

Struggle, Strife, and Stalemate: Yasuo Fukuda and Present-day Japanese Politics

Bert Edström

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Executive Summary

When Yasuo Fukuda became prime minister of Japan on September 25, 2007, it was a resounding comeback. He had retired from national politics only the previous year, after having been seen for a while as a serious contender for replacing the incumbent Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi. When Shinzo Abe abruptly resigned as prime minister, however, after not even one year in office and after a general election that was disastrous for his party, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Fukuda was picked as Abe's successor.

Yasuo Fukuda is the eldest son of Takeo Fukuda, Japan's prime minister 1976–78. Despite being a member of a political family, Yasuo Fukuda did not seem to have any ambitions to become involved in politics but worked in private business for 17 years after his graduation from Waseda University in 1959. In 1976 he switched career path and began to work as a secretary for his father. In 1990, Fukuda replaced his father as a representative of the 3rd Gunma constituency when the former prime minister withdrew from politics. Appointed chief cabinet secretary in 2000, Fukuda became not only the government's spokesman and troubleshooter but also the No. 2 in the cabinet. He occupied the post from October 27, 2000 to May 7, 2004, which made him the longest serving incumbent in this post in Japan's postwar history. Fukuda proved to be a capable and competent manager of day-to-day chores and eminent at handling the constant flow of issues and problems that flooded his desk. Already from the start, his calm and balanced character stood out and he acquired the image of being an efficient official, who preferred to stay in the background and was not keen on bravado activities aimed at pandering to public popularity. These character traits made him be seen by his party as an eminent candidate for succeeding Abe.

As a result of the Upper House election on July 29, 2007 the ruling coalition that the LDP formed with the New Komeito no longer commanded the majority in the Upper House, which was in contrast to the situation before the election when the coalition parties had the majority in both the Upper and Lower House. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reshuffled his cabinet a month after the election but this did not make him regain the political initiative and he resigned.

When Fukuda took over as prime minister, he also took over fifteen of the seventeen ministers in the previous cabinet. The few changes in ministerial lineup and the fact that only one of his ministers was without ministerial experience showed that Fukuda preferred to play it safe. The day he took over as premier, he made it clear that he was quite aware of the fact that he and his party were facing an uphill struggle in the Diet and that his new cabinet had its “back to the wall.” He declared that the main task for him was to regain popular trust. The day he took over he announced the set of basic policies of the new government and clarified that the government would consult sincerely with the opposition parties on important policy issues. Furthermore, the government promised to solve the problem of missing pension records; to promote structural reforms in line with regional circumstances, formulating individual prescriptions for handling the various problems of disparities; to do its best to continue the support activities being performed by the Maritime Self-Defense Force based on the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law while firmly maintaining the Japan–U.S. alliance and international coordination as the basis of Japan’s foreign policy; and to proceed with active diplomacy for Asia, further strengthening Japan’s cooperation with the international community aimed at achieving the denuclearization of North Korea, and devoting itself wholeheartedly to solving the abduction issue promptly.

The parliamentary situation was precarious for Fukuda when he took over. The 168th session of the Diet was marked by the inability of the ruling coalition and the political opposition to agree over policies. In parliamentary systems this is a matter-of course but in the Japanese political system where one party, the LDP, has been in power for more than half a century (with a short break in the mid 1990s), the ruling parties had problems in adapting to the new parliamentary

situation. From the start, Fukuda's approach was conciliatory toward the political opposition in the Diet, which indicated that a strategy of non-confrontation was his way of trying to handle the problem of his government getting its bills passed through the Diet. His stance clashed with the intransigent approach taken by the opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa and his party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

One attempt at solving the problem of the stalemate in the Diet was seen quite soon after Fukuda had become premier. On October 30 and November 2, Prime Minister Fukuda held talks with Ozawa and sought the opposition leader's cooperation in enacting a new law to allow continuation of the Japanese activities in the Indian Ocean in support of the U.S. efforts against terrorism. Ozawa refused to accept this proposal. To the surprise of many, at least political commentators and probably most of them who voted for Ozawa's party in the Upper House election, a heated debate broke out when it was claimed that the possibility of forming a "grand coalition" that would include the DPJ had come up during their talks. What is more, that Ozawa had accepted to enter into a discussion over cooperation with the government.

Who brought up the idea of "the grand coalition"—if the subject was ever broached that is—is unclear. What is clear is that Ozawa found it worthwhile to enter into discussions with the ruling coalition and when his party did not accept this, he declared that he was leaving as party president. Visibly upset, he claimed that his party was "lacking in ability" and had little chance of winning the next Lower House election.

The damage done to the DPJ by Ozawa's activities and comments was considerable. His derogatory comments about his party's ability caused considerable damage to party unity, and the hope and happiness felt by party members after the resounding victory in the July election turned to dismay. Party members found it hard to go along with discarding vital policies that they had fought hard for during the election campaign and now was expected to skip just because of the whim of the party president. Nevertheless, Ozawa was persuaded to withdraw his resignation by others in the DPJ leadership. This demonstrated that they saw themselves at a loss without his strong leadership.

Worse still was that his demeaning attitude showed voters the goal that the DPJ had fought hard to attain, viz. the impression among voters that the DPJ was better suited than the LDP to govern the country.

Ozawa's actions in the beginning of November and his comments about his party served to nullify many of the gains that the DPJ has made in recent years. It was a blessing in disguise for the prime minister and his ruling coalition. Ozawa's moment of unbalance changed the political momentum and wrecked any hopes harbored by the leading opposition party of forcing the prime minister to dissolve the Lower House and call a snap election which—it was widely speculated—the LDP would lose. Using the right to have the Diet take a decision by override vote, the government gained parliamentary approval of its key proposal on January 11, a few days before the 168th session of the Diet ended, after having been extended twice.

In a way, it showed that the LDP was back on track as the ruling party. The change of Japan's political landscape that the outcome of the Upper House election resulted in was noticeable. The defeat for the LDP was also a defeat for Shinzo Abe's personal agenda with his strong stand on nationalistic issues and his forceful drive for the need for constitutional reform. That the change from Abe to Fukuda meant a change of the political agenda was manifested in a symbolic action a couple of weeks after Fukuda took over, when it was announced that an office established by his predecessor to promote his initiative to build "a beautiful nation" was a waste of money in the eyes of the prime minister. The distancing from the disgraced former party leader and his ideas was taken a step further when another of the fundamental ideas on Abe's political platform was discarded by his party. On December 24, the Fukuda government officially abandoned the plan to create a Japanese version of the U.S. National Security Council which was aimed at reinforcing the role of the Prime Minister's Office as the control center of diplomacy and national security.

The first months in office have proved that Fukuda is a shrewd politician with stamina and perseverance. His way of dismantling the DPJ's frontal attack, in a situation in which the opposition party was pressing home its advantage after

its landslide victory in the Upper House election, was a masterly move. Whether it was intentionally planned or not, the outcome derailed the DPJ's onslaught on the coalition government.

Unfortunately for Fukuda at least, his time in office thus far has seen his talents as an eminent manager of political affairs consumed by containing the DPJ's attacks on the LDP. It is true that his moves in early November helped his party, but there may have been a price to be paid—by the country. None of the serious problems that Japan is facing has been attended to by the political parties.

In Fukuda's New Year's message to his party, he asserted that the ruling LDP should stay "on course" and avoid causing any surprises. If he is taken at his word, the reform drive that was initiated by former prime minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi, and which elections showed the Japanese people supported, is over. The problem for the LDP was pinpointed by Fukuda himself in 2006 in an interview, in which he pointed out that the candidates competing for succeeding the incumbent prime minister, including Fukuda himself, did not differ very much as far as domestic politics are concerned. Despite that the leading LDP politicians know the necessity of reforms and tax hikes, the political system is unable to deliver.

Yasuo Fukuda's Resounding Comeback

The distinguished Japanese diplomat Kazuo Chiba once likened Japan and its foreign policy to a water-fowl: “We prefer to work behind the scenes, just like the unseen feet of the water-fowl work to propel the bird gracefully on the water.”¹ If this imagery is turned on its head, it neatly describes the 168th session of the Diet (the Japanese Parliament) that ended on January 15, 2008. MPs were busy running around, giving interviews, taking part in meetings of committees (where the bulk of parliamentary work is pursued), and entering the rostrum to make speeches, issuing political declarations letting off a lot of steam. But in spite of their frenetic activities, not much happened. This session is likely to enter Japan's political annals only as a footnote—the session became one of the rare cases when a session of the Diet has been extended twice; furthermore, one decision was taken by override vote.

