Political Fragility in Japan and the Resignation of Abe Shinzo: Is Japanese Democracy Going Backwards?

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Translation by Maxim Shabalin

I was travelling in the UK in the first half of September and the news of Abe's resignation reached me in London. The local media too were reporting on this unexpected event in some detail. Newspapers which would normally differ in their comments such as The Financial Times ("Abe posed as a samurai but was a weakling after all") [1] or The Guardian ("Japan does not have a leader befitting her national wealth") agreed in criticising the absence of leadership in Japanese politics.

To resign two days after the policy speech and immediately before parliamentary interpellations is to betray both the Diet and the people. It is an unprecedented scandal in the history of constitutional government. Some would defend Abe because of his being ill, but if he was really ill then the matter is even more serious. It means that for several days or weeks a person unable to exercise proper judgment remained in the Prime Minister's seat, convened a Diet session and went so far as to deliver a policy speech. It is as if the Japanese people had embarked on a plane with a seriously ill pilot at the controls. This continuous confusion demonstrates how little Abe, together with the LDP and the Cabinet leaders surrounding him, thought of the nation and how lightly they took politics.

Seen from Europe, Japan is still an oriental enigma. From the 1990s, by a process of trial and error, Japan undertook various systemic reforms aimed at realizing a global standard of democracy. Under Koizumi it seemed to have realized a kind of politics that was easily comprehensible, maintaining a long-term government under a popular leader enunciating clear policies. However, since Koizumi's resignation party politics has once again been cast into disarray and lacks sustainability.

The confusion in post-Koizumi Japanese politics stems from the failure to transcend Koizumi politics either in terms of political method or of policy. In this essay I would like to consider this state of confusion and try to elucidate the prospects.

1) Comparing Japan and the UK in terms of their adjustments following a period of personalization of politics

One of the purposes of my visit to the UK was to research British politics post-Blair. As I was discussing British politics post-Blair with local political scientists, the announcement of Abe Shinzo's resignation came just as I was about to consider the interesting comparison between him and Gordon Brown. Both were successors to charismatic leaders who had sustained their power for a long time and both faced the problem of adjustment following the personalization of politics.

By personalization of politics I mean the phenomenon of a leader emerging in the context of rising dissatisfaction with representative democracy in which conventional parties and institutions are the units of political behaviour, who then rejects the old party institutions and gains popular support by addressing the people directly. Not bound by institutions, such leaders try to secure support by directly relating to the unfettered ordinary citizen. Moreover, by communicating the popular will directly in the process of policy formation, without negotiation between representatives, they strive for quick, dynamic policy change. Such was the case with both Tony Blair and Koizumi Junichiro.

Both Brown and Abe, as successors, then face the question of how to follow or reject this technique. Their approaches are different. Brown is well aware of the fact that he is not a showy politician. Consequently, he resolutely avoids such techniques as exposure to the media and conspicuous performances and makes solidity his selling point. He is steadily implementing policies different from those of his predecessor such as a gradual withdrawal from Iraq and emphasis on social equality. In English, a politician's performance and choreography is called spin. This time, I managed to interview some of the brains responsible for the Labour Party's spin; and they said that the Brown government had changed politics from a showy to a sober activity. In the final days of Blair's government, the Labour Party's approval rating was much lower than that of the Conservative Party but Brown's adoption of this posture caused him to gain unexpected levels of approval in the opinion polls. Compared to Blair with his nice appearance and good speaking skills who would frequently become arrogant and who embarked upon the mistaken path to war, Brown, who has a serious and fervent approach to policymaking, at the moment commands the sympathy of the English people.

The greatest reason for Abe's short-lived Prime Ministership seems to lie in the fact that he did not fully realize his difference from the former Prime Minister Koizumi and his own weaknesses. Not everyone can attract popular support by charisma. By intending to take over Koizumi's presidential-type leadership, Abe increased the centripetal forces of the incumbent ruling party and the Cabinet and tried to place himself in the forefront. By appointing a Cabinet secretariat and setting up advisory councils, he aimed at top-down policy development. Such a technique can be effective if accompanied by corresponding abilities, but the vicious circle in Abe's case was that the more he put himself forward, the more people laughed at him. The weakness of the technique of the politics of reliance on approval ratings was exposed.

2) Policy-level contradictions

In terms of policy, Abe's LDP fell into two contradictions: between nationalism and universal values, and between the liberty proclaimed by the strong and the equality that takes into consideration the weak.

