

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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Japan—Toward a Two-Party System of Government?

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Introduction: The Emergence of Political Volatility in Japan

In the two short years since Junichiro Koizumi's retirement, Japan has witnessed the fall of one prime minister, Shinzo Abe, and the severe weakening of another, Yasuo Fukuda. The reformist zeal of Koizumi has been followed by the stillborn nationalism of Abe and the revived sway of the faction system under Fukuda. Moreover, the once-dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) itself is now seriously threatened by a surging opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

It appears that, after one-party rule since 1955, Japan is now approaching a two-party system with the DPJ looming as a center-right alternative government. In short, Japan is currently experiencing a distinct period of political uncertainty, confusion, and transition.

The DPJ and its Prospects

Such a transition is the direct result of the DPJ's resounding victory in the July 2007 Upper House election. Since that time, the opposition has frustrated and impeded almost all legislation stemming from the Lower House, causing former prime minister Abe to resign and making Prime Minister Fukuda appear ineffectual, weak, and indecisive.

The DPJ is eager to use its Upper House majority to frustrate Fukuda, forcing him to resign and call a Lower House election.¹ Currently holding 113 seats in the House of Representatives, the DPJ must win yet another 129 seats to form a government in its own right—a challenging task. Nonetheless, the DPJ will undoubtedly increase its own seat numbers, giving it more leverage in the chamber than it has at present. The Yamaguchi by-election of April 27, 2008, an important indicator of LDP and DPJ electoral rating, was won by the DPJ candidate Hideo Hiraoka (by a comfortable margin of 21,944 votes), suggesting that the DPJ is currently of good standing in public opinion. The calling of a general election by Prime Minister Fukuda might thus be further off than anticipated.

The LDP and its Prospects

The current Fukuda cabinet is firmly aligned to the ongoing operation, if not restoration, of the faction system Koizumi did so much to eradicate. The Fukuda cabinet is returning to the old LDP. For example, Fukuda put the heads of six of the LDP's nine factions into either his cabinet or the four top party posts. He has also fully restored the LDP politicians who opposed the privatization of the postal services, the symbol of the reform drive, naming some of them to key party positions.²

More recently, the public approval rating of Prime Minister Fukuda's cabinet fell to only 25 percent in late April 2008, whilst its disapproval rating rose to 60 percent. The Japanese public has taken a harshly critical view of a number of matters affecting the standing of the government—including growing concerns about a recession, a lack of progress over checking for errors in pension premium payment records, and the continuation of the provisional petrol- and road-related taxes.³

¹ "Come Together," *Global Agenda* (October 13, 2007): 22.

² "Fukuda's Tough Job," *Japan Echo*, Vol. 34, No.6 (December 6, 2007), <http://www.japanecho.co.jp/sum/2007/340601.html>

³ *Asahi Shimbun*, April 22, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200804220050.html>

Given these circumstances, it is unlikely that the LDP will retain its large majority in the Lower House of the Diet. Currently holding 304 seats—excluding the 31 seats held by New Komeito—the LDP can afford to lose up to 62 seats and still retain its majority.⁴ It remains to be seen whether Fukuda can hold the DPJ at bay and salvage what he may from the current voter disillusionment with him and his government.

An Alternative, Non-LDP Government?

On October 30, 2007, and November 2, 2007, Prime Minister Fukuda held one-on-one talks with DPJ president Ozawa. The talks were to have important ramifications. On October 30, Fukuda tried to obtain Ozawa's agreement for enacting a new law allowing the continuation of the Maritime Self-Defense Force's refueling operations in the Indian Ocean, but Ozawa rejected this proposal. On November 2, both men discussed the possibility of their parties forming a grand coalition, with the DPJ joining the cabinet. There are conflicting reports over who initiated these talks, yet the salient fact is that such talks definitely took place.

Currently, it seems unlikely that the idea of a grand coalition will be actively pursued before the next general election. Both the LDP and the DPJ at this point are strongly vying with each other as separate political entities, not potential governmental partners. The DPJ is preparing to assume power. It senses that the embattled Fukuda cabinet is facing defeat and that shortly the DPJ will lead the nation. In sum, Japan is definitely moving in the direction of a two-party system, though the timing of this transition is uncertain. The introduction of the majority mixed-member (MMD) electoral system makes a change of government likely sooner or later because the system itself maximizes the DPJ's chances of winning as many or even more single-member district (SMD) and proportional representation (PR) Diet member seats as those of the LDP.⁵ To conclude, as Steven Reed pointed out in 2005, an alternation in power in Japan is likely within the next three elections.⁶

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⁴ "Strength of Political Groups in the House of Representatives," Japan Information Network, http://www.shugiin.go.jp/index.nsf/html/index_e_strength.htm.

⁵ Dr. Patrick Koellner, personal communication to author, April 18, 2008.

⁶ Steven R. Reed, "Japan: Haltingly Towards a Two-Party System," in *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, ed. Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 2005) 292.