

# Political visions in Japan. Generational warfare

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## Two rival political visions emerge for reviving Japan. Will they clash?

IT IS rare in Japan to find one bold political leader, and even rarer to find two. Yet since the start of the year, two men with wildly different personalities, political styles and power bases have launched daring projects that they hope will help shake Japan out of its long economic funk. They may end up colliding with each other.

The first is the prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda. At the opening of the Diet, or parliament, on January 24<sup>th</sup>, he said he would present a bill by the end of March that aims to double the consumption tax, to 10%. For well over a decade, the political establishment has acknowledged the need for an increase, but its nerve has failed it time and again, despite a ballooning government debt and rising social-security costs for an ageing population. Mr Noda is now gambling his political life on such a tax rise. He also wants to slash the number of Diet members from 480 in the lower house to 395, cut the salaries of civil servants by 8%, and reduce their housing benefits.

Any one of these measures would, in a Japanese context, be considered bold. All three together seems almost quixotic in a divided Diet where the upper house is dominated by the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Moreover, Mr Noda's popularity has slid in recent opinion polls. He has the support of his own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), never a given for any leader of that fractious party. But the LDP shows the same intransigence that has been its stock-in-trade since it lost power in 2009. It vows to block the tax bill, even though raising the consumption tax has long been a plank in its own policies. It would like Mr Noda to dissolve parliament and call a general election on the issue. Mr Noda, his aides say, counts on LDP obstructionism to backfire with voters. Yet history has not been kind to prime ministers seeking to raise the consumption tax.

Meanwhile, a different vision of government—leaner, less inclined to tax, and less obsessed with regulation—is appearing far from the political centre. In the industrial city of Osaka, a political movement is emerging, led by 42-year-old Toru Hashimoto, the new mayor. He draws support from those frustrated by the quagmire of mainstream politics. Osaka is Japan's second-biggest city, with a huge industrial hinterland. Its people are known for business acumen and an earthy frankness.

Mr Noda and Mr Hashimoto embody very different political styles. Mr Noda, who is 54, is old school. He has called himself the “no-sides” leader who promises to put consensus before confrontation. When he chides the LDP, he does so gently, turning its own words back at it. Some of Japan's elder statesmen consider him the best prime minister in years.

Mr Hashimoto, by contrast, is deliberately abrasive. He has a withering contempt for his enemies, as was clear over the new year when he publicly refused to shake the hand of the boss of the local labour confederation who had backed his rival in last year's election (as also had the DPJ and the LDP). Compounding the insult, Mr Hashimoto plans to turf the confederation out of its low-rent

offices in the city hall, from where it has brokered power for half a century.

Mr Hashimoto is also scathing about central government. He particularly loathes the hidebound education ministry, which he loves to call “stupid”. Such talk rattles the Tokyo establishment. Some there dismiss him as a badmouthing populist. Others describe his style as “Hashism”, to confer a sort of dangerous extremism. So far, he has shown only the odd right-wing tic—such as requiring Osaka’s teachers to stand for the national anthem.

His tactics look more like determination than despotism. First, he has a clear short-term political goal. He wants to merge the city of Osaka with the prefecture surrounding it in order to cut overlapping government services and reduce debt. He stood down as governor of Osaka prefecture to run for mayor in order to achieve just that. His plan needs a Diet vote to take effect, and he is assiduously courting politicians in Tokyo. But if they vote it down, his advisers say, he will send “assassins” to run in the next election against the national politicians who oppose him. His Osaka-based Restoration Party has already started recruiting potential candidates.

Second, Mr Hashimoto has a sophisticated group of backers. These not only include many in the Osaka media and business establishment who have supported his crackdown on the unions and government waste. The mayor is also drawing sharp minds from the civil service in Tokyo, and has support from mayors and governors in other parts of Japan who favour devolution.

Third, he is pretty persuasive. On January 24<sup>th</sup> Seiji Maehara, the DPJ’s policy chief, said Mr Hashimoto had convinced him to change his mind about the creation of an Osaka megalopolis. In Osaka some observers say the biggest danger now is that no one any longer stands up to Mr Hashimoto.

Potentially troubling for Mr Noda, Mr Hashimoto strongly opposes an increase in the consumption tax. As a high official in Tokyo puts it: “There’s a fight between the DPJ and the LDP, and between the DPJ and the populist undercurrent. In the end, it’s the populists who are more of a worry.” Many in Tokyo hope that, like other regional leaders who have emerged in a flash of charisma, Mr Hashimoto will wilt in the national spotlight. For the moment, though, he is sharpening up Japanese politics, and that can only be a good thing.

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\* The Economist. Jan 28<sup>th</sup> 2012 | OSAKA AND TOKYO. From the print edition.  
<http://www.economist.com/node/21543544>