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Recent changes in Japanese politics, the trends and outlook

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The Liberal Democratic party (LDP) held office as the governing party for the very long period from 1955 to 1993.

Notwithstanding that free and fair elections have been held, one party has dominated throughout, and in order to distinguish Japan's "party system" from the "one party systems" of the old Eastern bloc, it has been called a "predominant party system".

In 1993 the non-LDP Cabinet of Morihiro Hosokawa was formed and embarked on a series of political reforms including those of the electoral system and political funding, but in 1994 the LDP returned to power where they have been since.

In particular the LDP, led by Junichiro Koizumi enjoyed a landslide victory in last year's general election winning 296 of the 480 seats in the Diet.

Today I would like to examine three things, the factors that enabled them to retain power from 1955 to 1993, then the reasons and the nature of the reforms that took place in 1993, and then lastly how the changes brought by reform have changed those first factors.

I would like to focus on four mechanisms that supported the LDP holding office from 1955 to 1993: The Koenkai or "Personal Support Networks", Factions, Policy Tribes and the effective suppression of opposition mobilization.

Up until 1993 the Japanese electoral districts were organized into "Multimember Districts", from which three to five Members would be chosen, and in order to obtain a majority of seats it was unavoidable that LDP candidates would be competing with one another.

As the local Branch of the LDP could not support one candidate over another they were virtually useless in the context of an election, and as candidates

cannot rely on party organizations to assist them, they had to create their own vote-gathering organizations.

So the local Branches of the LDP exist in name only, and in fact the fundamental organizational unit is the Koenkai, or “personal support network”.

The Koenkais are the receptacle of all and sundry matters that the constituents might like to bring to the Member, so weddings, funerals, and other celebrations and events, assistance with obtaining employment or receiving awards and so on, and any other community events such as sports festivals and excursions and so on, and rather than generating support for the party they work hard at building support for that individual politician, they are the core of vote gathering at election time.

For example, the Member for the electorate of my parents’ home in Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture (Lower House Electoral District No. 11 Kanagawa Prefecture) is Prime Minister Koizumi, but if he chose to leave the LDP, Koizumi’s Personal Support Group would not be thrown out of the offices of the LDP Kanagawa No. 11 Branch office, rather the LDP Branch, which exists in nothing but name, would instead be ejected from the Koizumi support group building!

To deal with the fact that the Personal Support network is the fundamental unit supporting the party, the LDP itself can be said to be nothing more than an alliance of corresponding factions. So what are factions and why do they come about?

The first reason is that the President of the LDP is elected primarily by LDP Diet Members, and so the powerful members of the party establish followers and like-minded individuals specifically for those Presidential elections.

The second reason for the rise of the factions is closely related to the electoral system. As I mentioned with the multimember electorate system, LDP candidates would inevitably do battle with one another, and because the party couldn’t be seen to be favouring one candidate over another, candidates would join particular factions and obtain from them campaign funding and help with campaign speeches.

Obviously the more members in the Diet the greater the bargaining power, so the faction head would also lend a hand. This competition between factions has been a contributing factor to the maximization of LDP seats in government.

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The third mechanism that contributed to the long hold on power that the LDP had was what is called “pork-barreling”. At least until the time of the Mori Cabinet, all draft bills prepared by all government departments had to be reviewed by the LDP before reaching the Diet. If the LDP Policy Research Council didn’t approve,

no bill would pass. And as all LDP members, even those not part of the executive, could join Policy Divisions of this Council they get to participate in the decision making process in a particular area of policy, exerting *some* degree of influence.

This is what are called “Policy tribes”. By becoming deeply involved in policy development in specific areas, these politicians can then enhance their appeal in their constituency by association with whatever is achieved, increasing their chances of reelection. This has also helped to keep the LDP in power

The fourth point, has been the effective suppression of opposition mobilization. The LDP is something of a “catch-all” party which has successfully managed to enlist the support of a wide range of classes, interest groups and organizations. Of particular note is their success in preventing the organization of interest groups that in other countries you would fully expect to be supporting the opposition.

