

Fukuda : a Captain with No Clue Where to Go

Saturday 19 April 2008, by [MUTO Ichiyo](#) (Date first published: January 2008).

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Japan has entered a period of chronic political instability since the devastating defeat of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) headed by rightist Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in the Upper House election in July 2007. The LDP's downfall stood in stark contrast with the meteoric rise of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) that became the largest party in the Upper House. The ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komei Party lost its power to freely impose legislature. Now Abe is gone and Fukuda Yasuo, a lack-luster LDP politician, rules the country as prime minister.

One positive thing about this development is that two vicious models of rule have been tested one after the other and both proved failures — a neoliberal model applied by Koizumi Junichiro for five years and an ultra-rightist model imposed by Abe Shinzo for one year. Both have shown their real faces and became discredited in the eyes of the majority of the people. The successive failures of the two models offer an opportunity to reorient Japanese politics toward an alternative future, one that is possible if only popular intervention is properly organized.

But let us first look at what happened in the past few months.

Abe's Political Suicide

For about six weeks following his ignominious defeat, Abe clung to prime minister's chair on the empty claim that his basic platform — change of the postwar Japanese regime through the creation of a new constitution — had been supported by the people. But there were no prospects that bills reflecting his policies would pass through the Upper House. The most crucial issue to him, according to him, was the extension of the term of the anti-terrorism law scheduled to expire at the end of October. Under this law, Japanese navy ships were providing refueling in the Indian Ocean for the U.S. and other warships engaged in the "Enduring Freedom" operation in Afghanistan.

The Democratic Party headed by Ozawa Ichiro made it clear that it would reject the extension of the law on grounds that the Japanese military participation in the U.S. war, which was being fought without legitimatization by the United Nations, was violation of the Japanese constitution. If the Upper House rejected the law's extension, the Indian Ocean operation would have to be terminated.

This issue grew into the first testing ground for the LDP-DPJ contestation. Abe set the operation as the decisive symbol of Japan's allegiance to the "international community" (read the United States). In early September, Abe met with President Bush during the Sydney APEC summit and reassured

him of Japan's commitment to continued fueling operation. To the surprise of all observers, he declared he would stake his political life on this matter. Back from Sydney, he delivered his policy speech at the Diet on September 10 mapping out his policy perspective. Everybody expected a showdown with the opposition on the fueling issue in the following Diet sessions.

Just two days later, however, Abe called a press conference and announced his resignation. Abe said that he was stepping down to "clear the political gridlock created by the ruling coalition's election defeat and to expedite the extension of the anti-terrorism law." Because the fueling service was an international commitment, he said, he had offered to talk with DPJ president Ozawa to resolve the matter but Ozawa had refused to meet. That was why he decided to step down. This did not make sense at all as a rationale for resignation. Drawing howling accusations of irresponsibility from all quarters, Abe took refuge in a hospital. This in fact meant political suicide for Abe and all he represented.

The ensuing political vacuum led to a suspension of all Diet activities including the fueling law extension. In fact the term of the law expired and the warships were called back.

Amid rising criticism, the LDP scrambled to find a new president. The party presidency was contested by Aso Taro and Fukuda Yasuo. Aso, a grandson of U.S. occupation-era Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, pledging to toe Abe's rightist line, was generally considered the most likely successor to Abe, but the LDP finally chose Fukuda Yasuo, a son of the late Fukuda Takeo, a prime minister from the 1970s. Fukuda is known to be critical of Abe's rightist line. The Lower House elected Fukuda as new prime minister while the Upper House nominated DPJ president Ozawa. The Lower House decision having the precedence, Fukuda became prime minister on September 26. At the outset, his cabinet enjoyed a fairly high public support, close to 60 percent, certainly reflecting widespread popular revulsion toward Abe.

Fukuda Cabinet — Interim Nature

What is the nature of the Fukuda cabinet?

It is difficult to identify the exact political platform of this government. It looks a lot like a ship that struggles and barely manages to stay afloat. True, it is moving, but the poker-faced captain does not give away his destination. Maybe he does not know. To prevent the boat from overturning, the captain orders some ballast to be pumped into the left tank, and then gives another order to let more ballast into the right, causing the ship to lose buoyancy with each weight increment.

