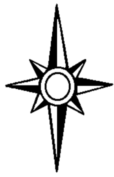

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What's at Stake in Japan's Elections? by Takao Toshikawa and Richard Katz

In a series of newspaper advertisements, a few of Japan's more cosmopolitan business leaders, including Kazuo Inamori, founder of Kyocera, pointed to what's really at stake in the November 9 elections for the Lower House of Japan's Diet. "We support a nation where a change of government is possible," they wrote.

They're right. Will this election produce a great leap forward toward contested elections by creating a closer balance between the ruling Liberal Democrats (LDP) and the main opposition party, the Democrats (DPJ)? Going into the election, the LDP held 246 seats, just five more than a majority. By contrast, the DPJ had only 137. Most forecasters believe the LDP will lose some seats and the DPJ gain a fairly large number – with no change in government. But can the DPJ gain enough seats to create the sense among voters that, some day, it could actually take power?

Except for two brief interruptions of about a year each, the LDP (and its precursor parties) have ruled Japan since World War II. But one-party democracies are too rigid to make the kind of wrenching course corrections that Japan needs. Competition is just as indispensable to good government as it is to economics.

This does not necessarily require a two-party system such as in the U.S. or Britain. Most democracies are run by coalitions. But it does require real contests for power and regular changes of power. In Japan, decades-old ties between entrenched politicians, government ministries, and special interests are so tightly woven that the LDP is gridlocked. Part of the party wants reform, especially urban Diet members, fearful of losing their seats as so many did in the last Lower House elections. But others in the party, beholden to special interest support groups known as *koenkai*, oppose reform. Policy is stuck.

Buds of change

Many trends are slowly building the basis for contested elections. The question is how long it will take these buds to bear fruit.

For one thing, there is finally an opposition party, the DPJ, which sees itself as becoming the government. Many previous opposition parties, such as the Socialists and Communists, neither expected nor really desired to take power. The DPJ is doing cartwheels to convince voters and elites that it is capable of ruling. It is even running a record nine former bureaucrats in this year's elections.

Unfortunately for the DPJ, some of those attempts to look "responsible" make it look too much like the LDP. It is boring. These days, the public prefers mavericks, like Junichiro Koizumi, Makiko Tanaka, and Shintaro Ishihara. DPJ leaders Naoto Kan and Ichiro Ozawa no longer come off as mavericks.

A second change is that of a "manifesto" election. The public has become entranced by the notion of each party standing for certain policies, with the campaign being a policy debate. True, many politicians are cynical about these manifestoes. Still, the very fact that they affect voter behavior forces politicians to take them more seriously than they might like to.

Traditionally, Japanese elections are not about policy, but about campaign funding and organization ability. Individual Diet seats and political machines are often treated as personal fiefdoms – so much so that a huge number of Diet members, including Koizumi, simply inherited their seats from their fathers or other relatives. In the current election, a record 38 percent LDP candidates have relatives among Diet members.

And yet, in recent years, the *koenkai* have been losing a chunk of their clout. One reason is the rise of "media candidates." Another is the growing interest in policy debate.

Behind these trends is a more fundamental sociological factor: the rise of the urban "floating voter" with little loyalty to any party or *koenkai*. They are the critical swing factor. This creates a dilemma for politicians. The image of reform attracts many floating voters. But the reality of reform weakens the *koenkai*. To the extent that reform succeeds, the *koenkai* are less able to, or eager to, mobilize money and voters for the LDP. That, in turn, weakens the *koenkai's* ability to stifle reform. Koizumi versus the resistance forces is, in part, a battle between the urban floating voter and the *koenkai*.

A third change is Koizumi's success in dismantling the traditional LDP factions and party baronies, particularly the once all-powerful Tanaka faction.

The problem for this election is that neither the DPJ nor even Koizumi stirs real excitement. Many voters, once truly enthusiastic about Koizumi, now support him mainly for lack of a better alternative.

Consequently, voter turnout could be low, almost certainly lower than the 62 percent turnout in 2000, though not as low as the record low 56 percent in 1996. Low turnouts favor the better-organized LDP and its ally, the Komeito. In a late October by-election in Saitama, a city near Tokyo, the LDP barely squeaked to victory, mainly because of a dismal 27 percent turnout.

