

Family Feud, or *Realpolitik*? Opposition Parties, Breakups and Realignments in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

In this contribution, I use the breakup – just short of the 2017 General Election – of Japan's former second biggest political party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), as a case study so as to assess the practical implications of splits and realignments in the most relevant party split in Japan since the DPJ was ousted from government in 2012. First, I examine DPJ's origin as an umbrella for ideologically diverse groups that opposed the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – the government party in Japan throughout most of its post-war history, its tendency to factionalism, and the oftentimes damaging role the factional dynamics played in the party's decision-making process throughout the years. In the case study, it is understood that the creation of the Party of Hope – a split from the LDP, and the salience of constitutional issues were exogenous factors particular to that election, which helped causing the DPJ split.

Keywords

Democratic Party of Japan; Electoral Reform; Factionalism; Japan; Political Realignment

Introduction¹

In spite of being a consolidated liberal democracy, Japan lacks alternation of power. An opposition exists, but its electoral results are below the amount necessary for a change of government. Until 2017, there was a sizeable opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), but its electoral strategy towards unseating the incumbent government was unclear, and its support rates, weak.

Throughout most of its post-war history, Japan has been under the rule of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In the election framework during the so-called 1955 system² (1955-1994), featuring single nontransferable vote multi-member districts (SNTV-MMD) – a system in which one district could elect from three to five Diet members according to the size of its electorate (Lijphart 2012), the party that has more resources has advantage in taking more seats (Reed 2003).

In this system, the LDP could maintain a steady majority in both houses of the Diet in spite of its internal divisions. Issues such as clientelism, links to big business and specialized policy-making groups, considered important for such electoral prowess, also facilitated electoral corruption, leading to incidents such as the Recruit and Sagawa cases³ in the late-1980s and early-1990s (Sims 2001). The revealing of such scandals led to public distrust of the LDP government. As a result, in 1992, the Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, “had no choice but to stress its commitment to political reform”, reopening discussions aiming towards revising the existing electoral system (Kohno 1997, 136).

In 1993, the passing of a vote of no-confidence called by the opposition, and supported by LDP dissidents, triggered the so-called Liar Dissolution⁴ (*usotsuki kaisan*), dissolving the Diet and calling a Lower House general election. Its aftermath was a loose coalition of eight opposition parties that ousted the LDP from power for the first time since 1955 (Reed 2003). Some of these parties were created by LDP rebels just before the elections,

¹ I would like to thank James Letson, Yixuan Ong, and my advisor, Hiro Sasada, for comments and suggestions in earlier drafts, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions helped to improve the overall readability of this research note. All remaining mistakes are my own.

² The 1955 system has its name due to a political realignment occurred in 1955, when the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), divided between a left and a right faction, reunited, and as a response the Liberal Party – with links to the bureaucratic and business elites – and the Democratic Party – that preached a “more socially minded and state-centered conservatism” joined forces to establish the LDP. This merger had a great deal of support from the business elite, afraid of a rising support for the socialists. (Gordon 2013, 269)

³ The Recruit scandal was named after the job-listing publishing company, still active to this day, “that issued millions of dollars’ worth of its own stock at below-price market prices to politicians”(Kohno 1997, 136). The Sagawa scandal, by its turn, involved Sagawa’s CEO bribing politicians to ensure benefits for the delivery industry, as well as the use of underground connections to intimidate opponents of his political ally Noboru Takeshita, clearing the path for his selection as Prime Minister in 1987 (Gordon 2013).

⁴ *Asahi Shinbun*. June 23, 1993. p. 29. *Yomiuri Shinbun*. October 12, 2003. p. 13.

such as Ichiro Ozawa's Renewal Party (*Shinseito*), and Masayoshi Takemura's New Party Harbinger (*Sakigake*). In addition, from that point well until the end of the 1990s, a wave of splits and realignments led to the consolidation of most of the opposition under the DPJ umbrella.