Given the July election results, the Fukuda cabinet was doomed to immobility right from the beginning. With the Upper House dominated by the opposition, bills adopted by the Lower House but not favored by the opposition cannot pass through the Upper House. Media call this a "twisted" inter-house formation that leads to a chronic paralysis of parliament functions. According to the Constitution, however, a bill sent from the Lower House but turned down by the Upper House can still become law if passed a second time by a two thirds majority of the Lower House. Theoretically, therefore, the ruling coalition, which now controls more than two thirds of the Lower House seats, can use this rule to override the opposition of the DPJ. But frequent recourse to this rule would compromise the credibility of the rulers and the Fukuda cabinet wants to avoid this as far as possible. If it should ride roughshod this way, the opposition may feel justified to present a motion of censure to the Upper House, equivalent to a motion of no-confidence for the Lower House.

All observers agree that this cabinet is an interim one and that general elections cannot be avoided to reconstitute the Lower House before the expiry of the regular term in the autumn of next year.

The mission the LDP has given Fukuda is to hold general (Lower House) elections at a time and in a situation where the LDP will not face the same landslide defeat as in the Upper House election.

But the situation has rapidly deteriorated for Fukuda with one scandal after another erupting after he stepped into power. The case of blatant bribery involving ex-Administrative Vice-minister of Defense Moriya Takemasa and U.S. weapons importers totally discredited the defense bureaucracy and exposed the shady operations of the Japan-U.S military industrial complex.

Fukuda's handling of the scandalous loss of pensions records has also invited public anger. The issue was exposed by the DPJ during the Abe administration, but it is Fukuda and his government that have been held responsible for its settlement. In December people were shocked to hear from Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare Masuzoe Yoichi that close to 10 million of the 50 million misfiled personal pension records would be ultimately unidentifiable. The government earlier promised to put every single record into order by the end of March 2008. Asked if the failure was a serious breach of faith on the part of the government, Fukuda enraged the people by saying he had forgotten whether the government had ever made such a promise. People felt fooled.

In the first few months of its rule, public support for the Fukuda cabinet plummeted. Opinion polls in December showed that only 30 percent or so of people supported Fukuda versus close to 50 percent who did not.

Given this situation, Fukuda and the LDP hesitate to dissolve the Lower House early. One of the likely scenarios is for the LDP to call general elections after the G8 summit in Hokkaido in July 2008. Creating for itself an image of international importance is the LDP government's usual tactic to impress the voters. The summit chaired by Fukuda is seen as a golden opportunity to enhance his image. Similarly, Fukuda's China diplomacy, begun with his visit to Beijing in December to establish "strategic mutually benefiting relations" to be reciprocated by President Hu Jintao's visit to Japan, will serve this purpose immensely.

Domestically, Fukuda, as his New Year address indicated, will try to look people-friendly by emphasizing consumer interests and promising full efforts to resolve the pension issue. He knows his government cannot survive without differentiating itself from the Koizumi-Abe governments, and is trying to de-Abeize the political language. He also tries to do something to patch up social disparities. As part of this gesture, some of the advisory councils set up by Abe, like the "beautiful country" council have been dissolved and the revision of the Constitution has been removed from the list of immediate slogans.

Is Japanese politics being reoriented?

Can Roots of Evil be Removed?

The current predicament of the LDP has resulted from the historic failure of the three fundamental policy orientations it has subscribed to: (1) unconditional identification with the U.S. global strategy; (2) advocacy of ultra-right historical revisionism reinstating and glorifying Japan's imperial past; and (3) uncritical subscription to the neoliberal reorganization of society.

These three pillars have all proved rotten. As is clear to all, the U.S. strategy of global domination implemented in the Bush-neocon manner has failed. But Japan has bound itself even more tightly to this hollowed pillar. The second pillar that Abe succeeded in erecting has fallen. The third pillar planted by Koizumi, which once drew enthusiastic popular support, has proved a major source of disasters for the everyday life of the majority of the people — dilapidating country towns, emergence

of a large mass of underemployed and underpaid workers, the yawning gap between the rich and the poor, and a loss of social solidarity.

Can the Fukuda government get clear of the three negative legacies of the past and replace them with a new vision based on different principles? Is it willing to do so? By no means.