One of the key actors during the session was Japan's new prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda. If a Clintonesque Comeback Kid of Japanese politics were to be crowned, Fukuda would no doubt be a strong candidate despite his 71 years of age. His ascension to the top spot of Japanese politics on September 25, 2007 represented a resounding comeback. He had retired from national politics just the year before, having previously been regarded as a serious contender to replace the then incumbent Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi who retired in September 2006.

Fukuda is known for playing it safe. Up until his candidacy in 2006 proved in the end to be a non-starter, it was not clear whether he would run as a candidate or not, despite the fact that opinion polls and commentators portrayed him as a

¹ Kazuo Chiba, “Japan: After the Cold War and Beyond,” in Bert Edström, ed., *Japan's Foreign and Security Policies in Transition*. The Swedish Institute of International Affairs Conference Papers 19 (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs and the Center for Pacific Asia Studies, 1996), p. xix.

key contender. While avoiding clarifying whether he was a candidate or not, his activities gave all the impression that he was. An opinion poll presented by *Kyodo News* on May 13, 2006 showed that Fukuda was the second most popular candidate, garnering 31.4 percent while Abe led with 40.1 percent. With the other two contenders obtaining 4.5 and 2.7 percent, respectively, the race to succeed Koizumi was effectively a two-man race.² Another poll two months later confirmed that Abe and Fukuda were still the two main candidates; Abe received support rates of 45 percent and Fukuda 25 percent, better by far than the third most popular candidate.³

Fukuda's withdrawal from the race to succeed the prime minister came suddenly. To the surprise of many, when most political commentators were just waiting for him to officially declare his candidacy, he announced instead his withdrawal, one month before the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was due to pick Koizumi's successor. Instead of entering the political limelight, he receded into the shadows seemingly for good.

Given Fukuda's demonstrated popularity, his withdrawal took many by surprise since he was widely seen as the only contender who could challenge the popular Abe, who led by a wide margin in all polls. Fukuda cited his age, 70, as one reason why he abstained from entering the race but also hinted that his decision "stemmed from fear of a possible foreign policy rift with Abe over visits to Tokyo's contentious war-related Yasukuni Shrine."⁴ It is likely, however, that it was rather an unexpected event that forced him to conclude that his prospects of defeating Abe were slim.

Shinzo Abe had been on his way up in Japanese politics ever since he secured a place on the national political stage by being appointed deputy chief cabinet secretary by Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori in July 2000. Abe was a politician who had built his career on one particular issue, the North Korean abduction of

² Shiota Ushio, *Abe Shinzo no rikiryō* [Abe Shinzo's abilities] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2006), p. 42.

³ Quoted in Bill Sharp, "Who will succeed Koizumi?," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 190 (July 9, 2006), <http://starbulletin.com/2006/07/09/editorial/special.html>

⁴ Bert Edström, *The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy*, Institute for Security & Development Policy, Asia Paper (May 2007), p. 45.

Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 80s, which he never tired of denouncing. Since it was an issue that befitted the mood of Japanese public opinion, his constant harping at North Korea had made him popular. On July 5, 2006, when the respective campaigns of the prime ministerial hopefuls were gearing up, North Korea launched a missile over Japan. This event served to enhance the electoral prospects of the outspoken hard hitter Abe.⁵ Fukuda has a keen sense of political reality, and since Abe's popularity left other candidates trailing far behind in opinion polls, it is likely that Fukuda concluded that his candidacy for the LDP Presidency had been undermined by the help rendered to Abe by North Korea's unexpected missile launch.

Fukuda's sudden withdrawal left the field wide open for Abe. When members of the LDP voted in the election for party president, Abe secured a triumphant victory over the runner up, Foreign Minister Taro Aso. On September 26, 2006, Abe became Japan's youngest prime minister in the postwar period. When Abe formed his cabinet, Fukuda was not among his ministers and most observers and pundits considered his political career over. After all, Fukuda's official reason for not filing his candidacy was his age and he would not be any younger in the future.

Notwithstanding the above, one could view Fukuda's appearance in the campaign for replacing Koizumi as representing in itself a sort of comeback. Fukuda is the longest-serving chief cabinet secretary in Japan's postwar history but had resigned unexpectedly in 2004. The reason for this move was that he had not paid his pension installments properly. But since this kind of behavior has been a well-established habit among politicians and high-ranking bureaucrats, many saw his resignation as premature and out of proportion.

With his sudden departure in 2004 from the No. 2 post in the government, and given that he was rather lacking in charisma, it was not easy for Fukuda to regain his position as a top political contender in 2006, since Abe's sales points were popular with the voters. Abe is nineteen years Fukuda's junior and became premier in large part because he portrayed an image of freshness and youth. This was in contrast to the image of the much older Fukuda, who was seen as a

⁵ Ibid.

representative of the staid and conservative circles that have ruled Japan almost uninterrupted since the Second World War. Abe's youth and his bold action on what had emerged as a key political question—the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea—met with the sympathy and support of broad strata in Japan and carried him all the way to the post of prime minister. Furthermore, the charisma and charm of departing Prime Minister Koizumi served to accentuate the dull and uninspiring impression that Fukuda's appearance in the 2006 LDP presidential campaign gave.

Whatever the reasons for Fukuda's decision not to officially enter the race for the post of prime minister in the summer of 2006, the opinion polls spelled verdict on the likely winner. Even if Fukuda had entered the race, it is likely that he would not have triumphed; Abe's following among LDP party members was far too substantial. In any case, Fukuda's hint that his decision stemmed from fear of a possible rift that threatened to divide the LDP and would be detrimental to its standing with voters, strengthened his image as a politician with statesmanship qualities, who cared more about his party and country than about personal gains and reputation.

The Formative Period of a Politician

When Fukuda was appointed prime minister there was a need for his party to prepare the ground by presenting his background and merits to the public; such information was provided on the party's homepage. General facts about Fukuda's career before he entered the political world were generally meager, however, amounting to little more than the fact that he had graduated in 1959 from the Faculty of Politics and Economics of Waseda University and began working for a petroleum refining and marketing company.⁶ The government's presentation was not much more detailed. As usual when a new premier steps in, the gist of his career is summarized. In the *Profile of Prime Minister Fukuda*, three facts appear on the front page: (1) he was born in Gunma Prefecture, Japan, on July 16, 1936; (2) he was a member of the House of Representatives; and (3) his Constituency was Gunma 4th District where he has been elected six times. On the next page, the "milestones" of his life are given. The list begins with his birth in 1936, his graduation from the Azabu High School in 1955 and from Waseda University in 1959, and his subsequent employment by a petroleum refining and marketing company. His career in business is blank apart from a note that he resided in the United States for two years from 1962. A reader is informed that he left business in 1976. Also the subsequent period is sparsely described: he is said to have become a secretary of a House of Representatives member, was the prime minister's chief secretary from December 1977 to December 1978, and was elected to the Lower House of the Diet in February 1990.⁷ The above facts are scanty and do not give much information about the formative period of a future prime minister or of his life before his political career. In Fukuda's case, the period before 1990 when he won

⁶ LDP homepage, <http://www.jimin.jp/jimin/english/e-staff/fukuda-ya.html>

⁷ Prime Minister and His Cabinet, "Profile of Prime Minister Fukuda," http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hukudaprofile/index_e.html

a seat in the Diet would seem to have been quite significant for his political style. Furthermore, it was his political style that was important for why he was picked as leader by his party after the debacle of Abe who had turned from being the Golden Boy of Japanese politics to being regarded as a veritable disaster for the ruling LDP. Yet, skeletal as this information on Fukuda is, some important traits emerge.

Graduating from the prestigious Azabu High School means that Fukuda was raised in Tokyo. For his political career, it counted that his father Takeo Fukuda was born in Gunma Prefecture and represented its third district in the Diet. Before his father's political career commenced in 1952, he worked for the finance ministry as a career bureaucrat. This means that Yasuo was raised and educated while his father made a career as a bureaucrat and later as a politician. Takeo Fukuda's shift from being an elite bureaucrat, having graduated from the country's most prestigious education institution, Tokyo University's Faculty of Law, and working for the center of the Japanese government, the finance ministry, to becoming a politician was not something he chose. Having become the head of the Budget Bureau, his arrest in the Showa Denko corruption scandal that broke out in 1948 resulted in him following his mother's advice to leave the ministry.⁸ He was tried on bribery charges for his role in this scandal but was acquitted after he testified that he had been paid by the company but did not understand that it was a bribe.⁹ The transition from bureaucrat to politician was not easy for Takeo but, once elected to the Diet in 1952 and solidly aligning himself with prime minister-to-be Nobusuke Kishi, he soon found himself in the political limelight and began a distinguished political career, attaining the post of prime minister in 1976.