In this research note, I discuss some structural problems inside the DPJ after its consolidation in 1998, the origins of its internal factionalism, and its oftentimes damaging role in the party decision-making process. I also refer to literature on the LDP's factions to analyze the main differences between the two parties' factional structure. Lastly, I use the 2017 DPJ split as a case study to assess the practical implications of splits and realignments in the most noteworthy opposition-related political fact since the DPJ was removed from government in 2012.

Taking these factors into consideration, I put forward the following research question:

RQ1: *Why did factionalism, despite being a common trait in the Japanese political party system, lead to the split in the DPJ?*

In this work I attempt to answer this question by presenting a background of the party realignments after the 1994 electoral reform, analyzing the trends of party realignments, breakaways, as well as intra-party factionalism from the 1993 General Election to this day, with a focus on the divisions within the DPJ and its splinter groups as of 2019: The Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP).

This research relies mainly on literature review, with the aid of newspaper articles related to the topic whenever necessary.

Literature review

In Hyde's 2006 paper, she argues that the party faced more difficulty than the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) when it came to influencing the policy-making process in the Diet, pointing out that the party "made its own job of being the opposition party more complicated to overcome its own disunity" (Hyde 2006, 99). She also writes that factionalism became a salient issue in the DPJ ever since Yukio Hatoyama started the talks that eventually led to a merger with Ichiro Ozawa's Liberal party (Hyde 2009). The division within the party at the time was related to a lack of consultation with other members before discussing the possibility of merger. This was the first time in which the centralization of decisions became an issue inside the party, and many others were still to come. However, Hyde does not focus much on the absence of a consensus-building mechanism inside the party which is an important factor for a party that became an umbrella for most of the LDP opposition.

On the DPJ's decision-making structure, especially during its time in government, Mulgan (2014) points out that there was a tentative centralization during Yukio Hatoyama's tenure as prime minister, aiming to eliminate party intervention in policy-making and freeing "the government executive from the constraints of pro-protectionist backbenchers" (ibid., 19). However, a majority of backbenchers was against the new policy-making set-up, forcing the DPJ administrations to gradually return to the system in effect during the LDP's government, that is, a decentralized system in which "the ruling party had a veto over government policies and worked to modify them in the light of collective party and individual backbenchers' political and electoral interests" (ibid., 4). The return to such a decentralized process, she argues, led to the emergence "of an 'opposition party within the party'" (ibid., 12). This internal opposition, associated with the factionalism derived from former political affiliations which was an issue present in the party from the beginning, would help create the conditions for a schism that eventually happened in 2017.

On the competition between parties, Reed and Shimizu (2009b) argue that even though one of the main aims of the electoral reform was to create a two-party system that would lead to an alternation of power, the LDP has been able to avoid it by using a series of stratagems. All of these rely on a new proportional representation tier and try to void the implications of Duverger's law⁵ – a generalization that electoral systems with (pure) single-member districts lead to a two-party system. Reed and Shimizu (2009b) predicted, however, that those stratagems, if repeated, would lead to the party defeat on the following 2009 general election, which actually happened. However, two of these stratagems – using the PR tier as a consolation prize for candidates who lost their SMDs, and trading LDP votes for *Komei* in PR in return for *Komei* votes in SMDs – are still effective to this day, rendering the explanation incomplete.

Other works have dealt with the cleavages in the DPJ from an electoral perspective (Hrebenar and Nakamura 2015; Pekkanen and Reed 2018a; 2018b; Scheiner, Smith, and Thies 2018) but present the ongoing factional dynamics only incidentally. This work attempts to fill in a gap in literature after the 2017 Lower House general election, arguing that if there was not an exogenous factor – the founding of the Party of Hope, which I discuss in the

⁵ "The law is driven by the idea that in the long-run rational politicians and voters will realize that it is hopeless to have more than two parties competing at national level. Although three parties may remain in contention for a few years, a party which begins to slide will rapidly disappear as everybody comes to realize that it will win no seats at all if its support is evenly dispersed. By contrast, the number of parties in a proportional electoral system may be determined more by social forces than by the system's opportunities to split without penalty" (Brown, McLean, and McMillan 2018)

sections below, it is unlikely that the DPJ factionalism alone would have led to the major split that happened.