It should first be remembered that if not an Abe-like ultra-rightist, Fukuda is neither a dove nor a liberal. As a leading member of the Koizumi cabinet, Fukuda was an important architect of Japan's scheme of military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fukuda has no intention to critically reexamine the justice of Iraq invasion and critically review Japan's commitment to the Bush war. Vis-a-vis the controversial re-dispatch of the Japanese fleet to the Indian Ocean, the Fukuda cabinet hurriedly made a makeshift bill to send the fleet back. The bill was rejected by the Upper House, but Fukuda made it law using the two thirds Lower House majority. Now the LDP intends to introduce a permanent law allowing the government to dispatch troops anytime without requiring to make a special law each time Self- Defence Force (SDF) troops are sent overseas. Overall, the Fukuda cabinet is substantiating all military commitments made under the "realignment" accords with the U.S., such as the construction of a new base in Henoko in Okinawa and the deployment of missile defense systems.

What about the ultra-rightist doctrine introduced by the Abe group? True, Fukuda does not like to appear ultra-right. But he has retained almost all the ultra-right ministers Abe appointed in his cabinet. Besides, the LDP is still dominated by ultra-rightists affiliated with parliamentary contingents of rightist alliances such as Nihon Kaigi (The Japan Conference)" They were dealt a heavy political blow by Abe's defeat, but have begun to reorganize around Aso as their new leader. Though Fukuda said he would not visit Yasukuni Shrine and certainly does not subscribe to the ultra-rightist view of history, he has no intention to eradicate the ultra-rightist legacies from the state ideology and practice. Rightist intervention against gender equality, peace education, and minority rights are all still rampant, with the participation in most cases of the LDP and other conservative representatives in local assemblies.

What then is the Fukuda cabinet doing as regards the neoliberal "reform"? While even the mainstream media have now begun to report on the negative consequences of the Koizumi reform, the Fukuda government has done nothing by way of strengthening safety nets for the hard-hit people. Knowing that Abe's abstract state-remaking slogans did not work, Fukuda is now talking about politics whose eyes are level with ordinary people. But no actual steps have been considered to curb corporate profiteering, rectify and regulate extremely exploitative labor market practices, and safeguard universal public services for the entire population.

On the other hand, the Fukuda cabinet is susceptible to intra-LDP backlashes against the part of Koizumi's neoliberal reform that destroyed the local bases of individual LDP politicians by making their pork barrel politics difficult. The Fukuda leadership attended to this need by proposing the preservation of the petrol tax, which is used exclusively for road construction, and this has flared up as another issue of contestation with the DPJ, which demanded abolition of the tax.

Overall, the Fukuda LDP has no specific hallmark of its own. It has no will to remedy but is merely trying to patch up the obvious ills caused by the immediate past — all to buy time. The LDP finds itself in a blind alley.

Democratic Party — Power as the Only Goal

Can the DPJ then be the alternative? Many people now look to the DPJ for change. A survey

conducted by Kyodo News in the middle of December showed that 45.7 percent favored a DPJ-led government and only 28.5 percent a LDP-led government in the near future.

But the DPJ's stances on vital issues are ambiguous. DPJ President Ozawa Ichiro, once a strongman in the LDP leadership, is known for his advocacy of an "ordinary country," that is, a Japan free from the pacifist Article Nine restriction on having a legal military force like other "ordinary" countries. After the July election, Ozawa contributed an essay to liberal monthly magazine *Sekai* (November 2007), saying that if it is part of the United Nations' peace-keeping activities, the Self-Defence Forces can be dispatched overseas and use force without contravening Article Nine of the constitution. According to him, the fueling activity in question in the Indian Ocean violates Article Nine as it is part of an American war not authenticated by the United Nations, but troops operations in Afghanistan as part of the U.N. resolution-based NATO-commanded International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) would be constitutional. This novel and absurd interpretation of the constitution surprised his friends and foes alike as it came just as his party was preparing to confront the government on the fueling operation.

