

A nagging Japanese riddle: Who's 'left' and who's 'right'?

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In the Dec. 16, 2013, Lower House election, the **Liberal Democratic Party** won a resounding victory while the **Democratic Party of Japan** suffered a crushing defeat, bringing about a change of government after three years and three months of DPJ rule. Expectations were that the election campaign would center on policy issues such as whether the consumption tax rate should be raised, whether Japan should join the talks for the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement, and whether and how Japan should end its reliance on nuclear energy. In reality, none of these issues were decisive in the election outcome, because there were no clear-cut differences in the positions taken by the two major parties. Clearly nuclear power did not become a major campaign issue. It has long been said that it is hard to fight a national election on the environment and energy agenda. That appears to have been proved true again. Although all parties other than the LDP pledged — albeit to varying degrees — to do away with nuclear power generation, the election outcome suggests that a large portion of unaffiliated voters who support an end to nuclear power voted for the LDP.

In contrast, *Nihon Mirai no To* (Tomorrow Party of Japan), whose sole agenda was to abolish nuclear power, lost many of its pre-election seats. As has been shown in Britain, a change of government is nothing uncommon when a nation has a single-seat constituency system. The party in power draws up national policies, but no policy can possibly satisfy all citizens, corporations or organizations. This creates a sense of victimization among some segments of the electorate, who then take revenge on the governing party in the next election. A party in the opposition camp only has to either attack the ruling party or remain silent on policy matters. A head wind against the ruling party serves as a tail wind for the opposition, which stands to gain under a single-seat constituency system.

A typical example of this is found in the debate over the consumption tax hike, which was one of the major points of contention in the latest election. After the DPJ won a landslide victory in the 2009 Lower House election, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama vowed not to raise the consumption tax rate “during the next four years.” Less than a year later, however, Naoto Kan, who took over from Hatoyama as prime minister, effectively put a consumption tax hike on the DPJ agenda for the July 2010 Upper House election, and incurred deep voter distrust. Although the tax hike proposal may not have been entirely to blame, the DPJ saw the 54 seats it had going into the election dwindle to 44. Afterward, it had to deal with a divided Diet as its ability to implement policy was crippled.

In the 2009 Lower House election, the DPJ came up with a clearly liberal manifesto, choosing to highlight how it differed from the LDP. Although there were doubts about the feasibility of some campaign pledges, the DPJ deserved credit for demonstrating its liberal orientation. What proved unfortunate for Hatoyama, an idealist, was having to face the insoluble question of relocating the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa. After succeeding Hatoyama, Kan vowed to follow realistic policies as an avowed disciple of Yonosuke Nagai, a professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology who was a reputed champion of realism at one time.

It is difficult to believe that Kan, a left-leaning civic activist while attending Nagai's university classes in international politics, was then known as a rightwinger in relative terms. Be that as it may, every word and deed of Kan as prime minister befitted his claim that he was a realist. Yoshihiko Noda, who succeeded Kan, was even more of a realist. He staked his political career on raising the consumption tax rate and, indeed, won the consent of the LDP and Komeito for the hike. Noda also nationalized the Senkaku Islands; neglected the task of implementing the DPJ's 2009 manifesto; shelved the DPJ pledge to shift decision-making power from bureaucrats to elected politicians; let bureaucrats, especially those of the Finance Ministry, take the initiative in drafting and implementing important policies; and paid no attention to the global warming issue. All in all, Noda pursued such a conservative policy line that even Hatoyama criticized the prime minister for acting like a leader of “the Noda faction of the LDP.”

Shinzo Abe, who returned to the helm of the government following the December election, represents the rightwing element within the LDP in policy matters with his calls for revising the Constitution, reorganizing the Self-Defense Forces into a national defense force and reforming the education system. Stressing these policies, however, is not what won him voter support. Instead, he placed emphasis on reviving the nation's economy and ending deflation. Abe seems to follow a path of perverted conservatism as he seeks economic resuscitation through classical Keynesian policies. He calls for unlimited quantitative monetary easing by the Bank of Japan, a

supplementary budget to the tune of more than ¥10 trillion, and more spending on public works in the name of anti-disaster efforts — policies that would be abhorred by his “conservative” European and American counterparts.

I had expected, perhaps wishfully, that Japan would enter an age of two major political parties — the conservative LDP versus the liberal DPJ — competing with each other under the single-seat constituency system. But Noda repainted the DPJ’s liberal agenda —reflected in its 2009 manifesto — with a conservative brush, while Abe put “big government’s” touch on LDP conservative policies that had come to the fore under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. As a result, it has become all but impossible to distinguish the basic policy lines followed by the two parties. Differences between the LDP and DPJ have been blurred by Abe and Noda.

Another unexpected result of the latest Lower House election is the emergence of a number of minor political groups despite the single-seat constituency system.

Regretfully I was wrong to anticipate an age of two major political parties, one conservative and the other liberal.

Notes by JF to put the above in perspective:

- *The **Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)** has been in power in Japan for almost all of the post-War period, excepting an 11-month period in 1993-4 and a 3-year period 2009-2012 when the **Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)** held a majority of seats in the Diet. The LDP is somewhat misnamed in that it has traditionally been center-right conservative and strongly nationalist by US and European standards, analogous to the Republican Party in the U.S., while the DPJ has been more liberal and analogous to the Democrats in the U.S. But as this article shows, it’s a little more complicated in Japan!*
- *Yukio **Hatoyama** was the head of the DPJ at the time of their electoral victory in 2009 and became Japan’s first ever **DPJ Prime Minister**. He lost support and was forced to step down as Prime Minister in 2010, largely due to his failure to stand by his pledge to close the USA’s **Futenma Air Force Base** on Okinawa. He was succeeded by Naoto **Kan** who served 2010-2011, stepping down amidst unpopularity and widespread criticism of his management of the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Kan was resucceeded by Yoshihiko **Noda**, who served through the end of 2012 when a resurgent LDP achieved a resounding victory in the general election, regaining a strong majority in the Diet and returning to power.*
- ***Shinzo Abe**, the LDP leader (who had previously served as Prime Minister in 2006-7) became Prime Minister again in 2012 when Noda had to resign due to the LDP’s victory. Abe was right-wing from the standpoint of military and geopolitical affairs, and was aptly known as '**Abe The Hawk**'. Yet despite his right-wing hawkishness, Abe was far from a fiscal conservative. He was highly interventionist and more akin to the Democrats in the USA in advocating major government spending. His “Abenomics” program made him the world’s champion of quantitative easing and he spent trillions on large-scale government projects. Most observers in Japan and internationally have a positive view of his economic program. Though Japan technically drifted into recession in November 2012 after 2 consecutive quarters of negative GDP growth, the LDP maintained a strong majority and Abe was re-elected in the December 2014 elections, which were a referendum on both Abenomics and his very hawkish policies. The economy continued an overall trend of recovery over the next decade with eventual reversal of deflation and recovery of the Nikkei stock index to a new all-time high in February of 2024 after 34 years. After Abe’s brutal assassination in 2022, his 2 successors, **Suga** and then **Kishida**, both LDP, largely continued his policies, as has current PM **Sanae Takaichi**, Japan’s first female PM. Takaichi is extremely popular, quite conservative (sometimes deemed 'Japan’s Iron Lady') and very much an Abe disciple with hawkish and pro-U.S. tendencies. The LDP won by a landslide in 2026 elections and very much continues to dominate Japanese politics.*