Our best bet is that the LDP will probably suffer not-so-high losses, and Koizumi-led coalition government will continue. Nevertheless, even public opinion polls taken by mass media a week before elections have been wrong the last few times around. The reason is the floating voter.

Broadly speaking, in national elections, 30 percent of the voters will go to the polls and vote for the same party no matter what. 30 percent don't vote. The remaining 40 percent, the "floating voters," only decide whether to vote, and for whom, immediately before elections. So, earlier polls miss their intentions.

When these unaffiliated voters move strongly, unexpected results occur. The last time was the 1998 Upper House election, where the LDP lost despite widespread predictions of victory.

Traveling around the country to deliver speeches and such, I have not sensed such movement this time. Before a strong wind blows, first there is a gentle breeze. While people are saying that this is the first election with full-fledged "manifestos" on issues like reform of the public highway corporations, pension reform, Japan's role in Iraq, the economy, revision of the Constitution, and so on, the electorate does not see significant differences between the LDP and the DPJ. So a wind has not yet built.

Careful examination of individual electoral districts yields little likelihood of big LDP losses. In fact, some within the LDP go so far as to predict an LDP majority: at least 241 seats. That goes against conventional wisdom which believes the LDP will lose its thin majority and be forced to continue relying on its alliances with the Komeito (presently 31 seats) and New Conservatives (10 seats).

Some recent developments have turned off voters. Koizumi forced former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone (aged 85) to withdraw his candidacy by enforcing a new LDP rule limiting proportional representation candidates to age 72 or younger. Because this violated previous LDP promises to him, Nakasone furiously called Koizumi's demand, "Extremely rude. It's like throwing a bomb. It's political terrorism." Will the electorate take this as the LDP not caring about the elderly, or as replacing the reactionary old guard with a new generation? Mass media opinion polls show them somewhat indecisive but favoring the view that, "Ultimately the electorate should decide when politicians withdraw."

In the most realistic scenario the LDP wins 230-240. The LDP cannot sustain its current strength. However, the loss will most likely be in single digits. This result will mean neither an LDP loss for which its leaders will have to take responsibility, nor an increase in DPJ seats that the DPJ could claim as a victory. Neither party will be satisfied. An election pro from Komeito with an established reputation for election predictions also forecasts LDP results in the 230s.

Even if the LDP should lose 25 seats, the three-party ruling coalition would still secure 250 to 270 seats. Koizumi's continued premiership would not be in doubt. If the LDP's seats should fall to the 220s, however, the anti-Koizumi forces would revive, and Koizumi's reform express would be reduced to a slow train.

If the three ruling parties combine for 250 to 270 seats, the DPJ will secure 170 to 190. That's way up from its current 137. Consequently, the battle in the Upper House election next summer will be fiercer, and governing the nation will likely be more difficult.

In the second scenario, the LDP falls below 220 seats. One LDP elder says, "The DPJ says the same things the LDP does. They're like a pair of look-alikes. So the psychology of the voter may become "They're both the same, so why not try the new one.' The LDP mustn't be over-optimistic. If they mess up, they'll barely get by."

His long experience tells him that the effect of the DPJ-Liberal merger is not to be dismissed. In the last Lower House election, in 2000, the LDP lost many critical urban seats. If those routs in single urban districts spread to two or three districts per city this time, the LDP would drop below 220 seats.

In that case, politics will become fluid and the question of Koizumi's resignation would be raised. If the ruling parties fail to maintain internal control, even the direction of the election of the prime minister in the Lower House may become unclear. At the least, the "Koizumi reform" will come to a standstill.

The DPJ's goal is to increase its current 137 seats by 60. If it succeeds, forming an opposition coalition Government or achieving policy agreement with the Communist Party, which currently holds 20 seats, and the Social Democratic Party, which holds 18, would become realistic. Even if an immediate change of government did not occur, the ruling and opposition parties would be evenly matched. The curtain would open on an era of two-coalition politics.

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