Party realignments in perspective

The first realignment: 1994 Electoral reform

To understand how the Japanese party system transitioned from the so-called “1955 system” to the parallel voting system, and how this transition affected the body politic, we have to understand the catalyst for such change. In 1994, under the coalition government, the Diet passed an electoral reform that created a new system – a parallel single-member-district along with proportional representation (SMD-PR),⁶ and restricted the rules for electoral funding and spending (Sims 2001). One of the main reasons for the electoral reform was a mistaken consensus, established during the early 1990s, that the Japanese electoral system “was primarily responsible for factionalism, money politics, the power of special interests... [and] an emphasis on personality rather than policy in voting behavior, and LDP one-party dominance” (Curtis 1999, 142).

After the inception of the SMD-PR system, the debate on whether Japan would converge to a two-party system started, and one of the proponents of such political convergence was Ichiro Ozawa. For him, “Japan’s relatively homogeneous electorate, whose ideological outlooks tend not to diverge too widely” would lead naturally to elections that are “likely to become battles between two large teams” (1994, 66). For some time, there were signs that led towards such conclusion. One was the establishment of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), in 1996, formed mainly by members from *Sakigake*, JSP and DSP, and its consolidation in 1998, with the incorporation of some other small parties. Another was the effect of Duverger’s Law - mentioned above - on the new electoral system. Reed and Shimizu point out that, in fact, “Japan has moved closer to a two-party system in every election since the first under the new system, in 1996” (2009b, 29).

However, as theory does not always follow reality, in Japan it worked in a different way. As an alternative argument to Duverger’s Law, Scheiner (2012) points out that the mixed SMD-PR system used in Japan creates a situation in which the PR rules create conditions for the emergence of a multiparty system to emerge but also introduces constraints on party proliferation. For example, it is possible to point out that there are

⁶ It consists of an electoral system in which both a single member district (SMD) and a proportional representation (PR) bloc work in parallel. On the election day, the electorate will be given a ballot with two columns. One is to vote for its local district, writing the candidate’s name; the other one, to vote on its preferred political party for PR.

parties that depend mostly on their PR votes to be represented in the Diet. An example is the Japanese Communist Party which attained 12 seats in the 2017 general election, 11 of them being on proportional representation slots (NHK 2017). In addition, there are originally regional parties with a noticeable presence both in PR and single-member constituencies, such as the Western Japan-based right-wing *Ishin no Kai*, elected three members in single member districts and eight members (most of them in the PR bloc from which Osaka prefecture is a part) on the 2017 Lower House election, as well as two out of the four seats for the Osaka constituency on the 2019 Upper House election (NHK 2017; 2019). In other words, if Japan had adopted a pure single-member district system as in the United Kingdom, there is a possibility that the JCP, in spite of having a reasonable national voting share, would be left with only one constituency seat.

After the electoral reform in 1994, and especially throughout the 2000s, the political scenario indeed shifted towards a two-party system. There was a belief that with the DPJ, it would not be the case of a “perennial opposition” anymore. Rather, it would be the only alternative to an LDP government, since in most districts, competition is “between two – and only two – viable candidates, offering voters a choice between one candidate from the ruling government coalition and one from the opposition” (Reed and Shimizu 2009b, 29). Sasada et al (2013) write about the variations of party polarization in Japan and the United States and the differences between the two countries, focusing on the party leadership strategies and organizational structure. They state that the DPJ “placed great emphasis on presenting the party’s ability to manage the government” (2013, 426–27). The reason, accordingly, was that a handover of power became a concrete possibility. They argue further that “as the DPJ tried to appeal to the voters as a possible governing party, its party leadership initially took a convergence (counterproposal) strategy” (ibid., 437), working with the LDP in certain issues by offering counterproposals so as to demonstrate that the party could formulate effective policies and demand realistic amendments to the ruling party’s bills. In addition, they posit that “weak leadership initially impeded polarization, but a more centralized party organization in the late 2000s allowed the party to take a confrontational strategy, widening the gap between the two parties” (ibid., 437) which means that in the analyzed period of time, even though there was no significant difference between the policy positions among LDP and DPJ members, “a top-down party polarization occurred as a result of party leaders’ voting strategies” (ibid., 434).