Given his father's background as a Tokyo University graduate, it would have been natural to think that Fukuda would follow in his father's footsteps and

⁸ Sato Yuichi, *Fukuda Takeo ron: Seiji rosen to sono jinmyaku* [On Takeo Fukuda: Political path and networks] (Tokyo: Jutaku shimposha, 1976), p. 97. For Fukuda's involvement in this scandal, see Kawano Konosuke, *Fukuda Takeo: Hatashite kyoseishu to naru ka?* [Takeo Fukuda: Will he be the savior after all?] (Tokyo: Nihon jihosha shuppankyoku, 1966), pp. 202–8.

⁹ See Kawano, *Fukuda Takeo*, p. 206.

enroll at the same university—but he did not. He chose Waseda University instead; the large university in Tokyo known for its training of journalists and politicians. His choice of university resembles that of his predecessor Shinzo Abe whose father was a Tokyo University graduate but who received his university education at an institution of learning of lesser repute. After graduation, Fukuda did not enter the political world as might be expected, given his family ties, but began working for an oil company in a career that would span seventeen years and make him division director.

Entering Politics

There is an obvious parallel between Yasuo Fukuda and his predecessor Shinzo Abe in that both belong to well-known political families. Fukuda is the eldest son of Takeo Fukuda, who served as premier 1976–78. His son Yasuo began a respectable but quite ordinary career working for a Japanese company. During his company years there is nothing to indicate that he had any plans to follow in his father's footsteps and enter politics. His career in business was cut short, however. Shortly before his father became prime minister in 1976, Yasuo Fukuda switched career path and worked as a secretary for his father. Becoming a politician was rather accidental, he recounted later: "I had no intention to become a politician but when my younger brother [Ikuo Yokote] who was going to succeed my father fell ill, I aspired to become a politician. In November 1976 I resigned from my company and became the secretary to a member of the Lower House."¹⁰ Having worked for an oil company for many years indicates that Fukuda was intent on pursuing a career in business but switched to politics, a fate not uncommon for the first-born son of a Japanese politician.

As a secretary to the prime minister, Fukuda could follow the making of domestic and international politics at close quarters. Especially noteworthy events were the negotiations leading to the conclusion in 1978 of the Japan–China Peace and Friendship Treaty, in the successful outcome of which his father played a crucial role. When Takeo Fukuda in a surprise move by LDP

¹⁰ "Dai 22 Jiminto sosai wa Fukuda shi! Shijohatsu no oyako 2 dai shusho wa tanjo" [Mr. Fukuda the 22nd LDP president. The birth of the first second-generation premier], *Sankei supotsu*, Sep. 18, 2007.

members relinquished the post of prime minister to Masayoshi Ohira (prime minister 1978–80), he did not retire from politics but continued to be a key politician, with his son continuing to work as his secretary. From 1978 to 1989, Yasuo Fukuda was also a director of the Kinzai Institute for Financial Affairs, a research institute that has close links with the finance ministry, and was elevated to the position of trustee in 1986. In a sense, this affiliation facilitated Fukuda's following in the footsteps of his father, who had behind him a career as a bureaucrat in the finance ministry and who still today has the reputation of having been one of Japan's most prolific finance ministers in the postwar period.

In 1990 Fukuda succeeded his father as a representative of the 3rd District of the Gunma Prefecture and entered politics in his own capacity. His father had held this seat since 1952 and, as is customary in contemporary Japanese politics, Fukuda's decision to stand for election (he was subsequently elected) was more or less taken for granted since the seat "belonged" to the Fukuda family. Nonetheless, what was remarkable in his case was that he received more votes than two of the heavyweights of the LDP who were also candidates in the same constituency, Yasuhiro Nakasone and Keizo Obuchi, a former and a future prime minister respectively, and who were both two of the party's top vote-getters.¹¹

Fukuda's election to the Diet was helped by his family background. This fact has rendered him with the distinction of belonging to a "political family," *seiji kazoku*. That might be true in the sense that he was the son of a politician, but being only a second-generation politician does not seem to qualify him as belonging to a political dynasty like the Hatoyamas—at the moment boasting fifth-generation politicians—or the Ishiharas with third-generation politicians. In Japanese politics, the number of political representatives with parents and grandparents having been politicians has increased to such a degree that around 40 percent of LDP members of the Diet are what has been termed "hereditary

¹¹ Kabashima Ikuo and Okawa Chihiro, "Fukuda Yasuo no kenkyu" [Research on Yasuo Fukuda], *Sekai*, No. 772 (December 2007), p. 57.

politicians.”¹² Fukuda was well aware of that not all approved of political families and commented on such, when, replacing his father, he was first elected to the Diet: “There might be criticism of second generation [politicians], but while I am a son of a politician, I’m 50 and hope I will be judged as one independent individual.”¹³ Another comment he made was to another younger member of the Diet: “I’m over 50. An uncle replacing an uncle. Our role is to support you young people.”¹⁴ By the time he became prime minister, he had been re-elected six times, so it is hard to claim that Fukuda was not popular with voters in his constituency.

The Legacy of a Father

Thus, as mentioned above, having a father who has served as prime minister and having “inherited” his seat in the Diet, Yasuo Fukuda belongs to a group of politicians with roots in a “political family.” Working as a secretary for his father gave him experience and a personal network in Japan’s government and business elite that has been of great use for him as a member of the Diet. But unlike many second or third-generation members of the Diet, Fukuda replaced his father after he had already pursued a career in business—and worthy of note is that he had been elected as a member of the Diet only seven years short of the retirement age for public officials. With his family background of belonging to a well-established “political family” and with his own personal career in private business, Fukuda evinces the happy inter-marriage of political heritage and ample experience in a vital sector of society.

Despite that the careers of father and son differ, their characters resemble each other.¹⁵ Fukuda learned the tricks of the political trade when he worked as a

¹² See, e.g., Carmen Schmidt, “Die Rekrutierung politischer Repräsentanten in Japan,” NOAG, No. 171–172 (2002), p. 100. In his classic study, Kenzo Uchida shows that at the end of the 1980s, 45 percent of all LDP members of the Diet were second-generation politicians. See Uchida Kenzo, *Gendai Nihon no hoshu seiji* [Conservative politics of present-day Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1989), p. 162.

¹³ Kawamura Keiko, Kimura Keiko, Fujiu Akira, “Fukuda Yasuo ‘Onna to hinkaku’: Naze ka ‘obasan’ ni ninki” [Yasuo Fukuda, “Women and dignity”: Why popular with “old ladies”?], *AERA*, No. 43, Nov. 1, 2007, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 18f.

¹⁵ “Kiso kara wakaruru ‘Fukuda Yasuo’” [Understanding the basis of “Yasuo Fukuda”], *The*

secretary for his father. To work as a political secretary to a member of the Diet, a minister, and/or the prime minister is a recognized and unparalleled way to acquire knowledge of the chores of politics and the wheeling and dealing of daily political management. Fukuda's image of being his father's son was given credence, furthermore, by the reverence that he holds for his father, something that is readily apparent. Not only had Fukuda worked as a secretary for his father and given up his career in business to do so, replacing his father as a representative of the same constituency, he has also made it a task for himself to push for ideas associated with his father. A notable case was seen in spring 2006, when it emerged that Fukuda had a real chance of succeeding Koizumi. In Japan, several prime ministers have become noted in posterity for some spectacular achievement and in a number of cases these achievements have been related to foreign policy.¹⁶ Takeo Fukuda is credited for two important achievements in the area of foreign policy: the Fukuda Doctrine (1977) and the peace and friendship treaty with the People's Republic of China (1978). The doctrine linked to his name is seen as constituting the foundation of Japan's relations with the countries of Southeast Asia. Given the fact that the Fukuda Doctrine is considered a significant element of Japanese foreign policy and holds a revered place in Japan's diplomatic history, it is a matter-of-course that Yasuo Fukuda holds the doctrine linked to his father's name in high esteem. So, even though he had not declared that he was a candidate or was going to announce such, when the campaign for succeeding Prime Minister Koizumi approached, rumors spread that Fukuda was set to make a decisive move in order to boost his likely candidacy by launching "a new Fukuda doctrine"—referring to his father's initiative toward Southeast Asia three decades before. At the time, this move was seen to be his trump card in the fight for the post of prime minister. Instead, however, Shinzo Abe dominated the opinion polls, with the result that Fukuda did not even officially enter the race.