For example, after the post-war failure of the socialists to organize the rural sector into agricultural unions, as I’m sure you know the Farmer’s Cooperative movement managed to organize almost 100% of farming households, so there was no successful alliance formed between the rural sector and labour as for example happened in Sweden.

Similarly the communists and socialist hit a brick wall when they tried to organize medium, small and micro-business sectors. What should have been the very backbone of left wing political party support; the workers themselves, were organized into enterprise labour unions, per company, where their interests were clearly tied to those of the company, and they would suffer as well if the company went under.

And so in exchange for job security and welfare arrangements, unions have exercised restraint in making excessive pay claims, in what has become known as “labour-management cooperation” spreading widely since the 80s amongst the major industries. Added to this the fact that the Japan Socialist Party tended to be far more radical than the Western European Social Democrat Parties, and had taken a road antagonistic to big business, they found themselves completely mismatched to the sentiments of the workers.

In short, employees of large private enterprises were getting on quite well with the owners of each company, and had no need of political parties to rescue them. And in fact found that the policies of the Socialist Party offended the cooperative attitude they had to their employers and they withdrew their support. Whilst it would be going too far to say that they then threw their weight behind the LDP, they certainly ceased to constitute any sort of support base for the socialists and has effectively been “depoliticized”.

So we had an LDP party very smug in the solid support it enjoyed, how is it they found themselves looking defeat in the face? I believe that the change of

government in 1993 was brought about by the combination of three factors, one long term, one mid term and one short term.

Firstly, the long term factor was that the policy gap between the ruling and opposition parties had for some time been shrinking.

[Previously] Even if members of the LDP had defected, without actually joining forces with the opposition they would have had a hard time making their point, in respect of those they'd left behind. No matter how bad the factional infighting got at home, there were simply some issues that prevented them from actually getting into bed with the opposition. This is the basic reason that the LDP remained intact up until 1993.

However, things were no longer as they had been in the 50s and 60s. The big philosophical battles, the choice between capitalism and socialism as a point of contention was receding rapidly into irrelevancy, and words like "the cold war" seemed relics from another age. Under the Socialist cabinet of Murayama a number of policies were revised including the Japan US security treaty, acceptance of the Constitutionality of the Self-Defense Force, acknowledgement of the flag and the National Anthem etc, in all of these ways the differences between the policies of the two parties were growing smaller. These are the very things, that led to a group of LDP deserters forming the Shinseito (The Japan Renewal Party), and the Shinto Sakigake (New Party Harbinger) and under Murayama the LDP itself forming a coalition with the Socialist Party, to create a political alliance which at one stage would have been unimaginable.

On the other hand, no matter that compared to bygone years policies had come to resemble one another, beginning with the National Security Policy, there were still some large policy gaps in 1993.

Furthermore, the concept of National Security proposed by Ichiro Ozawa, the effective leader of the Shinseito (Renewal), was regarded as right-leaning by those within the LDP, and so the long-term factors I have described here were still not enough to immediately tear the LDP apart. At best the LDP deserters linking up with the socialist could have been derided as some sort of illicit coupling. What they needed was some sort of policy issue that would place them closer to the opposition than those remaining, something that would justify a union between the deserters and the socialist.

This opportunity arrived in the form of the mid-term factor of political reform.

Mistrust of politics reached a climax with the succession of corruption scandals beginning with the Recruit scandal, the Kyowa scandal, the Tokyo Sagawa scandal following one after another, and a group of younger LDP members, with the cooperation of the opposition (because of the LDP split majority in the House of Counselors any political reform bill would not have been possible since 1989 without the agreement of the opposition) pressure mounted to realise genuine

electoral reform.

The LDP split into two, with the members passionate about electoral reform on one side and a “cautious faction” of members who wished to retain the multimember electorate system on the other. The New Party Harbinger was clearly driven by deserters from the passionate extreme, and along with the Shinseito (Renewal) which was basically the Hata Faction, they exploited the internal polarization over political reforms in the LDP, as well as the factional infighting that was also taking place – and calling themselves the “reform faction” going head to head with the “conservative faction” – managed to achieve a non-LDP coalition government.