Three moments illustrate the possibility of a handover of power discussed above. First, in the 2003 general election, the first after the merger with Ichiro Ozawa’s Liberal Party,

the party won 177 seats (up from its 136 seats before the election), “a historic result as the opposition had never done this well in the 1955 system” (Hyde 2009, 57). After that, in the 2007 Upper House election when the DPJ became the majority party in the chamber. Then, in the 2009 general election when the DPJ achieved a landslide victory, which many commentators saw as a turning point. (Lipsy and Scheiner 2012; Rosenbluth and Thies 2010).

The party came to office in 2009 with the intention of consolidating the political control in the Prime Minister’s office, with politicians making policy decisions and bureaucrats giving advice and implementing the decisions but not making policies themselves (Stockwin 2019, 20). Yet, in the end of its time in office, the DPJ’s relations with the bureaucracy differed little from when the LDP had been in power, that is to say, there was no mechanism to completely rein in the bureaucrats.

The ongoing clash between politicians and the bureaucracy is noteworthy issue in Japan as there are several theories aiming to explain the links between non-elected and elected officials. Mishima (2013) writes that historically the bureaucracy has an “activist organizational culture”, a legacy of state-led development in the Meiji period (1868-1912), which makes bureaucrats able to “assume the kind of responsibilities that would be reserved exclusively for politicians in other countries” (705). In addition, “the bureaucracy often works as the pivot of policymaking and undertakes coordination among different actors” (ibid., 705) -- a role that provides leeway for manipulation. Lastly, Mishima (2013) points out that “bureaucrats can talk directly to interest groups via policy deliberation councils and informal communication channels” which effectively means that they can solve administration-related issues without involving politicians, often being able to act “as the principal, rather than the agent, and exert noticeable influence in policymaking” (706).

This desire to replicate the Westminster model of strong executive power in the hands of the prime minister was accomplished at first but due to backbenchers’ dissatisfaction with the new system, was scaled down and finally returned to the same governance model used during the LDP governments. I talk about these reforms in detail below, along with the issues of centralization and decentralization of the intra-party decision-making process.

Post-1995 realignments and party factionalism

In this section, I analyze the effects of factionalism in the opposition parties’ realignment during the late-1990s and early-2000s. It is necessary to point out that the way factions were formed in the DPJ differs drastically from the LDP. One of the reasons is that

the DPJ was formed essentially by three groups: socialists (from JSP and the Democratic Socialist Party), LDP defectors, and politicians from the new parties formed in the mid-1990s. On the other hand, factionalism in the after-reform LDP is mostly related to intra-party post allocation and party presidential elections, as well as information exchange (Krauss and Pekkanen 2010). These differences in origin would be crucial at a later date, when DPJ was confronted with two strategies that divided its membership and led to the 2017 split.

Due to the peculiar circumstances of the opposition realignment and DPJ establishment as a congregation of splinter groups from across the political spectrum (Hyde 2009; Stockwin 2019), it was difficult to reach a party-wide consensus on policy. For example, “even the groups which derive from the LDP are not coherent with regard to their political programs”; the Ozawa faction would include nationalists and neoliberals, and Hatoyama’s group would tend to be moderate in both ideology and economic policies (Zakowski 2011, 197).