Yomiuri shimbun, Sep. 24, 2007, http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/fe_070924_01.htm

¹⁶ Bert Edström, *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine: From Yoshida to Miyazawa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 177.

The legacy of his father can also be discerned in the policies on Fukuda's political agenda. Given the fact that the achievements ascribed to his father's premiership are related to foreign policy, it was to no surprise that Fukuda demonstrated a keen interest in foreign policy. According to Fukuda's elder brother-in-law Michio Ochi, who is a former minister, one reason for Fukuda's engagement in foreign policy was that before Takeo Fukuda retired from politics, he advised Yasuo to concentrate on foreign policy and his brother-in-law to focus on monetary and fiscal policies.¹⁷ Yasuo Fukuda became a member of the foreign affairs standing committee of the Lower House in 1992 (a post that he kept until 1999), and his first political post of significance was as parliamentary vice-minister for foreign affairs. That post was in the Tomiichi Murayama cabinet, in which his classmate from Waseda University Yohei Kono served as foreign minister. Fukuda's stint as vice minister was brief, lasting from August 1995 to January 1996 when Prime Minister Murayama resigned. The recognition of Fukuda's foreign policy expertise surfaced in November 1996, when he became chairperson of the foreign affairs committee of the LDP.

Chief Cabinet Secretary

Like Abe, Fukuda boasted only one key top political post before he was appointed prime minister—but it was nonetheless an important post.¹⁸ His government stints came in the first and second Yoshiro Mori cabinet (October 2000–April 2001) and he was asked by Mori's successor, Jun'ichiro Koizumi, to continue when Koizumi took over. Fukuda occupied the post from October 27, 2000 to May 7, 2004. The post of chief cabinet secretary made him not only the government's spokesman and troubleshooter but also the No. 2 in the cabinet. Before this appointment he was not particularly noted on the national political stage but was appointed for the post by Mori at the recommendation of prime

¹⁷ Yamamura Akiyoshi, "Kantei no yoba': Fukuda Yasuo kenkyu" ["The witch at the Prime Minister's Office": Research on Yasuo Fukuda], *Bungei shunju*, September 2003, p. III.

¹⁸ When Fukuda was chief cabinet secretary, he also served concurrently as Minister of State and Director-General, Okinawa Development Agency (Oct.–Dec. 2000) and Minister of State for Gender Equality (Jan. 2001–May 2004).

minister-to-be Jun'ichiro Koizumi, who was a key official in Mori's faction to which Fukuda belonged.¹⁹ With a total of 1289 days as chief cabinet secretary, he became the longest serving in this post in Japan's postwar history, beating Shigeru Hori's 1258 days in the post. As Fukuda noted when he became the third-longest in the post in 2003, to become the No. 1 in this post was a record that "cannot be passed easily."²⁰

During his initial weeks as the chief lieutenant of Prime Minister Mori who was also his faction leader, Fukuda seems to have been influenced by his boss's repeated verbal blunders, which the press unfailingly picked up on.²¹ Considering Fukuda's reputation when he left as chief cabinet secretary as a thoroughly "balanced" politician, this habit is surprising and might have been the result of the fact that it was his first stint in an important political post, and that he was not used to being constantly surrounded by journalists and reporters. Remarking on an ill-advised statement that had been made by another minister, Fukuda clearly demonstrated his displeasure with the press: "Although comments that leave room for misunderstandings should not be made, we also hope you will listen to remarks more carefully," Fukuda told reporters, indirectly admonishing the press for focusing on the apparent verbal gaffe.²²

As chief cabinet secretary, Fukuda made himself known by placing priority on foreign policy.²³ When Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka had to resign amidst a row in 2002, Fukuda became a "shadow foreign minister" by discreetly issuing instructions to foreign ministry officials. He played a key role in devising Prime Minister Koizumi's North Korea policy.²⁴ And he portrayed the image of being

¹⁹ "New top gov't spokesman well-versed in foreign policy," *Japan Policy & Politics*, Oct. 27, 2000, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moXPQ/is_2000_Oct_30/ai_66930775.

²⁰ "Fukuda serves longest-consecutive term as spokesman," *Japan Policy & Politics*, June 2, 2003, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moXPQ/is_2003_June_9/ai_102917549.

²¹ "Gov't spokesman Fukuda is also gaffe-prone," *Japan Policy & Politics*, Dec. 5, 2000, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moXPQ/is_2000_Dec_11/ai_68163378.

²² "Fukuda says new minister's remarks pose no problems," *Japan Policy & Politics*, Dec. 7, 2000, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moXPQ/is_2000_Dec_11/ai_68163435

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 111f.

²⁴ "Kakufuku senso' saigen ka...Tanaka Makiko shi, Minshushuini no shitsumonsha ni" [A reappearance of the Kakuei Tanaka-Takeo Fukuda war]?...Ms. Makiko Tanaka DPJ

“a friend of China.” This latter image benefited from the legacy of his father, who as prime minister concluded the peace and friendship treaty with the People’s Republic of China back in 1978. This image was considered one of his fortes in the prime ministerial campaign that observers and the Japanese public at large had expected him to launch in 2006. The reason why Fukuda was thought to be going to focus on foreign policy in his upcoming campaign was partly his repute as an official with foreign policy as a strength, but also that the main contender and competitor for the post of prime minister, Shinzo Abe, had established himself as a right-leaning hawk and vitriolic critic of China, asserting the right for all Japanese to pay homage at the Yasukuni Shrine regardless of sharp criticism from neighboring countries. Relations with China soured, as they did with both Koreas, and ordinary Japanese had come to worry about the negative effects on relations with these neighbors.

Fukuda cut short his service as Prime Minister Koizumi’s right-hand man on May 7, 2004. The reason he gave for stepping down were revelations that he had mishandled his payments of public pension premiums. In fact, seven ministers in all admitted that they had failed to pay their mandatory national pension premiums but Fukuda was the only one who took responsibility for his wrongdoing and resigned.²⁵ “I’m deeply ashamed of having led people to lose their trust in politics,” Fukuda said at his regular morning news conference.²⁶ His resignation was a blow to Koizumi, with the Upper House election due in July and problems over Japan’s policy toward Iraq causing severe political problems for the government.

Leaving his post and citing the mishandling of his pension payments as the reason took many people by surprise; others had done the same but had not drawn the same conclusion as Fukuda about the severity of their actions. In hindsight, stepping down added to his image of being a solid and trustworthy

questioner in Lower House committee], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Oct. 10, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/news/20071010i111.htm>

²⁵ “Ministers won’t quit over pension scandal,” *The Japan Times*, May 8, 2004, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20040508a6.html>

²⁶ Reiji Yoshida, “Fukuda resigns from Cabinet: Pension fiasco fallout proves Koizumi right-hand man’s undoing,” *The Japan Times*, May 8, 2004, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20040508a1.html>

politician. Indeed, Fukuda's longevity in office as chief cabinet secretary can be attributed to his capable, competent, and efficient managing of day-to-day chores and his particular proficiency in handling the constant flow of issues and problems that flooded his desk. Already from the start his calm and balanced character stood out, and it was not long until he had acquired the image of being an able and capable official who preferred to stay in the background and was not keen on bravado activities aimed at popularity with the public.