The first contradiction was exacerbated by Abe's call for an escape from the postwar regime and by his enhancing of statism and nationalism. On the one hand, Abe proclaimed a "value-based diplomacy" and emphasized the United States and India as partners sharing freedom and democracy. On the other, he was a proponent of vulgar nationalism and internationally he made such bizarre statements as: "In the case of 'comfort women' there was no coercion in the narrow sense". Such values as liberty, democracy, human rights are not compatible with the egocentrism of the insistence on legitimizing for Japan alone a war which is internationally recognized as aggressive. There is an inseparable connection between liberty, democracy, human rights, and the interpretations of history by which past wars are understood. Nevertheless, Abe together with his entourage of politicians and experts, were ignorant about this

point until it was too late. This ignorance led to Japan's isolation from international society.

The second contradiction, concerning domestic socioeconomic policy, is one which LDP politicians face on a daily basis. Under Koizumi, this contradiction was whitewashed with the vague symbol of structural reform. When Koizumi retired as prime minister, the effects of the "reform" became visible in local communities and individual lives and even people who traditionally supported the LDP began to distrust LDP politics. At the Upper House elections in July, the LDP was chanting the slogan "Towards the realization of growth"; however, in the end this was just impossible. This is because the fruits of growth are monopolized by a handful of those in the upper strata of society while the remaining majority are gradually impoverished with the promotion of neoliberal structural reforms. The people have strongly felt this.

Abe was torn by these two contradictions. Had he been a thorough and detached person like Koizumi he would have stayed calm even in the face of contradictions, but Abe was in this respect weak. The overwhelming defeat in the Upper House election awakened him to the depth of this contradiction, and his body and soul probably collapsed in the same manner.

3) The enfeeblement of the LDP produced by a strong leader

The LDP that chose as president and Prime Minister someone such as Abe, that it should not have, has entirely lost its ability to govern. The politicians who elected and supported Abe as Prime Minister must first and foremost be ashamed of their stupidity and apologize to the people. How did the LDP end up in such a disastrous condition?

Ironically, many Japanese political scientists had recently been pointing to the systemic strengthening of the LDP, noting that the small constituency system and party subsidies had strengthened the party's centripetal force and its executive's powers of control, and both developments together had enabled strong control within the LDP by the Prime Minister/Party president. Such a conclusion could certainly have been drawn from the actions of the Koizumi government.

But just one year after Koizumi's resignation, the LDP sank into unprecedented crisis. Increasing the party's centripetal force and creating the framework for strengthening the Prime Minister's leadership is one thing; for the party and cabinet to maintain its vitality and authority quite another. To be sure, Prime Minister Koizumi did utilize his power unusually effectively for a Japanese Prime Minister and he succeeded at implementing policies. However, at the same time, within the LDP everyone remembered the sweet taste of electoral victory that came from merely hanging on to such an exceptionally popular figure as Koizumi. The unification and centralization that may be anticipated when politicians share policies stemming from debate and mutual encouragement did not occur. Instead, what did spread within the LDP was reliance on others, the search for a popular figure capable of winning an election, and the show of centripetal unity together with the empty centralization of authority.

As many political scientists point out, a series of political system reforms can be said to have unified and centralized the government and political parties and clarified the locus of power and responsibility. However, at the same time, unification and centralization have had the effect not only of stripping politicians of their skills and suitability but also exposed leaders to the unswerving gaze of the people. Under such circumstances, politicians and political parties bore an enhanced risk. Prime Minister Abe may constitute the first case of failure to cope with such risk.

When one looks at the LDP today, we can observe, on the one hand, the ongoing adjustments to the political system aimed at centralizing and unifying power, and on the other, a conformity among politicians and a desire for easy electoral victory by belonging to the party's main faction. Despite the fact that the locus of power and responsibility was clarified, the subjectivity to wield such power was not cultivated, and indeed one even got the impression that such subjectivity declined. The people are not so indulgent as to forgive the LDP now just because it replaces a greenhorn Prime Minister with the veteran Fukuda Yasuo. The task of cultivating and producing a leader who can exercise authority within a unified party system and cabinet has only just begun, and of course, the biggest opposition party, the DPJ, also has yet to tackle this issue.