Among those who started their careers in the 1990s – meaning they never belonged to either the LDP or to the left-wing opposition – many are supporters of neoliberal economics as a result of their education at the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management, a think-tank specializing in educating the new generation of Japanese leaders (Zakowski 2011). This ideological background draws these politicians closer to the LDP than to some members within their own party.

In 2004, Koellner wrote that the main factions/tendencies inside DPJ were as follows: *Yūai kurabu* (“Fraternity club”, former DSP), *Shinseikyoku kondankai* (“New government discussion circle”, former JSP/SDP), *Kuni no katachi kenkyūkai* (“Shape of the nation research group,” with many members originating from citizen networks), *Seiken senryaku kenkyūkai* (“Political strategy research group,” conservative, many with *Shinshinto* background), and *Kōbōkai* (“High companions’ society,” former *Sakigake* members at the core) (2004, 98). At the time, “while most of the groups inside the DPJ can easily be categorized as cliques or tendencies, the *Yūai kurabu* and the *Shinseikyoku kondankai* should be regarded as institutionalized factions,” with such institutionalization being related to the both the links to the labor union confederations *Dōmei* and *Sōhyō* as well as connections to previous parties, “the DSP in the case of the *Yūai kurabu* and the JSP in the case of the *Shinseikyoku kondankai*” (97–98).

In this way, the original DPJ factions were more related to the origins of its members than not. It is important to understand the role of factions inside the DPJ because the party

needed to resort to “vaguely worded official statements” that tried to “gloss over diverging intra-party standpoints” in order to conceal this internal cleavage (Koellner 2011, 32).

Throughout the 2000s, the DPJ tried to distribute posts among various groups to appease the members of the different groups that helped form and enlarge the party. With such actions, it remained mostly united until 2017 due to the advantages a well-established party can provide in the PR election tier, which is not accessible for independent candidates. The logic behind the new electoral system explains why discontented conservative DPJ Diet members did not turn their back on the party often. First, because these politicians increase their electoral chances by belonging to a large party. Second, because it is only if there is no LDP incumbent in a said district that a potential DPJ renegade can compete for a seat with someone who received the party nomination (Koellner 2011).

This assessment, however, just corresponds to the DPJ before becoming government, since Ozawa’s faction – *Isshinkai* – split from the DPJ five months before the 2012 general election, perhaps in a strategic movement to draw itself apart from a party that did not deliver most of its electoral promises. Gordon (2013) points out that the main reason for Ozawa’s departure was his stance against a “compromise with the LDP to win Diet approval of a two-stage doubling in the consumption tax,” to pay for the March 2011 disaster recovery without further increasing the government debt (349). According to him, Ozawa left because “by increasing taxes, the party contradicted its pre-disaster platform of 2009” (Gordon 2013, 349). Thus, in spite of its ideological patchwork, the DPJ stood together because of the actions of the leadership – that tried to cater to the interests of the main factions by either finding a minimum compromise and distributing party leadership posts according to the strength of each group – and of the institutional logic of the new electoral system.

In the next section, I present another important point to understand the DPJ attitude towards factionalism and the reasoning for the party breakup in recent years: its decision-making process, especially during its time in government.

Decision-making process in the DPJ

According to Mulgan (2014), the DPJ’s 2009 manifesto pledged to shift from a policy-making process in which the government and the ruling party proceed in parallel, “to a unitary system of Cabinet-centered policy making” (4). Its aim was eliminating party intervention in policy-making, something closer to what the DPJ’s secretary-general Ichiro Ozawa had long defended: a strong Cabinet-system like Britain’s (Ozawa 1994, 55). The abolition of the party’s Policy Research Council (an autonomous party body in charge of

policy-making, which also held vetting power) supposedly would “enable backbenchers to exercise policy influence through their inclusion in the government” (Mulgan 2014, 4).