The Upper House Election, July 29, 2007

The prelude to Fukuda's sudden appointment as prime minister can be sought in the raging scandal that the national pension system mess constituted. Modern Japan knows many scandals but the scale of the chaotic state of the national pension system came as a shock when it was disclosed in April 2007. The mishandling of the pension system outraged the Japanese public and tarnished the image of the government and Prime Minister Abe as well as the LDP and made them easy targets for relentless attacks from the political opposition. When Abe tried to salvage the situation by announcing in the Diet that the problems linked to the pension system would be resolved by April 2008, it was a promise that few trusted. A poll revealed that 75 percent of respondents answered no and only 16 percent yes when asked if they considered that the government's actions to rectify the problem were trustworthy. Especially annoying to Abe was when it was revealed that he had been informed of the serious problems afflicting the national pension system already in December 2006—half a year before the scandal broke—and that he had seemingly not taken the issue very seriously.²⁷ When the news of his “disinterest” surfaced, it added to the distrust of his assurances that the government would rectify the mess. Instead, Abe's declaration that the pension mess problem would be solved within a year down to the last yen and the last individual failed to impress but was seen as clumsy and unsatisfactory. Popular distrust of Abe became a plus for Fukuda. The enormous scale of the pension mess and the knowledge that political bigwigs were to blame threw a redeeming light on Fukuda's past dealings with his own pension matters. In the eyes of ordinary Japanese, he had behaved in a way that was unfortunate and unacceptable but had taken responsibility for it by resigning. In any case, whatever Fukuda's past

²⁷ Bert Edström, *Japan's Upper House Election, July 29: Down or Dawn for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe?* Institute for Security & Development Policy, Policy Paper (July 2007), p. 10.

wrongdoings, it was dwarfed by the pension mess Abe found himself embroiled in.

The outcome of the Upper House election was not positive for the LDP. Winning only 37 seats, the party's share of seats decreased from 110 before the election to 83, with the consequence that the parties forming the coalition government lost their majority. Many well-known and senior members of the LDP were rejected by voters. The result for the LDP was even worse than predicted by polling institutes, and was bound to have effects on policies, especially since the LDP's partner in the coalition government, the New Komeito, had also failed to lure voters. Both in- and outside the LDP, the debate that had started before the election—when it had become clear that the LDP would perform badly at the ballot-box— of who was to blame, continued to rage. The election outcome was a message from voters that was only too clear: a majority of voters wanted change and a government that would act responsibly. It seemed, however, as if Prime Minister Abe did not catch this message. In an unusual show of resolve, he announced that he had no intention of stepping down; this went against the grain of recent history, which has seen a number of prime ministers having to leave their posts after poor performances by the LDP in elections.²⁸

The New Abe Cabinet

Prime Minister Abe's determination not to step down despite the election catastrophe for his party did not bode well for the LDP in the new parliamentary situation. Soon after the election, notwithstanding a brief period of improved popularity in opinion polls, Abe was soon dwelling in the doldrums again. The row over scandals that had surfaced during his time in office before the election continued after the election with yet another minister forced to resign, damaging the LDP still further. Although Abe tried to avoid doing so, in the end he was forced to give in and sacked his scandal-ridden farm minister,

²⁸ Iio Jun, *Nihon no tochi kozo* [The structure of Japan's government] (Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 2007), pp. 112f.

Norihiko Akagi.²⁹ The *Tokyo shimbun* presented an investigation said to reveal how much out of tune with voters Abe had become by the end of his tenure. It was not concepts like “Beautiful Japan” dear to Abe that caught the voters’ attention as such, but rather issues such as pensions and social security or problems related to the issues of politics and money, the urban vs. countryside issue, and the issue of inequality—*kakusa*—that had emerged as a prominent political issue in a short period of time. By no means in the minority, voices began to speak up for the need to continue the structural reform initiated by Koizumi.³⁰

One attempt by Abe to recapture the political initiative was his announcement that he was going to reshuffle his cabinet. It gave him the opportunity to sack those ministers whose track record had become an embarrassment not only for the government but most of all for the prime minister. Appointing a new cabinet had two aims, personal and for his party. One was to make Abe try and regain his standing and authority in the LDP, severely hit as he was by the outcome of the Upper House election and the scandals that had rocked the political scene—which, in several cases, had been caused by members of his cabinet. Another aim was to regain the party’s stature as the only viable ruling party, a status it had enjoyed for several decades.

A way for Abe to re-build his standing in the party and rally support around him was to increase the role of the party in policy-making by choosing ministers who would not only be an asset to him as prime minister, but also able to contribute to the good of the party—something that was Abe’s overriding responsibility as party president. Thus, he returned to the traditional way of bringing in prominent representatives of LDP factions, thus breaking with the manner that intra-party affairs had been managed by his predecessor Koizumi, who had been elected leader of the LDP against the will of the party leadership and who had used his time in power to try and eliminate the influence of the

²⁹ Bert Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan: The Demise of Shinzo Abe*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper (September 2007), p. 23.

³⁰ “Shinshusho e no yobo ‘rinen yori seikatsu’ kencho” [Demands on the new premier: Living [standard] rather than ideology noticeable], *The Tokyo shimbun*, Sep. 23, 2007, <http://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/politics/monitor/CK2007092302050959.html>

factions, traditionally the power centers in the party. He had largely succeeded and Abe had followed in his footsteps by appointing ministers in his first cabinet much out of his personal preference, thereby in large measure disregarding the factions. But soon this way of appointing ministers also showed its limitations; it gave Abe a loyal following of cabinet ministers but being Abe's "buddy" was not always a sufficient qualification for a minister managing national affairs, as evidenced by the parade of scandals caused by Abe appointees. This time, Abe allowed the factions to have a solid say in whom to appoint, and the Koizumi era of forming cabinets seemed long gone.

After Abe announced his new government, the government and the prime minister temporarily enjoyed improved popularity figures. A number of polls conducted after the cabinet reshuffle showed that the rates of approval for the Abe government jumped upwards by more than ten percent.³¹ But the prime minister's improved standing in polls proved short-lived. An increasingly widespread view was that the DPJ did not win the election, but rather the LDP had lost it; many voters went to the ballot-box determined to teach the LDP a lesson by casting their ballots against the LDP rather than voting for opposition parties as such, with the DPJ profiting from this in many cases. It was also important for voting that the large opposition party had succeeded in gaining an image of being a party capable of governing the country, and its party leader, Ichiro Ozawa, was seen as a stronger and more able leader than Abe. In a poll published before the Upper House election, 50 percent of respondents saw Ozawa as a stronger political leader than Prime Minister Abe.³²

Abe's Demise

The constant and relentless pressure on the prime minister took its toll. In a blitz move on September 12, 2007 he announced his resignation. It was a stunning action that took all by surprise since it came only two days after he had given his policy speech in the Diet. On that occasion he had not given any hint of a floundering mood but instead had signaled an unbroken will to

³¹ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, p. 17.

³² Referred to in Edström, *Japan's Upper House Election, July 29*, p. 17.

continue the fight in getting parliamentary approval for the important bills to be presented to the Diet.

Even if Abe's demise was to be predicted due to his poor standing in opinion polls, and with prospects for the next Lower House election looking increasingly grim, his sudden resignation nonetheless came unexpectedly. Rumors spread that Abe was ill and these were confirmed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki and further corroborated when the news floated that Abe had been hospitalized.³³ Eventually, it was revealed by Abe himself that he had been in quite critical condition and had had to resign because he was unable to fulfill his duties as prime minister.³⁴

As a candidate for president of the LDP, Abe's main sales point had been his freshness and youth, but once prime minister this positive image began to wear thin surprisingly quickly. To his party leaders and those who were entitled to vote for LDP presidential hopefuls, Abe's primary asset in the campaign for succeeding Prime Minister Koizumi was his popularity among the electorate in opinion polls. He emerged as a worthy successor to Koizumi and the candidate who would be able to carry on Koizumi's legacy with his unsurpassed ability to talk to the hearts of Japanese. When Abe was elected Koizumi's successor, the ruling party hoped to improve its standing among voters. This assertion was confirmed when polls taken immediately after Abe became prime minister showed that he had support rates of 70.3 percent, one of the highest support figures ever recorded.³⁵ But Abe's actions in office and as party president undermined his main selling point of youth and freshness; this was now seen as demonstrating his lack of experience and espousal of far-fetched ideas that were not closely tethered to political realities. To the LDP, Abe's growing unpopularity served to seal the party's fate at the ballot-box. His personal agenda that had been incorporated into the LDP's political platform in

³³ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, p. 1.

³⁴ Abe Shinzo, "Waga kokuhaku: Sorijinin no shinso" [My confession: The truth behind a prime minister resigning], *Bungei shunju*, February 2008, pp. 114–23.

