

# *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE LDP IN JAPAN: WHAT HAPPENED?*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the reason why the LDP has stayed so long in power and why it ultimately fell out. It begins by giving an overview of the political situation in Japan in the past decades. It then proceeds to explain the main theories on why the LDP stayed so long in power and maintains that the main contributing factor has been a weak opposition. Finally it discusses how the new party has distinguished itself from former opposition parties and how and why the LDP had failed to meet that challenge.*

**Keywords:** Liberal Democratic Party, Democratic Party of Japan, Elections, New Komeito, Japan Communist Party, Japan socialist Party, Junichiro Koizumi, Shinzo Abe, Taro Aso.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Echoing what Voltaire said of the Holy Roman Empire the leftists in Japan have for a long time said that the Liberal Democratic Party is neither liberal, nor democratic and not really a party. Democratic or not it is nevertheless a fact that it has managed to retain its grip on power almost uninterruptedly since 1955, a situation unheard of in any other “real” democracy. All this just changed in August this year when the party dramatically lost 155 seats in the lower house elections and thus its majority. The party had already lost its majority to the opposition in the upper house back in 2007 but now, finally some might add

the era of almost uninterrupted LDP domination seems to be at an end. The question that the LDP party members are probably asking themselves is how on earth did this happen? This paper will try to answer that question but before proceeding to do that it is important to understand the workings of Japanese politics and how the party, despite its unpopularity and despite its corruption, managed to maintain its grip on power for so long.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE LDP HOLD ON POWER**

The Liberal Democratic Party came into existence in 1955 when the country's two main conservative parties; the Liberal Party and the Japan Democratic Party merged into one. The left wing parties had been openly discussing for some time a merger and the conservatives feared that they might lose power against a united left. Most of the centre-left parties soon merged as well to form the Japan Socialist Party. The JSP was orthodox Marxist, vehemently anti-American, opposed to the U.S. military presence in Japan, and opposed to the U.S.-Japanese security treaty. The conservative wing thus had good reasons to merge. Until August 2009, the party had been in power non-stop since 1955 with the exception of 1993 when a breakaway faction from it formed a multi-party coalition that only lasted for 11 months. The situation made some political commenter dub Japan *de facto* one party system while others would call it the first party system. One would think that in a democratic state, a party with such a long track record of staying in power must have been very popular, but far from it, the LDP is and has for a long time been both unpopular and inherently corrupt. Its support base had been steadily declining thus it resolved to form coalition governments with the small Buddhist party New-Komeito. In the year 1990 a poll conducted showed that only 19% of participants supported the single party system while over 50% wanted some other alternative<sup>12</sup>, a poll conducted in August this year showed that 20% of participants were going to vote for the LDP against 34.6% who said they were going to vote for the main opposition party; the Democratic party of Japan.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore the LDP does not have and has never had any well defined ideology; rather it has strived to maintain the system. In the absence of countering evidence the LDP had for decades been able to maintain that it is the only party capable of running the economy and if the left-wing parties ever came to power nationalization and economic stagnation would surely follow. Tight campaigning regulations (laid out in 1925) also surely favor the incumbent candidate. As Hrebenar points out: "Almost every type of campaign activity that would evolve the voter in any but the most superficial way as prohibited. In particular, door-to-door campaigning, signature drives, polling, providing food and drink, mass meetings, parades, unscheduled speeches, multiple

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<sup>12</sup> Hrebenar, 2000, page 11.

