

Down to the Wire in Japan

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Only days left in Japan's historic general election

Election campaigning for Japan's general election officially opened Tuesday, but you would hardly know it. The two main and several smaller parties vying for votes have been campaigning furiously since mid-July when Prime Minister Taro Aso dissolved the Diet (parliament) and set August 30 as the day of reckoning.

The leaders of the two main parties, Aso of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Yukio Hatoyama, leader and prime ministerial candidate for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), have already had televised debates with each other and with leaders of several smaller parties.

The DPJ appears to be headed for a sweeping victory, taking as many as 300 of the 480 seats in the Diet, according to the latest Nikkei poll, well over a simple majority, with possible a two-thirds majority in reach. It has taken Japan a long time to come to this point, where it is on the brink of a genuine two-party system, one in which two parties, one a little left of center and the other a little to the right, alternate in power. Japan is the only major democracy in the world that has not experienced a change of government through the ballot box.

In a larger sense, Japanese politics have reached that stage already in that two political entities with roughly equal political strength are fighting it out openly, are having policy debates, publishing manifestos and touring the country to try and sell the voters on their point of view.

For the opposition Democrats, there remains the one final hurdle in persuading the conservative Japanese public that they can be trusted with power. Should Japan stick with the known or take a leap into the unknown and turn the keys to government over to another political party? And if they can't do it now, when can they do it?

The sound trucks have been patrolling my neighborhood for the past two weeks. But for that matter, posters featuring faces of the local candidates or the party leaders have been plastered on walls and neighborhood houses since I moved to Japan from Thailand nearly two years ago.

The electioneering will reach a frenzy over the next week or so with more sound trucks, more politicians, wearing sashes with their names on them greeting commuters going to and from work at the railroad stations, more election flyers stuffed in mailboxes.

Japanese are at least spared the endless attack advertisements on television as is the case in the US, since paid advertisements on radio and television are banned. The candidates make their case on unpaid televised public forums and by haranguing voters at railroad stations, the main public space in urban Japan.

The politicians however, have found a loophole in the election law that permits them to air what look suspiciously like attack ads over the Internet. In a recent YouTube video produced by the LDP, a young man woos his girlfriend with promises about a life free of worries about child care and

retirement.

The woman wonders how her suitor is going to pay for all these goodies, while he tells her not to worry. He will sort out the details later after they are married. It is a clever play on the DPJ party manifesto, which calls for generous government benefits childrearing and is generally vague on how to pay for them.

Each party has issued its election platform, or manifesto, as it is called here. It is not certain whether Japanese voters are swayed by these platforms any more than most Americans are persuaded by their party platforms, but it does give the candidates something to talk about. The LDP has zeroed in on the several generous promises made in the DPJ manifesto along with its fairly vague proposals to finance them.

Democrats propose that the government provide a monthly stipend of about \$250 per month per child until graduation from junior high school, providing free high school education and the abolition of highway tolls. The proposals would “bankrupt” Japan, says Hiroyuki Hosoda, secretary general of the LDP.

Some others would argue that these comments are pretty rich coming from the party which has spent its way into the greatest per capital budget deficit of any developed nation on the planet, a public debt that is estimated at about 180 percent of gross domestic product.

Despite all of the sound and fury - not just a metaphor considering the sound trucks patrolling residential neighborhoods blasting out the name of the candidate over and over are the principal means of campaigning in Japan - the public opinion polls showing the LDP headed for defeat have not budged in the past two weeks.

Aso is putting up a brave fight, but a victory in this election would be somewhat akin to former US President Harry Truman’s surprise victory in the 1948 presidential election. But Aso and his party did catch a break with the first definitive news of impending economic recovery, which might take some of the wind out of the opposition sails.

The country’s gross domestic product grew at nearly one percentage point in April-June, compared with the sickening 11 percentage point drop the previous quarter. It works out to an annualized growth rate of around three percentage points. Aso, of course, was quick to argue that the news vindicated the stimulus measures his government has taken. In two weeks we will know if the vindication mattered to the electorate.

P.S.

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