³⁵ "Fukuda naikaku shijiritsu 57.5%, Yomiuri shimbunsha yoron chosa" [Support rate for the Fukuda cabinet 57.5% according to Yomiuri shimbun poll], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 27, 2007, http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/fe_070927_01.htm

anticipation of the upcoming Upper House election was discarded. The party returned to its traditional stance of putting priority on pork barrel issues, which the DPJ had usurped during the election campaign and was one reason why it had performed formidably in the election, while the LDP experienced one of its least successful elections since the party was founded half a century ago.

For decades, the pre-eminent sales point of the LDP in the eyes of voters had been its unquestioned ability to govern; but the activities of Prime Minister Abe and members of his cabinet had cast serious doubts over this image. These doubts were a key reason why the LDP lost the Upper House election. Abe's debacle in the election was also the LDP's, and the overriding task of the new prime minister was to regain the trust of voters and to launch a counter attack against the relentless onslaught inflicted on the ruling coalition by the political opposition.

Yasuo Fukuda Elected Prime Minister

After the campaign for the Upper House election was over, it soon dawned that a new campaign was to take place: the campaign to pick Abe's successor. Abe's surprise announcement was followed by another surprise when Taro Aso, who was generally seen as the likely successor immediately after Abe's resignation, found himself almost immediately side-stepped in a process that was over in a few days—the LDP factions instead throwing their support behind Yasuo Fukuda, a politician who was an entirely different type of politician than Aso. In important respects, Aso's political profile resembles that of Abe, and with Abe depicted as the main culprit behind the election disaster of the LDP by both its rank and file and faction leaders (who were also eager to flee their own responsibility), Aso's leadership bid with his close connection to the deposed prime minister met with little enthusiasm. From leading the life of a retired statesman since he withdrew from the race to succeed Koizumi, Yasuo Fukuda suddenly became a household name and made it into the top ten lists of the blogosphere.³⁶

Fukuda's Non-campaign

In contrast to the 2006 campaign that did not take off as far as Fukuda was concerned, the 2007 campaign became notable in that he did almost not have to campaign at all to be appointed prime minister. With the defeat in the Upper House election and the popular discontent with the LDP and the coalition government, the crisis mood spread in the LDP and, in a surprise move, leaders of all the LDP factions but one flocked around Fukuda, with the result that he

³⁶ “‘Web chumokuwado’ Natsume Masako ga ii ni” [Words on the web: Masako Natsume No.1], *The Asahi shimbun*, Sep. 25, 2007, http://www.asahi.com/komimi/TKY_200709250221.html

was expected to stand as candidate. Thus, before the real campaign had even started, its outcome was all but a foregone conclusion.

The only faction not looking to Fukuda as the party's savior was the small Aso faction, led by the party's secretary-general Taro Aso, who had served as foreign minister in Abe's first cabinet and was a long-time member of the Diet, having been re-elected six times. At first, Aso was seen as the leading contender to succeed Abe, and seems to have been favored by Abe since he informed Aso in advance of his intention to step down. But being the one who Abe preferred as his successor was not a plus for Aso in a situation in which Abe had lost the support of his party. Abe's popular predecessor, Jun'ichiro Koizumi, also threw his support behind Fukuda. So too did the leader of the faction to which both Fukuda and Abe belonged, former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. Despite the fact that he was discarded by the LDP as premier in 2001, he has continued to be a kingmaker in the party. In order to keep the pretense that the party had a real choice, however, Aso did not withdraw from the campaign. But in effect his candidacy was a mere show for public consumption in that it looked good for the party that there was not only one candidate. Standing as a candidate was also seen to signal his interest in being considered when, in the future, Fukuda's successor is to be picked.

Given that Fukuda had emerged the undisputed victor in the battle for the party's top post and Aso's candidacy constituted a mere token performance, the margin with which Fukuda was elected party president was slimmer than expected, with Aso winning as many as 197 votes against Fukuda's 330.³⁷ It indicated that there was a quiet resistance against the new leader in the LDP. Was it because he had been picked by the leaders of LDP factions as the successor and his election could be seen as a return of old-style LDP politics with party bigwigs running the show? This was the management of politics that Koizumi had revolted against and that had received such an overwhelming support from members of the LDP as well as by voters in the general elections.

³⁷ "Fukuda triumphs in LDP race. New leader eyes 'revival' of party after winning 63% of vote," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 24, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070924TDY01002.htm>

If so, Fukuda could reasonably expect to encounter greater skepticism once the initial honeymoon period comes to an end.

One of the reasons Fukuda came to be seen as the most suitable successor was that his image was in contrast to that of Abe. Fukuda seemed to offer many of the qualities that Abe had demonstrably lacked. In a strange twist of fate, what had contributed to the downfall of Fukuda the year before was now his forte. When he withdrew from the race to succeed Koizumi, he stated officially that age was one reason why he did not file his candidacy. With Abe's demise, furthermore, he had not become any younger, which indicates that age was not the key reason for why he did not enter the race to succeed Koizumi. Also Fukuda's dry and bureaucratic style combined with the image of being an eminently capable and competent manager of tasks and responsibilities of the prime minister was seen to make him a sensible choice as leader of the LDP. While he had only one ministerial position on his résumé, it was an important one as he had served as chief cabinet secretary. His work in that post had made him acquire a reputation for reliability, steadiness, and dry, self-deprecating and sarcastic wit.³⁸ Even his pension blunder in 2004 was seen in more favorable light, since he had stepped down because of it. It is an irony of history that the national pension system mess was one of the reasons why he became premier.

Fukuda's Political Style

With a career background in business and politics, Fukuda's conciliatory political style was seen as an antidote to Shinzo Abe's ten month tenure as prime minister—who after his sudden resignation began to be described even by LDP heavyweights as a political good-for-nothing and the very opposite of the image of the Golden Boy of Japanese politics that he had been seen as when he became prime minister. But the careers of Abe and Fukuda resembled each other in that they both worked in business before they turned to politics and, thus, differ from other postwar premiers who had started out as bureaucrats—what can be said to be the Yoshida track of Japanese politics—or as journalists as

³⁸ Richard Lloyd Parry, "The reluctant Prime Minister prepares to step up to the plate in Tokyo," *The Times*, September 21, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2500575.ece>

many other leading politicians like Shinzo Abe's father Shintaro Abe. Unlike Abe, whose career in business lasted only three years, Fukuda had been in business for seventeen years. Like Hata and Abe, Fukuda is a politician who represents a contrast not only to the bureaucrat-turned-politician that his own father was a prime example of, but also to another type of politician—those who enter politics as *tarento*; that is having acquired fame as a TV personality, comedian, singer, athlete, etc. In the case of Fukuda, his appearance contrasts to their style; he is the incarnation of a politician who is competent, serious, hard working, business-minded, down to earth—to such a degree that he is often described as dull and colorless.

Despite the fact that Fukuda's career resembles that of Abe's, they were judged differently. On paper their career paths were comparable: both had worked in business, been a secretary to a parliamentarian and a member of the cabinet, had been a member of the parliament roughly for the same amount of time, and had been minister only once—both Abe and Fukuda served as chief cabinet secretary. In a country valuing seniority and age, it is of significance that Fukuda is twenty years Abe's senior. And with a father who was one of the true octogenarians of Japanese politics, assuming the post of prime minister at an age well beyond retirement age for ordinary citizens and being seen as his father's political heir, Fukuda carried with him an air of experience and maturity. He had a long and meritorious career and was seen to offer what Abe's months in power lacked: calm leadership tempered by years of experience.

What had been seen as Fukuda's weak points in the campaign for the post of prime minister in 2006 became attractive sales points amidst the gloomy mood that predominated in the LDP after the Upper House election. In an AP cable reproduced by the *The Guardian*, Fukuda is described as having “displayed a talent for quietly managing the cabinet without dragging disputes into the open, a skill that commentators claim is needed after Mr Abe's tumultuous, scandal-hit year in office.”³⁹ While Abe tried to pose as one who was going to take over the banner of “reform” after Koizumi (but met skepticism), Fukuda did not

³⁹ “Yasuo Fukuda: a quiet man of compromise,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2176789,00.html>.

have to pose. He had supported Koizumi's reforms during his time as chief cabinet secretary.

With his career in private business, Fukuda upon being appointed prime minister became yet another case of the new type of *salariman* premiers that emerged in the 1990s with the pioneer being Tsutomu Hata (prime minister May–June 1995). Fukuda's predecessor Shinzo Abe had a similar background.⁴⁰ These *salariman* premiers started their careers as typical company employees. Famous is how Hata worked for the Odakyu Bus Co. as an ordinary blue collar worker for eleven years before he turned to politics.⁴¹ The personal background of these prime ministers made it easier for ordinary Japanese to identify with them than with the type of politician usually attaining the top spot in politics. It seems that neither Hata nor Abe or Fukuda had any particular longing for entering politics but proceeded to do so out of a sense of duty to continue their fathers' work as politicians.

