fish must become amphibious in order to survive, or get back into water as soon as possible, otherwise it will dry up. It cannot wait too long. The Upper House election coming in July 2010 will decide the fate of the LDP. In the meantime, it will struggle to survive, and do so mainly

by negative campaigns, finding weaknesses of the DPJ.

Before the August election, I speculated that the LDP, after defeat, may try to reconstruct its identity as a genuine ultra-right party, activating and integrating the grassroots chauvinist, anti-foreigner kind of movement. That danger is still there, but the likelihood of this course has diminished as the party failed to return most of its rightists in the August election. This may be the time for them to learn the art of survival from the PRI or Golkar.

Given this development, what will be the immediate future of Japanese politics? It is too early to predict but one can think of a few possible scenarios. The DPJ government may establish itself as another institutionalized ruling machine, or may blunder and misgovern and get split up, or may move right under an ultra-right influence from below, or move left, if slightly, under the pressure of social movements. As it is lacking principles and composed of heterogeneous trends, it is open to any of the above scenarios.

This means that now is the time when social movements working on different fronts – labor, women, peace, welfare, environment, agriculture – should get together to establish their common principled positions and visions of Japanese society. That is, to tell the DPJ government that we are here and will stay here until the government takes principled positions on crucial matters and acts accordingly. This does include lobbying activities, but the main approach is not lobbying but the influence we exert on the DPJ government through our uncompromising presence in the midst of society. Such pressure from below may split the party, triggering a process of reconsolidation of parliamentary political forces toward a sounder, more principled disposition of political forces, a welcome outcome benefiting our march forward.

Anyway, Vinod, we have come onto a new political terrain whose configuration is still to be explored. But things have begun moving. I like it.

I will write again to follow up.

Best,
Muto Ichiyo
26 September 2009, Yokohama

Author's note

Vinod Raina is an Indian activist working with the People's Science Movement, one of the chief organizers of the World Social Forum in India, and engaged in various struggles for social justice, with whom Muto has been working closely over the past 15 years.

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Author's biography

MUTO Ichiyo is the co-president of the People's Plan Study Group in Tokyo.

Contact address: 153, Sachigaoka, Asahiku, Yokohama, Japan 241-0822.

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