The short term factor then was the break-up of the Takeshita faction. To put it another way the ructions going on in the Takeshita camp were no different from a traditional war of succession. But with the combined effect of this and the long and mid-term factors that I have already described, the Hata Tsutomu / Ozawa Ichiro Group, torn apart by this domestic dispute, found that by leaving the party, instead of remaining and being known simply as the “anti-mainstream faction” within the party, they held the previously inconceivable opportunity of taking the initiative in the realignment of the political world by collaborating with the enemy.

Following this, following the non-LDP Hosokawa and Hata Cabinets, and Murayama’s JSP/LDP/Harbinger coalition government, in 1996 the Hashimoto Cabinet returned to power. Combined with the economic downturn at the time, in politics this is known as the “lost decade”, but were these political reforms, the electoral reform and campaign funds reform really losses?

Certainly the fall from power in 93 of the LDP was the effect of a perfectly timed combination of long, mid and short term factors, but is it safe to call it nothing but an aberration? Let’s look at those four points again.

Firstly the Koenkai, or Personal Support Networks. They continue to be the fundamental organized unit of the LDP. As a result of the political reforms, the electoral district Branches that parties are establishing are nothing but Koenkais by a different name.

In a survey of Representatives’ campaign funding that we carried out the funds received from the LDP head office or Prefectural Branch were no more than 18,000,000 yen, no more than 14% of the total. LDP Representatives cannot rely on LDP organization for their annual funds of over 100,000,000 yen, but must collect this themselves by approaching companies and groups. So we can see here that the LDP party organization remains just as stunted as it was previously, and that they have therefore maintained one of the elements that kept them in power for so long.

But at least there has been a big shift in the balance of power between the party and the Koenkais.

Under the multimember electorate system it was not unusual for non-aligned conservative candidates to push aside the LDP endorsed candidate and get elected with the help of Koenkais. But in the single member electorate system with only one endorsed candidate, it has become much more difficult for them to win elections with only one Koenkai to help them take on the whole LDP, not to mention problematic in light of the Public Officers Election Law, which tends to favour Party-endorsed candidates.

For example in last year's general election, veteran politicians such as Shizuka Kamei, a past Policy Review Council Chairman or Tamisuke Watanuki former Speaker of the House of Representatives, both vigorously opposed the Postal Services Privatization Bill and were expelled from the party. Whereas in the past they would have approached an election fearlessly confident that their Personal Support network would stand them in good stead, they only just managed to get through once LDP endorsement had been removed.

There were also several cases of LDP members who had opposed the Postal reform bill and been disendorsed by the party who had then either lost or pulled out of the election. Even some of Koizumi's "children" seem to have developed their own Personal Support Networks but unlike the days of the multimember electorates these did not completely replace the local party organizations.

There are also changes visible in the way in which factions operate. Firstly, with the introduction of the single member electorate the systematic basis of competition between candidates of different factions has gone.

The break up and reformation of factions has proceeded rapidly since the late 90s, with the Mitsuzuka Faction's war of succession, (secession of the Kamei Group), the break up of the old Nakasone Faction (into the Yamazaki and Eto Factions), break up of the Kato Faction (creating the Horiuchi Faction), the joining of the Eto and Kamei Factions and so on

The issue of campaign funds too, with the revision of the Political Funds Control Law factions are no longer able to receive political donations from business and interest groups, it has become more difficult to secure the loyalty of Members who belong to particular factions with financial support.

We even now see Representatives rebelling against factional driven decisions in policy development and Party Presidential elections.

Furthermore, with Coalition governments becoming more the norm, (there have only been about two years, from 96 to 98, since their return to power in

1994 where the LDP have held power in their own right) Cabinet posts such as Ministers and Vice Ministers must now be given to people who are not necessarily LDP members, and as the Koizumi Cabinet has demonstrated, in order to retain power, they must start rewarding talent rather than number of election wins, and so in this sense the distribution of jobs is no longer a prominent faction function (at least at Ministerial level).