However, the manifesto did not have much input from the party. Imai (2013) points out that since DPJ internal rules do not require the manifesto be approved by conference, enabling “the party leader to arrange the manifesto almost entirely at his/her discretion” (232). This was the case for Yukio Hatoyama, Ozawa’s successor as party president.

The centralization of decisions led to backbenchers’ dissatisfaction with the new system. Solving this problem required a degree of compromise by the leadership, that then established ‘Diet members’ policy research committees’, where DPJ Diet members could discuss government-sponsored bills. However, the decision-making authority would still remain with the Cabinet for that time being. During the Kan and Noda governments (2010-2012), the old system effectively came back into force. According to Mulgan (2014), “[w]hile the Kan administration brought back some elements of the old LDP system of ‘prior examination’ and *de facto* ‘prior approval’ through its newly reconstituted PRC, the Noda administration fully restored these powers to the party” (19).

Mulgan (2014) also points out that the “existence of the PRC and its policy committees allowed opposition to mobilize from within the party”, creating constraints to the decision-making process, and most importantly, “giving the impression not only of policy stasis but also of the emergence of an ‘opposition party within the party’” (12). That is an indicator that DPJ was as prone to factional struggles as the LDP, since “both major parties lack a clear common denominator for the factions they are composed of” (Zakowski 2011, 202).

However, Mulgan’s approach does not explain what happened with the party after its 2012 defeat. There was internal opposition, but this infighting was a natural behavior inside both parties. What differs is how the parties behave after the issues are solved.

Unlike the LDP, the party did not have a “no-side”⁷ (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, September 20, 2018) approach after heated discussions, with members challenging the party line even after the decision had already been made. One possible reason for this is that the LDP’s intra-party decision-making is a consensus-based policymaking system that was designed to keep its members happy enough not to defect. This was made by allocating posts within the party and the government as well as taking into account all opinions inside the party (Reed and Shimizu 2009a).

⁷ “No-side” is a rugby terminology, indicating the end of the match. In Japanese politics, it means that after an election, everybody is (or should be) on the same team.

Once the DPJ went back to the opposition, the intra-party rivalry continued, especially in the months preceding the dissolution of the Lower House in 2017 and the intensification of such cleavages became one of the main reasons for the Democratic Party split. This is covered in the following section.

Case study: 2017 General Election and the DPJ splits and mergers

I use the 2017 DPJ split just before the General Election as a case study due to the magnitude of the party split that ensued.

Throughout the LDP's history, there were breakaway incidents as well. However, those were not as serious as the DPJ's 2017 split, that is, they never threatened the party's existence or caused its complete dissolution. In addition, more often than not, the splits happen due to factional issues. The 1993 split, for example, was due to a rift in the Takeshita faction – the largest one at the time – after its leader, Shin Kanemaru, was arrested for tax evasion. The fight for Kanemaru's succession ultimately led to the Ozawa/Hata group split that created the *Shinshintō* (Kohno 1997).

How did the DPJ overcome its main differences during its early years? An explanation resides in the use of manifestos as strategy. Sasada et al (2013) point out that “in order to compete in an election upholding a manifesto, the party needed to draw a clear distinction in policy stances, between the DPJ and other parties (particularly the LDP)” (430). Thus, the party had to overcome most of its factional differences since fighting an election on a manifesto means that the party has to compromise on a minimum viable government program.

As of 2017, the Democratic Party (DP) – DPJ's new name after a merger with a faction of the Osaka-based *Ishin no Kai* – was “deeply divided over a center-left strategy that included cooperation with the JCP and a center-right strategy that supported amending the constitution” (Pekkanen and Reed 2018a, 25). Though, the JCP was never considered as a coalition partner – not even in the grand coalition of eight parties that ousted the LDP from power in 1993 (Kohno 1997; Pekkanen and Reed 2018b; Hyde 2009). In 2014, as constitutional reform-related issues were gaining salience,⁸ the DPJ, with Katsuya Okada as leader, moved towards cooperation with other opposition parties (including the JCP) in a united front for constitutionalism. This also led to the fielding of unified opposition candidates in all single-member districts in the 2016 Upper House election, a “minor