4) Post-Koizumi politics in Japan

The following scheme may be helpful to locate the present confusion in the evolution of Japanese politics since the 1990s. Prime Minister Koizumi's structural reforms emerged as a response to the breakdown of the postwar Japanese policy system that had long been maintained by an alliance between the LDP and the bureaucracy centring on the old Tanaka/Takeshita faction, but which broke down under the impact of the forces of globalization, the bursting of the "bubble economy", the ageing of society and the declining birth rate. The postwar policy system combined evils such as endemic corruption, inefficiency and waste, with a concern for equality and for the weak and the regions. Koizumi's structural reforms smashed the 'vested rights' of politicians and bureaucrats and promoted policy efficiency; but they also had a serious impact on people and regions that had enjoyed protection under the policies in place until then. Resistance to this continues to threaten the LDP. The opposition is gathering popular support by persistently questioning the harmful effects of the structural reforms. Faced with the contradictory vectors of inheriting the Koizumi government's success or correcting its evils, the LDP is irresolute. There is no clear-cut course for post-Koizumi politics.

In terms of finding a way out of this confusion, the UK's experience is interesting in various ways.

First, in terms of political method it is necessary to return to the fundamental point that politics is about getting things done. Charismatic leaders are not easily to be found. Rather, as was the case with Koizumi, a unique personality can have the bad effect of driving away serious debate and discussion. What is called for is to evaluate leadership in terms of the ability to reflect seriously on issues and the existence of an ability to explain issues to the public.

Furthermore, in terms of policy, what is required is not the mobilization of public opinion by the use of ambiguous symbols but discussion of the concrete issues facing the people, including the costs and consequences of such policies. The media focuses on the candidates in the election for LDP party president as a bald, either-or choice between continuing with reform or reverting to the old LDP ways. But a return to the earlier policies of the bureaucrats and LDP policy 'tribes' is already inconceivable. Moreover, reform does not have to be just Koizumi-style neoliberalism. What is called for is concrete debate over problems faced by the people such as inequality, poverty, worries over social security and job insecurity, their recognition as policy issues, and the search for ways to resolve them.

In order to maintain power the LDP has up until now from time to time undergone something tantamount to change of government by changing the image of the leader or the basic tone of policy. On this occasion, the strengthening of support for Fukuda among party veterans probably has the same objective. This is an undesirable situation for the DPJ. Although an

axis of confrontation between 'neoliberalism promoted by Abe' and 'Ozawa's social democracy' (DPJ Diet members may hate this expression, but Ozawa's policy is social democracy) emerged at the Upper House election, Fukuda is like a boxer who just tries to hold his opponent in a clinch.

However, if any sanity remains in the LDP, the natural thing to do is to change policy. In that event, the competition between the two major parties will be not just a clash of slogans but will have to evolve into concrete policy competition. In the UK, the Conservative Party has abandoned Thatcherism and is confronting the Labour Party on similar issues concerning the provision of medical care and education. It is no matter if policy differences are to some extent reducible to differences of degree. Concrete debate over differences in degree should be able to clarify alternatives.

The hardest problem for the LDP is how to strike a compromise between the demands of the business community, its biggest sponsor, while addressing social inequality. Fukuda also faces many difficult questions such as how to change the system of policy formation centring on the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy and the Ministry of Finance, and how to control young party members pushing for structural reform. Likewise, the DPJ too has to clarify its stance on the question of sources of revenue in order to raise the level of confidence and expectation for its policies. There is no magic wand of solution to fiscal problems just by curtailing wasteful expenditure.

Even if Fukuda wins an overwhelming victory in the party presidential election, his government cannot enjoy legitimacy. There are limits to the ability to keep shuffling government around within the party, and the greatest duty of the next Prime Minister will be to offer the people themselves the opportunity of choice through an early dissolution and general election.

[1] Translator's note: The Financial Times article by David Pilling published September 12 contained the phrase: "This is not bushido. This is chicken."

This article appeared in the November issue of the journal Ronza. Yamaguchi Jiro is Professor of Public Administration at the Graduate School of Law, Hokkaido University. In 2002-2007 he directed a comparative research project on "Transformations in Governance in the Age of Globalization". After its completion Yamaguchi initiated a follow-up project on "Civil Social Democracy". The term "civil social democracy" is conceived as a key concept for overcoming the "post-democratic" condition in developed countries. Yamaguchi has extensively published on contemporary Japanese politics. An up-to-date list of his publications can be found at his personal homepage (http://www.yamaguchijiro.com).

Translation for Japan Focus by Maxim Shabalin, D.Phil. student in Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, Merton College. Posted at Japan Focus on November 19, 2007.