But Fukuda differs from Hata and Abe in that his background and political style owe much to his father's background. Takeo Fukuda entered politics during the years when Japan's postwar political system took shape. Though not belonging to the group of elite bureaucrats recruited into politics by Shigeru Yoshida (prime minister 1946–47, 1948–54)—a group of politicians in posterity named “the Yoshida School”—the former finance ministry bureaucrat Takeo Fukuda was the archetype of this new type of elite bureaucrat-turned-politician.⁴² His son entered business and not the bureaucracy, and his career took another direction than that of his father's. Despite this, the son's personality and political style came to resemble that of his father's.

⁴⁰ Hoshi Hiroshi, *Abe seiken no Nihon* [The Abe government and Japan] (Tokyo: Asahi shimbunsha, 2006), pp. 19ff.

⁴¹ Naka Mamoru, *Hata Tsutomu to iu otoko* [Tsutomu Hata, the man] (Tokyo: Toyo keizai shimposha, 1993), pp. 49ff.

⁴² On the Yoshida School, see, e.g., Tominomori Eiji, *Sengo hoshuto shi* [A history of postwar conservative parties] (Tokyo: Nihon hyoronsha, 1977), pp. 45–50.

The New Komeito in the Post-election Political Landscape

When the new prime minister viewed the political landscape, both internal and external politics were in dire straits. The parliamentary basis and popular support of the coalition government formed by the LDP and the New Komeito was badly hurt as a result of the outcome of the Upper House election. While the election had been detrimental to the LDP, it was really bad news for its coalition partner, the New Komeito. Winning only nine seats, the party suffered a numbing defeat. It was a serious setback for the party since it had now only 20 seats in the Upper House. The LDP's junior partner lost most of its political clout and the LDP had to see its indispensable partner become a weak ally in the fierce battle that was expected to unfold in the upcoming Diet session. In his comments after the election, New Komeito Chairman Akihiro Ota concluded: "The general public especially wants more transparency and disclosure regarding politics and money."⁴³ It was a view that was also widely held among LDP members and was shared by the new prime minister and reflected in the pledges of his government. In order to tackle the adverse political situation and regain popular trust, the Fukuda government would "thoroughly discharge the duty of giving a clear account of its action." The outcome of the Upper House election clarified that continuing to pursue politics à la Abe would be detrimental to the prospects for securing decent results of the coalition parties in the forthcoming Lower House election. Ota saw the reason for the election debacle in "the scandalous way some lawmakers in the bloc handled political funds and gaffes by Cabinet ministers."⁴⁴ And since the wrongdoings referred to by Ota were attributable to LDP members of the government, not New Komeito representatives, it was clear that he blamed the losses of the coalition partners in the election on the LDP. It was clear that the severe beating that Ota's party had had to endure, and which opened up

⁴³ Hiroko Nakata and Masami Ito, "Abe looks to shake up Cabinet: Ruling bloc vows to stay united, try to connect with public," *The Japan Times*, July 31, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070731a1.html>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

worrisome prospects for the party's future, was the responsibility of the senior partner in the coalition government.⁴⁵

As could be expected, discussion began in the New Komeito on how to handle the fact that the party was severely weakened. After days of intense soul searching among party members, Ota announced that the New Komeito would continue to be a member of the coalition government.⁴⁶ It was a reasonable decision since leaving the government would be likened to the party abandoning a sinking ship; a double-edged message to voters in future elections when the party would need to join others if it wanted to be in the government. Given the fact that supporters of the New Komeito numbered enough to change the election outcome in many constituencies, it was absolutely necessary for the LDP to secure the support of the Buddhist party; if the New Komeito leadership asked its party members to shift from supporting LDP candidates to backing the opposition, the LDP would be substantially harmed. This is the case, as gaining access to the powerful campaigning machine mobilized for the Buddhist party, or a party seen worthy of its support, enables the LDP to win many more seats than it would do otherwise.⁴⁷

The Formation of the Fukuda Cabinet

The parliamentary situation was a precarious one for Fukuda upon coming to power; the Diet could expect stalemate to persist. The prospect of the Diet at a standstill was linked to Japan's external policy that faced a tough time ahead, with the new majority in the Upper House set to resist policies to be presented to the Diet by the Fukuda government. The result of the Upper House election created a parliamentary situation that was singularly uncomfortable for Fukuda's party, with the two parties in the coalition government no longer commanding the majority in the Upper House. Of some comfort was that the Lower House was solidly in the hands of the coalition parties, possessing as they

⁴⁵ "New Komeito eyes greater clout," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Oct. 1, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071001TDY03303.htm>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Author's interview of Norio Okazawa, professor of political science, Waseda University, Tokyo, March 13, 2007.

did more than two-thirds of the seats—a result of the landslide that former Prime Minister Koizumi had secured in the Lower House election in 2005.

In the aftermath of Abe's abrupt decision to resign, there was a quick, almost instantaneous transition from Abe to Fukuda. The rapid formation of the new cabinet was obviously deemed by Fukuda as necessary given the domestic political situation, but the haste with which his government was formed created prospects for more scandals. Almost all ministers of the scandal-tainted Abe cabinet were brought into Fukuda's new cabinet. Only two of the seventeen ministers were new and only one had not been minister before, making the Fukuda cabinet what a newspaper called an "election management cabinet."⁴⁸ It was only natural that Fukuda did not overhaul the cabinet immediately upon coming to power, since only one month had elapsed from when the ministers in the second Abe cabinet had been appointed. But already before Fukuda took over, it had become all too obvious that Abe had not scrutinized ministerial hopefuls to the degree that would have seemed natural given that his short-lived first cabinet had paraded a disconcerting lineup of politicians soon to be tainted by scandals. Subsequently, the Abe cabinet faced an uphill battle almost from the start because of the scandals that repeatedly hit the front pages of the newspapers.

The few changes in ministerial lineup and the fact that only one of his ministers was without ministerial experience demonstrated that Fukuda preferred to play it safe. While changes were few, they were nonetheless significant. Nobutaka Machimura, Abe's foreign minister, was appointed chief cabinet secretary, and Masahiko Komura, another former foreign minister, left his previous post as defense minister to replace him. It was a comeback in this post for Komura, who had been replaced as defense minister by Shigeru Ishiba, who in turn had previously served as director general of the Japan Defense Agency and is one of Japan's most profiled defense politicians. These men had previous experience of serving in key posts and, furthermore, were profiled representatives of

⁴⁸ "Fukuda naikaku stato, 15 kakuryo nokoru" [Start of Fukuda cabinet, 15 ministers remain], *The Asahi shimbun*, Sep. 26, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/special/07-08/news2/TKY200712010225.html>

important factions of the LDP. Placing these experienced politicians, who were also factional bigwigs into key posts, was a move by Fukuda to ensure that he had the important factions of his party behind him. But it might equally be seen as a way for the new prime minister of demonstrating his appreciation of the support shown to him by faction leaders when he was picked by them to lead the party and the government.

Political Priorities of the Fukuda Cabinet

The day he took over as premier, Fukuda made it clear that he was fully aware that he was facing an uphill struggle and that his new cabinet had its “back to the wall.”⁴⁹ Fukuda frankly admitted that the result of the Upper House election had shown that the LDP “has lost the trust of the people.”⁵⁰ His task was to regain trust but he had solid reasons for being concerned. The outcome of the Upper House election—a public opinion disgruntled by the way the government had handled the pension system and the declared intention by the political opposition to throw a spanner into the works of the ruling coalition—made it certain that Fukuda’s path forward was going to be stony.

At the first conference of administrative vice-ministers [*jikan kaigi*], Fukuda stressed that it was extremely important for the government to regain popular trust. “Without being trusted by the people it will be impossible to realize any policy or necessary reforms.”⁵¹ With this declaration it was highly problematical that two of the ministers of his cabinet, Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Kisaburo Tokai, were accused in the press of irregularities. On the day the Fukuda cabinet was presented, it was announced that the new defense minister had corrected the financial report for 2004 of a support group, and in a newspaper interview

⁴⁹ “Japan’s new Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda issues warning to party,” *Times Online*, Sep. 25, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article2531881.ece>

⁵⁰ “Fukuda triumphs in LDP race.”