<sup>13</sup> "Japans opposition leads ruling LDP, Tokyo Shinbun Poll says."

campaign vehicles, and candidate produced literature are illegal in contemporary Japanese campaigns.”<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore strict laws apply to size and form of advertisements. The guidebook of do's and don'ts in election campaigns is 478 pages long! Internet commercials are furthermore banned, the reason being that since the book (published in 1928) did not mention the internet it is considered illegal. Hrebenar does though acknowledge that regulations are regularly flouted but nonetheless the background role that campaigning posters and commercials seem to play in Japan is striking to outsiders. Yet another aspect of Japanese politics is the tremendous power that the bureaucrats hold. The bureaucrats, along with politicians have worked to protect the interests of lobbyists. The ministries also have their own budget which they can distribute more or less without consulting elected politicians. Still today a large number of bureaucrats are graduates from the elite Tokyo University and as such, they often consider themselves above the politicians in rank. When interviewing former Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, Chris Hogg of the BBC recounted with almost a pity how the stiff, uncompromising bureaucrats surrounding him seemed to dictate everything he said and did.<sup>15</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the office of Prime minister in Japan is among the weakest in any democratic state.

Despite rampant corruption, scandals and only minimal success in reviving the economy after the post war economic “*miracle*” came to a halt in early 1990s the LDP succeeded in maintaining its grip on power almost uninterruptedly for over 50 years, a fact that has made the Japanese people in general apolitical and cynical towards politicians. A common saying in Japan is that the country has a first class economy but third class politics, a poll conducted in 1980 even showed that considerably higher percentage of participants had faith in fortune tellers than politicians!<sup>16</sup> Recent polls also demonstrate that the faith in the democratic system seems to be at an all time low.<sup>17</sup> The popularity of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi demonstrated the willingness of voters to support whomever they thought likely to bring about change. The maverick prime minister promised change both in the economic sphere and in the way politics are conducted and had an approval rating approaching 90% in his first months in office!<sup>18</sup> It was sometimes said jokingly that Koizumi was popular because he promised to destroy his own party. After his disappearance from office things soon returned to business as usual though.

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<sup>14</sup> Hrebnar, 2000, page 50.

<sup>15</sup> “Japans political revolving door.”

<sup>16</sup> Hrebnar, 2000, page 21.

<sup>17</sup> McCreeedy, 2002, page 3.

<sup>18</sup> “Japanese PMs party wins Tokyo election.”

**THE FIRST TWO THEORIES: THE ELECTION SYSTEM AND CULTURE**

It has now been established that the LDP is corrupt and unpopular, the bureaucracy pervasively powerful and that the public seems to be ready to vote for whomever they believe will bring about change in the way politics are done in Japan. Election campaign regulations are also notoriously tight which has not helped to the opposition, however that does little to explain the LDP hold on power, these regulations are after all circumvented on regular basis. To explain why the same party has stayed in power for so academics have proposed four different theories.

The first explanation is that the **Single non-transferable vote** (SNTV) electoral system prior to 1996 favored LDP dominance.<sup>19</sup> In a SNTV system a voter casts a vote for only one candidate in his or her constituency; the candidate with the most votes gets the first seat and so on. The downside of this system is that it is perfectly possible for the most popular party to get the votes concentrated on one or two candidates, while a less popular party gets its votes spread more even and thus win more candidates although the party might get far less total votes. Although the electoral system probably plays its part it is hardly decisive, it was abolished in 1996 and the LDP managed to hold its grip on power for an additional 13 years. Moreover, according to Ichiro Miyajima the system basically introduced in 1925<sup>20</sup>, 30 years before the one party dominance of today. Although civilian control of the government was effectively abolished in war-time Japan there were years prior to 1955 with SNTV without a single party dominance and there have been years after 1996 without SNTV with one-party dominance. The first theory is therefore not adequate to explain the phenomena.

The second theory is the so-called Political culture theory.<sup>21</sup> This theory maintains that the Japanese people are simply submissive to authority and are therefore unlikely to try to oust the incumbent government out of power. Although this theory might sound romantic to the western orientalist wanting to construct a framework the differences of Japanese culture to his or her own, it is far too simple to be valid. To begin with, the LDP stronghold is in the countryside and it is a well know fact that people in the countryside are more likely than urbanites to be conservative and/or nationalists. This applies to Japan as well as to the U.S. and Iran as demonstrated recently. Furthermore polls in 1990 showed that 80% of voters in the countryside voted as opposed to only 60% of city dwellers.<sup>22</sup> Recent polls have also shown that a great majority of the population does not think that politics should be left to the politicians alone and the percentage of independent voters who do not vote for the LDP has

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<sup>19</sup> For details see Kohno, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Tanaka, 2007. page 2.