Ozawa however does not represent his party's consensus. Founded through a series of mergers, the DPJ is an amalgam of diverse political trends and is divided internally by contradictory tendencies that do not concur even on such basic policy issues as the revision of the constitution. While the party includes former Socialist Party members and liberals who uphold the present constitution, its mainstream consists of conservatives from different backgrounds, including even die-hard ultra-rightists, enthusiastic neoliberals educated at the Matsushita School of Government and Management, and U.S.-oriented remilitarization enthusiasts. Former party president Maehara Seiji, for instance, is known as a strong advocate of rapid military buildup to counter the threat of China.

At the moment the DPJ is taking a left of center position to attract the LDP-weary people. But the DPJ is generally seen as a more streamlined neoliberal party based on the urban upper middle class than the LDP, which includes quite a few anti-neoliberal local interest-oriented politicians. On the other hand, however, the DPJ counts on the support of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (RENGO), a major labor organization that feels a keen need to address the problems of marginalized workers who have been victimized by neoliberal policies. Given this, it is hard to imagine that the DPJ as is will some day become united and present to the people consistent and principled alternatives.

Grand Coalition and Political Realignment

If the two competing parties are both conservative groups with no basic differences as regards principles, as they actually are, it is no wonder that the idea of a grand coalition should emerge to straighten the "twist" that stymies the political process. In fact, the very idea was pushed forward and nearly became reality in early November when Fukuda and Ozawa held two sessions of closed talks and almost agreed to work together in an LDP-DPJ grand coalition. This plan failed to materialize as the DPJ leadership rejected it. Ozawa pleaded that by working inside the government, his party, which he deemed still "immature," would gain ruling experience and get some of its policies actually implemented. After his executives unanimously turned his plan down, Ozawa announced his resignation, but when the executives begged him to stay on as president, he agreed to stay.

This should be seen not just as an episode, but perhaps as a rehearsal. In the coming general elections, the LDP will almost certainly lose. Unless the DPJ wins overwhelmingly and can organize its own administration excluding the LDP, there will be momentum for a grand coalition. Since his

failure in November, Ozawa has repeatedly dwelt on the importance of a grand coalition, justifying what he tried to do. On the LDP side, Party Secretary General Nakagawa Hidenao and other influential leaders have leaked the fact that they favored the idea. LDP's "godfather" Nakasone Yasuhiro is particularly enthusiastic about this idea.

The point is that moves to forge a grand coalition between the LDP and DPJ is likely to trigger dynamic realignment processes in which individual politicians, factions, and groups may get free of their old party belongings and begin to gather together on the basis of shared political interests, credos, and policies. Such processes can occur in the course of the making of a grand coalition, with dissidents to the coalition strategy walking away, or can come with the collapse of a grand coalition government. Within such dynamic processes can we expect relatively progressive factions, groups, and parties come together to form a new political force that can work to undo the evil developments of the past decade.

An offensive to remove the three evil legacies and promote new visions outside the parliamentary arena will be essential for bringing about the proper, principled political realignment that is badly needed. That offensive has already begun, headed by the Okinawa people's massive mobilization of 110,000 protesters on September 29. Ministry of Education, Culture, ports, Science and Technology, censoring high school history text books in July 2007, ordered the deletion of descriptions that the Japanese military compelled Okinawa civilians to commit mass suicide in the closing days of World War II. This was another step by the Japanese government to whitewash the Japanese Imperial Army's criminal acts against the Okinawan people. In literal terms the whole of Okinawa became enraged and stood up in protest, demanding that the censors' instructions be cancelled. Facing this protest, the Ministry, though it did not cancel the original instructions, had to accept textbook descriptions about the Imperial Japanese Army having compelled civilians into mass mutual killings in Okinawa.

More recently, hepatitis C patients infected by tainted blood products approved by the Japanese government, who had sued the government for compensation, won a full victory, reversing the government's earlier decision not to compensate all the victims. This is a model case where mass pressure and public opinion force the government not just to accommodate to a new situation but to cancel its previous position.

In the Editorial Overview of our previous issue, we said that after the fall of Abe, the time had come for a people's counter-offensive to undo what has been done during the past ten years by the ruling elites, by repealing all laws, policies, commitments, and agreements that go against the pacifist principles and best traditions achieved by postwar movements.

This process has begun, partially and locally. It is time to turn it into a strategic offensive. (January 2008)

P.S.

* Posted in March 2008 on Japonesia's website:

<http://www.ppjaponesia.org/modules/tinycontent/index.php?id=15>

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