⁸ In 2014, Shinzo Abe's administration changed the interpretation of the Constitution's Article 9 (the peace clause) “so that Japan might exercise the right of collective self-defense.” (Izumikawa 2018, 316). The political groups that were against this measure are referred to as “constitutional opposition.”

miracle”, according to Pekkanen and Reed (2018b, 81). After Okada’s resignation as party president in 2016, Renho, Upper House member for the Tokyo constituency, also proposing cooperation with the rest of opposition, defeated Seiji Maehara, one of the pro-constitutional-review neoliberal DPJ members.

Renho’s tenure as party leader, however, was not without crisis. As conservative members left the party over the ambiguous position in relation to major issues – especially towards the constitution and collaboration with other opposition parties – the party needed to “take the revolt and defection of its members seriously and take actions to rebuild the party before it’s too late” (*The Japan Times Online* 2017a).

At this point, it is already possible to say that more than the decision-making process itself, the ideological divide between liberals and conservatives⁹ inside the DP – in spite of their former party affiliations – was becoming an important issue inside the party. In 2017, after a poor display in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections, Renho resigned and Maehara succeeded her as the party president. During his tenure, the dissent – led mainly by Goshi Hosono’s conservative faction (*The Japan Times Online* 2017b) – became stronger, with its members exploring the possibility of forming a new party. Soon before the 2017 General Election, held in October that year, as the Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike¹⁰ formed the Party of Hope (*Kibō no Tō*), these dissenters saw the new party as an opportunity to cooperate with the LDP on constitutional reform. Maehara even proposed merging the DP and Hope. A complete merger did not happen, but it triggered the creation of the CDP, composed mainly by the DP members that were in favor of collaborating with other left-wing opposition parties.

In 2018, the DPP, headed by Yuichiro Tamaki, was created as a result of the merger of the remnants of the DP and Hope, so to create a bigger structure to fight the 2019 local and Upper House elections (Yoshida 2018). A Japan Times editorial, criticizing the merger, wrote that it “seems to be yet another example of an unprincipled union of political parties in pursuit of numbers” (*The Japan Times Online* 2018).

As mentioned above, the differences in political origin and internal discussions on which kind of policy should be spearheaded by the party determined the split that formed the CDP and drove some DP right-wing politicians towards Koike’s party, then to DPP.

⁹ In this context, “liberals” refers to those in favor of an opposition united front alliance with the JCP and other left-wing parties; and “conservatives,” by its turn, refers to the neoliberals and other center-right politicians who were keen to compromise with the LDP in the constitutional reform issue.

¹⁰ Koike left the LDP in 2016 because of the lack of party endorsement for her candidacy to the Tokyo metropolitan governorship. (Pekkanen and Reed 2018a, 21; 2018b, 82–85)

However, the evidence shows that the main reason for the split was the impossibility of a complete merger between the DP and Hope, due to the restrictions that Yuriko Koike had towards “DP members deemed too left-leaning” (Osaki 2017).

In spite of the dimension of the 2017 split, as of December 2019, there were news that indicated another opposition realignment. Throughout the past November, the *Yomiuri Shinbun*¹¹ reported on the possibility of a merger between opposition parties by the end of the year. On December 6, Yukio Edano, CDP’s leader, in a meeting with the DPP and the Social Democratic Party leaders, proposed a merger aiming towards a united front against Shinzo Abe’s LDP administration in a forthcoming Lower House general election, that has to happen until the end of the current Diet session, in October 2021.