<sup>21</sup> For details see Richardson, 1974.

<sup>22</sup> Hrebenar, 2000, page 18.

been increasing steadily in the last decades.<sup>23</sup> The culture of a country is certainly reflected in its politics, after all the politicians are members of their countries culture like everybody else, but culture does not explain the one party dominance in Japan any more than culture explains why the U.K. has a two party dominance out of three main parties.

### ***INSTITUTIONALIZED CORRUPTION AND THE FAILURE OF THE OPPOSITION***

The third theory holds that the LDP, controlling budget allocation, subsidies and policy making brought back “pork” to the constituencies in exchange for votes. Pork is of course meant here as all sorts of benefits. Since the party controlled the government budget it was able to allocate resources to supporters, especially in the countryside which is overrepresented in the diet. Those in power in the countryside knew that bridges, tunnels, roads and all kinds of constructions would be built as long as the LDP holds power. The LDP therefore constructed a highly organized voting machine (the LDP has the most organized voting apparatus of any party save for perhaps the New Komeito) to maintain themselves in power. These organized voters have always been the backbone of LDP support. This theory is furthermore supported by statistics mentioned earlier that show that voting participation is far higher in the countryside than in the large cities or 80% as opposed to 60%. Furthermore the percentage of voters who are unorganized and thus less likely to vote for the LDP is considerably higher in the cities. Some scholars believed that the SNTV electoral system with multi member districts had in fact fostered this kind of pork barrel politics but Ethan Scheiner, the main proponent of the theory rejects this pointing out that the LDP did not change its strategy after the electoral reform of 1996 (The single member district system with proportional representation).

It might also be added that big companies have almost all supported the LDP, and many of them financially. Up until the 1990s there was no limit on how much money a private corporation could donate to political parties and as a result, corporations donated huge sums of money in exchange for lax laws, and a voice in the law making process. This was revised and fixed to a certain maximum amount, but that did however not have the desired effect (if desired at all) to curb money from companies. Instead parties and party-factions organized thinly disguised money making machines under the pretext of being interest groups or think tanks working to promote various policies. The main goal of the group is however, simply to make money. All this gives an image of a massive corruption but as Ramseyer and Rosenbluth point out; it is an institutionally driven corruption.<sup>24</sup> Although this did cost the party some popular support it could use the money it gains by this to buy back support in the manner described above.

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<sup>23</sup> Tanaka, Martin. 2003. page 30.

<sup>24</sup> Ramseyer, Rosenbluth, 1993, Page 9.