There are signs of change in the pork-barrelling via policy tribes as well. For example in the drafting of the 1998 Financial Revitalization Law the real stars were not those with established connection with the Ministry of Finance. But were rather young Members with ideas and resources, known as the “new policy-oriented breed”.

Other effects of the normalisation of Coalitions include signs that the “bottom-up” decision-making process of the Policy Research Council Policy Divisions is being overturned through the opposition of other Coalition governments.

We can further observe the rise of “retrospective voting”, as occurred in the 1998 Upper House elections, and the Hashimoto Cabinet of the day led the LDP to a defeat based on dissatisfaction with their economic management. (“Retrospective voting” will see a government in power rewarded with re-election for a good record, and will see an opposition come to power if the economic management has been poor).

In other words, they know they will be thrown out of office if they neglect the big picture issue of economic management for the sake of localized currying of favour. So the strategy of individual members running around trying to secure their own re-election by delivering specific benefits to their electorate is becoming less and less effective.

The last thing we can highlight here is the decline of organised voting blocs. It is true that they effectively prevented other parties (leaving aside the Komeito and Sokagakkai for the moment) from successfully organising specific interest groups. But those organisations and interest groups that had supported the LDP are now dramatically losing that power.

One reason for this is that since the reform of the lower house electoral system, organisations have become very cautious about political mobilization. In the single member electorate system there is only one candidate and things become very black and white and from the point of view of an organisation that may support them, there is a much stronger incentive than there was with the old multimember system, to back a winning horse.

Therefore, the closer the running the less inclined organisations will be to hoist the flag in favour of any particular candidate. And even if they do state publicly

that they are supporting someone, they might not actually do anything else. So no matter how hard the candidate works, in the single member electorate system, organisations will not mobilize the way they used to.

And with the gradual depoliticisation of Japan and the development of civil society, individuals may end up members of a greater variety of organisations, and though these organisations may recommend particular candidates there is less and less certainty that the members will vote according to that recommendation.

With the introduction of the open-list proportional representation system the 2001 Upper House elections showed just how weak the organisations have become. Because people were voting for individuals rather than parties, and the results of mobilized voting would correlate to the number of votes received by the candidate supported by that organisation, what became absolutely clear was that the “yield” (that is the percentage of total votes received by the supported candidate that were actually members of the supporting organisation) of each organisation had plummeted.

Conclusion

Let’s just go over those four points with regard to Koizumi.

Nothing illustrates the withering of the Koenkais and the ascendance of the Party executive so eloquently as the response to the defeat of the Postal Services Reform Bill last Summer. The Lower house was dissolved, and not only did the Party immediately withdraw endorsement for the Members who opposed the bill, but they put forward new Candidates to oppose them.

Koizumi has ceased distributing Cabinet posts with any regard to the proportionate size of particular factions, and the number of non-aligned members grew dramatically after last years general election. And as the privatisation of the three postal businesses symbolises the Koizumi Cabinet has made a genuine start on economic policies to support small government.

Whilst the LDP had been regarded as the “Conservative Mainstream” it had actually been a combination of Social Conservatism and economic liberalism (in comparative politics this is close to Social democracy), but under the Koizumi Cabinet both social and economic policy have become conservative, the LDP has become a Conservative Party in the true sense of the word.

What is important to note here is that in last year’s general election, the LDP did extremely well amongst the urban, and traditionally unsupportive, swinging voters, and that this is in striking contrast to their historical reliance on the organised votes of the vested interests. Now of course it will take some time before we can say that this has been brought about thanks to Koizumi’s personal abilities, or whether it is a structural development that can be sustained past his

period in office.

But even leaving aside this short term factor, I think we have seen some real changes to the mid and long-term factors that enable the LDP to stay in power for so long. Sure they came back in 1994 and seem to be performing very well, in particular their winning close to 300 seats in last year's general election, I do not think that, appearances notwithstanding, we are seeing a resurgence of the "Predominant Party System". I believe that what we are seeing now is substantially different, from what we had before.