In August 2020, after months of standstill in the negotiations, the merger was finally completed with Yukio Edano being re-chosen as party leader (Sugiyama 2020). The prospects of an electoral victory are still low, and its main reason is the electorate’s negative perception about the DPJ administration. As Scheiner et al (2018) point out, “the difficult truth for Japan’s opposition parties is that, since 2012, the LDP is simply the most popular item on the menu for voters” (36). Ikeda and Reed (2016) complement this view by stating that the party “had simply failed to govern effectively or even consistently” and the rejection of the party was “severe and long-lasting” (55).

Conclusion

In conclusion, some reasons that led to DPJ’s breakaway are clear. Since the party was formed by ideologically diverse groups – unlike the LDP which is a conservative party from the start – its factions were mostly related to these political origins. Consequently, the DPJ leadership, especially during the 2000s, tried to balance the distribution of posts among the groups that helped form and enlarge the party to conceal internal cleavages.

There is also an institutional reason for the absence of splits in the DPJ during the 2000s. The logic of the new electoral system made it risky for a politician to defect, since she would face a DPJ-nominated and a possible LDP candidate in the same single-member district which reduces her chances of being elected; politicians without a party affiliation are also not allowed to run in the proportional representation district. This logic stayed in place until the 2017 Lower House general election, when the electoral prospects of the Party of Hope were incentives for conservative-leaning DP members to defect. I return to this point below.

¹¹ *Yomiuri Shinbun*, November 4, 2019, 4; November 13, 2019, 4; November 18, 2019, 4.

The decision-making process inside the party, differently from the LDP, had moments of centralization and decentralization that depended mostly on the party leadership at the said moment. Mulgan (2014) explains how the decision-making process went from a tentative Westminster-inspired prime-ministerial-centered one to the system of prior examination and prior approval that was part of the LDP's manual. Sasada et al (2013) also write that the strategy was a result more of the party leadership positions than of grassroots pressure resulted from political polarization. However, even though there was the emergence of an "opposition inside the government", the party's inability to take into account the diverging opinions was crucial for the split that happened.

The case study presented cannot be completely understood if not by an exogenous factor in 2017: the creation of the Party of Hope in the period between the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election and Lower House election. The emergence of Yuriko Koike's Party of Hope opened a door for the DPJ conservatives that wanted to cooperate with the LDP on constitutional reform. Koike's refusal to a complete merger led the DPJ's center-left to create a new party, the CDP, that became the strongest opposition party in that election. The cessation of this exogenous factor, that is to say, the unfulfillment of the initial electoral expectations towards Koike's Party of Hope, explains, for example, the discussions that led to a merger between the DPP and the CDP at the time of writing. The parties effectively realized that the price of standing apart is an LDP administration without a possibility of an opposition party administration.

This research note contributes to the study of the contemporary Japanese political system by providing a concise background of opposition realignments, with a focus on the discussion of the former biggest opposition party's internal decision-making process, its failures and, more importantly, the exogenous factor that led to its split. It is also important to point out that even with the CDP/DPP merger, completed in August 2020, public opinion polls show that the electorate's evaluation of the opposition has not changed in a positive way, with the new CDP keeping the same amount of approval of its pre-merger existence (NHK 2020). Further research is still necessary so as to understand which are other factors that collaborate to the opposition parties' low support rates in contemporary Japanese politics, as well as the political perceptions among new generation of voters, whose patterns of political preferences are still unclear.

An important factor that needs further consideration is the role of the oppositions in the post-Abe political environment. Abe stepped down in September 2020, and his chosen successor was the former Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yoshihide Suga. As the LDP party

presidential mandate runs until September 2021, there is still some time for Suga to try avoiding the fate of being only a caretaker prime minister, in spite of the criticism towards his government's conduct of the Olympics and the COVID-19 pandemic¹².

Despite that, with an LDP presidential election in September, whose results are unforeseeable as of now, and the Lower House's four-year term ending in October 2021 (in the case there is not a snap election until then), there is a fair amount of uncertainty about the way Japan is going to be led in the next decade.

¹² *Tokyo Shimbun*, May 5, 2021.

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¹³ All online sources were accessible as to 25 June 2021.

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