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The fourth and the last theory also maintained by Ethan Scheiner and in a little different form by Aiji Takana<sup>25</sup> maintains that the large vote share gained by the LDP did not necessarily translate as a support for the LDP as such but rather as a support for the political system in general. In other words; voters simply had no other reliable alternative to the LDP. If we examine the other major parties in post-war Japan this theory seems to hold ground. The party that was for the longest the largest opposition party; the Japan Socialist Party advocated mass change in the social structure of Japan and was, at least in rhetoric, Marxist-Leninist until 1986.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, internal squabbling and constant factional wars between the radicals on one hand who believed that the party should be a class party and the more moderates who wanted it to be a mass party inhibited it from offering a reliable alternative. Hrebenar describes popular perception of the party as having been: “poorly organized, indifferently led, narrowly based, doctrinaire and irresponsible in policy, lacking in autonomy, poor in human talent, and overly prone to ideological and factional division.”<sup>27</sup> This was obviously not a party that voters could trust. Another major party was the Japanese Communist party which was even further to the left, advocating a complete overhaul of society, though in a democratic way. The JCP is one of the largest Communist parties in the world not in power, it is highly organized and has a relatively high budget for its size but such radical parties however are not likely to catch a majority of votes in any industrialized country barring an economic catastrophe. The last party worth mentioning is the New Komeito party which is generally perceived to be the political arm of the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai (although both are nominally independent of each other). The Soka Gakkai is, depending on one’s point of view a highly organized religious group or a highly organized cult. It bases itself on the teachings of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk Nichiren, and one of its underlying principles is intolerance of all “heresy” and other religious teachings. The organization furthermore owns assembly halls, companies and even universities in Japan. The Soka Gakkai evokes a high level of feelings in most Japanese ranging from intense praise to the far more usual; intense dislike. Originally founded to push forward the “gospel” of Nichiren, the party has repeatedly tried to reassure the nation that it has no intention of pushing Nichiren Buddhism upon a nation unwilling to accept it but with little luck so far. The percentage of votes cast for the New-Komeito party changes little from one election to the other, indicating that its voters are committed Nichiren Buddhists. It is therefore not very surprising that a political party based on the principles of the Soka Gakkai cannot hope to become a major opposition party, and in fact, the party has formed a coalition with the LDP for the past few years, not helping its popularity among those who want the latter out of power.

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<sup>25</sup> For more information see Scheiner, 2007. and Tanaka, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Kono, 1997, page 118.

<sup>27</sup> Hrebenar, 2000, page 210.



Many other small parties have come and gone but the parties mentioned before have been the main opposition parties in Japanese politics. Neither the New-Komeito nor the Communist party could ever hope to become a mass organization to challenge the LDP. The failure of the opposition is therefore mainly the failure of the JSP. The continuing success of the LDP despite its corruption and rampant nepotism does therefore not symbolize support for the party but rather says that there are other parties. It is also evident in the fact that with the exception of the Koizumi years, support for the LDP has been steadily declining since four small opposition parties merged in 1998 to form the Democratic Party of Japan. The party has been steadily gaining seats since its formation, going from holding 38 seats in the upper house to the now 109 of 242, and 93 members in the lower house to the now 308 of 480 making it by far the largest party. Ideologically speaking, the DPJ is a centre right party; although it calls itself revolutionary, and although the LDP calls it “*extremist*”<sup>28</sup> compared to the older opposition parties it hardly lives up to that label. The main changes on its agenda are overthrowing the “*ancient regime*”, ending corruption in the bureaucracy and increasing welfare. The increased welfare consists mostly of introducing child allowance, raising unemployment benefits, cutting taxes on small businesses, and reforming the pension system of the aging country. The party also intends to save 9 trillion yen by putting a stop to wasteful public work and other spending the LDP has used to keep itself in power as mentioned earlier. The most important promise of the DPJ is however to put an end to the rule of bureaucrats. The party was from 2006 led by Ichiro Ozawa a former chief secretary of the LDP, who had a reputation for regularly changing parties. Ozawa was forced to resign in May 2009 due to a fund scandal, but this does not appear to have diminished the popularity of the DPJ.

As mentioned earlier, the decline in the popularity of the LDP was reversed for a time from 2001 to 2006 by the ascent of Prime Minister Koizumi. In an attempt to revive the party's fortunes, the charismatic leader reconstructed the economy along neo-liberal economic ideals, privatized the postal system and tried to revive the economy with some success. His strongman approach to the powerful and conservative bureaucracy and his attempts to break down the factions within his own party gained him much popular support and for the first time the party was more popular in the cities than in the countryside. Ironically, however, his market reforms resulted in social disparities which seriously hurt the party's traditional base of support: the rural areas.<sup>29</sup> When Koizumi left the scene the party really had nothing left that appealed to voters. His handpicked successor Shinzo Abe was expected to continue his policies but had neither the charisma nor the forceful character of Koizumi, his popularity soon plunged and he lost control of his party, resulting in party members actively working

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<sup>28</sup> “The opposition peers ahead.”

<sup>29</sup> “Editorial: recreating the LDP”

against him; a strange report circulated in the media claiming that his cabinet members did not even bother to stand up when he entered the room.<sup>30</sup> The party then suffered great losses in the upper house elections of 2007, one major contributing factor to this dramatic loss was the so called pension scandal. It was revealed in 2007 that the government had lost 50 million pension records, up to this date only a small fraction has been correctly identified and authorities were forced to admit that up to 10 million records would probably never be correctly identified. Many political analysts labeled this the last straw for the unpopular party.<sup>31</sup> Abe resigned soon afterwards and his successor, Yasuo Fukuda signaled in many ways victory for the bureaucracy and the old style factions within the party over the reforms of Koizumi, Fukuda being an old style politician not likely to be the initiator of great changes. Fukuda abruptly resigned in September 2008, citing the difficulties he faced negotiating with the DPJ controlled Upper house. His successor Taro Aso, was yet another old style politician who seemed clueless how to revive the nations faltering economy. He soon saw his popularity plummet both within his own party and in the polls. The party resolved to attack advertising but to no avail and it would have needed a miracle to win the elections, polls 2 weeks before the election date showed the DPJ lead by almost 15%<sup>32</sup>, after being in power almost as long as the Chinese communist party, both Japanese voters and the LDP needed a break from each other.

### **CONCLUSION**

This short overview gave a very brief background description of the Japanese political situation and went over the main theories how the LDP was able to maintain power for so many decades. Although the first two theories (namely that the voting system had impeded change and the hierarchical political culture has made the voters unlikely to “rock the boat” may offer some insight it is save to dismiss them as main factors. Rather, the third theory; that the decades that LDP had been in power had made it able to control the budget and literally “bribe” constituencies into voting for them and the complete failure of the opposition to offer a reliable alternative seem more realistic. Of those two, the latter one appears to be decisive; the LDP still had control over the budget and still “bribed” the constituencies last August but that did not save them from a crushing defeat in the elections. In the last years, the party has performed badly in most elections and that fact has been one of the decisive factors in forcing prime ministers out of office from Shinzo Abe to Yasuo Fukuda and now, Aso. Polls also indicate that the party has been steadily losing support since back in the late 1990s; when the current biggest opposition party the DPJ was formed. Koizumi tried to change this trend and for a while he was successful but this was the result of his persona and

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<sup>30</sup> “The good son falters”

<sup>31</sup> “Scandal over lost pensions may be the last straw for the ruling party”

<sup>32</sup> “Japans opposition leads ruling LDP Tokyo Shinbun poll says”



his promise of change in the way politics are conducted in the country. Ironically his changes undermined the party's rural support which the party had always counted on. After he left the scene it was back to business as usual and the party's new found popularity in the metropolitan areas plummeted. Shinzo Abe, his successor lacked both his charisma and forceful character. The last straw was the pension scandal which the party never recovered from. The reason why people are turning to the opposition now is that it has promised; like Koizumi to fight the corruption and the power of the bureaucrats while (unlike previous opposition parties) keeping the economic and social system more or less intact. The Japanese electorate finally has a realistic alternative to the "ancient regime."

From all this we can gather that the state of Japanese politics in the last few decades has been somewhat dismal. Owing to bad opposition, the Japanese electorate has been left with no reliable option to voting for the same party elections after elections. Some have equated this to saying that Japan was a *de facto* one party state. This is probably an exaggeration since the government places no real legal restrictions on opposition parties comparable to countries like Singapore, for an example. Nonetheless the "first party" system was hardly healthy for a democracy, not even for the ruling party itself since it has caused both mass corruption and has contributed to the general disbelief in politics in Japan. Whether the DPJ can change this or not is an entirely another matter, the powerful unelected bureaucrats are not likely to be very enthusiastic about changes and will do whatever they can to preserve the cozy situation they have been accustomed to, the LDP will help them.

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