⁵¹ “Fukuda shusho, hatsu no jikan kaigi de kunji: ‘Shinraikaifuku wa kiwamete juyo’” [Instruction from Prime Minister Fukuda at first conference of administrative vice-ministers: “Extremely important to regain trust”], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 27, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/news/20070927i104.htm>

the minister attributed the alleged wrongdoing to a simple clerical mistake.⁵² But well aware that popular distrust that had brought down his predecessor and risked ruining his own position if he took a lenient attitude, Fukuda ordered his two ministers to explain facts in a way that would be satisfactory to the public.⁵³ Ishiba and Tokai were leading members of the LDP—otherwise they would not have been picked as ministers, but strictness was also a necessity given Fukuda’s position as president of the LDP. The rampant scandals that had beleaguered the party day in and day out during the short-lived Abe government threatened the very survival of the party, and wrongdoings that added to the distrust of the party among voters could not be tolerated. Not least it was in consideration of the key task that he had as the leader of the LDP: to bolster the spirit and morale of the party which was in shambles after the Upper House election. Fukuda was well aware of this task: “The LDP is facing various difficulties. I’ll do my best to revive the party,” Fukuda said after he had been elected party president.⁵⁴ The question was if he was the right man, known as he was for his bureaucratic image and lacking Koizumi’s charisma and eminent ability to lure voters manage the press. A seasoned analyst commented, “The very survival of the party may well be at stake. It is with this in mind that the new prime minister must attempt to govern between now and the election, which will probably be called sometime next year.”⁵⁵

Political Pledges

Once in office, it was obvious that Fukuda wanted to give an impression of being the stable hand on the wheel of the state. The day he took over, not only

⁵² “Sokaku tojitsu ni Ishiba boeisho, shushi hokokusho o teisei” [On the day cabinet is formed, Defense Minister Ishiba: Financial report corrected], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 27, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/news/20070927i101.htm>

⁵³ “Ishiba, Tokai shi ni ‘Kichin to setsumeio’...seijishikin de shusho shiji” [Prime minister orders Ishiba, Tokai “to explain without further ado” about political funds], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/news/20070927ia02.htm>

⁵⁴ “Fukuda triumphs in LDP race. New leader eyes ‘revival’ of party after winning 63% of vote,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 24, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070924TDY01002.htm>

⁵⁵ Takashi Shiraishi, “After Abe: Issues and Prospects,” *Japan Echo*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (December 2007), p. 7.

did he announce the new cabinet lineup but also the set of basic policies of the new government. They indicated how the new prime minister wanted to tackle the challenges that he and his government were facing and what the priorities of his government were. The first two points were pledges of how to make parliamentary work move forward. It is obvious that finding a way of managing the precarious parliamentary situation that the government faced was the top priority. Fukuda's more conciliatory style stood out as better suited to handle the problems that the coalition government was certain to encounter in the Diet in the coming months than his sharp-tongued predecessor. The new government declared that it would "consult sincerely with the opposition parties on important policy issues." Fukuda followed in the footsteps of his predecessors and announced a motto for his cabinet that can be seen as an invitation to the political opposition and an offer to cooperate, *jiritsu to kyosei*, or "autonomy and living together." Choosing this as the motto can be seen, as Jeff Kingston has pointed out, as an indication of how the prime minister wanted to tackle the political situation, showing that his focus was domestic and an attempt to balance free-market economic reform with the paternalistic style of welfare government.⁵⁶ This hand stretched out to the political opposition was offered in a situation in which the new leading party in the Upper House, the DPJ, had reaped success in the recent election and the popularity of the ruling LDP was at a nadir. It is also easy to discern Takeo Fukuda's legacy. When he formed his government in 1976, he had also chosen *kyocho to rentai*, or "collaboration and solidarity" as his motto.⁵⁷

The government's declaration that it would consult with the political opposition on important policy issues was, in a way, a victory for parliamentary rule. The parliamentary situation after the Upper House election gave food for thought both for the ruling coalition and the opposition parties. The parties forming the coalition government no longer commanded a majority in the Upper House.

⁵⁶ Jeff Kingston as quoted in Justin Norrie, "Out with the new, in with an old hand," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sep. 22, 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/out-with-the-new-inwith-an-old-hand/2007/09/21/1189881776610.html>

⁵⁷ Uchida Kenzo, "Fukuda Takeo naikaku (Dai 67 dai)" [The Takeo Fukuda cabinet (Japan's 67th)], in Shiratori Rei, ed., *Nihon no naikaku* (III) [Japanese cabinets, Vol. 3] (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 1981), p. 177.

Furthermore, the LDP was no longer the No. 1 party in the Upper House, with the cabinet facing a parliamentary situation that a government had rarely encountered since the LDP was founded in 1955. Over the course of more than half a century, the party had been in power almost without interruption, either by forming a majority government or, occasionally, securing a parliamentary majority by entering into a coalition government. Placing consultation with the opposition parties on the top of the list of priorities demonstrated a change of mood in the ruling LDP, evincing the fact that the party found itself in a situation that its leadership was not accustomed to and had little experience in handling.

Policy Pledges on the Key Political Issues

The remaining pledges of the Fukuda cabinet dealt with policy focused on issues forming the centerpiece of the political debate and thus constituting the focus of the political power game in the Diet. Two were related to domestic affairs, two to foreign policy. On domestic affairs, the government promised to solve the problem of missing pension records, and, second, to promote structural reforms in line with regional circumstances, formulating individual prescriptions for handling the various problems pertaining to disparities. In foreign policy, the Fukuda cabinet pledged to do its best to continue the support activities being performed by the Maritime Self-Defense Force based on the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law while firmly maintaining the Japan–U.S. alliance and international coordination as the basis of Japan’s foreign policy. A troublesome heritage left to Fukuda was the friction Japan had in its relations with its great security underwriter, the United States. The prime bone of contention was the issue of the prolongation by the Diet of the anti-terrorist law. Japan’s participation in the war on terror was limited but of great symbolic value as a token of Japanese support of the U.S. role in world politics but faced stiff opposition in the Upper House. Secondly, it pledged to proceed with active diplomacy for Asia, further strengthening Japan’s cooperation with the international community aimed at achieving the denuclearization of North

Korea, and devoting itself wholeheartedly to solving the abduction issue promptly.⁵⁸

To make structural reform a top priority served to show that Fukuda wanted to steer the LDP on to the reform track that had been championed by former Prime Minister Koizumi and which had helped him prevail despite keenly felt resistance from the bosses of the party. Ever since he had launched “reform” as his rallying call in the 2001 LDP presidential election, Koizumi’s efforts had been supported by voters, as revealed by poll after poll and election results. In fresh memory was the so-called postal election in 2005, which had been a choice between reform and anti-reform and in which the LDP secured a landslide victory thanks to Koizumi’s unbending promotion of reform. One of the lessons of the Upper House election in July 2007 was that voters did not favor candidates for high offices who did not appear to be keen on reforms. In 2006, Abe was elected as a politician who was to continue to pursue Koizumi’s reform work and posed as such, probably for the simple reason that, to be electable, any candidate had to demonstrate himself to be an ardent supporter of reform à la Koizumi. As prime minister, however, Abe soon appeared to prioritize other policy areas. He is a deep-seated conservative and an ardent proponent of the need for instituting a change of “the postwar regime”—which did not imply the reform of Japan’s political and economic system that Japanese in general see the need for so much as ending “the post-war solution” to the problem of Japan’s foreign and security policy, with Japan being subordinate to the United States.⁵⁹

Placing the commitment to reform at the top of his policy pledges was a way for Fukuda to counter claims and accusations that would surely be heard. With his elitist background and his elite bureaucrat image and of being solidly immersed in *hoshu honryu*, the conservative mainstream and Japan’s key political artery in the postwar period, Fukuda could easily be taken for a lukewarm reformist. But the outcome in recent elections had shown that anyone with ambitions to be more than a stop-gap premier had to pursue reforms. And among his political

⁵⁸ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, “Statement by the Prime Minister,” Sep. 26, 2007, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hukudaspeech/2007/09/26danwa_e.html

⁵⁹ Edström, *The Success of a Successor*, p. 65.

credentials was that he had been the right-hand man for former Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi.

Fukuda's policy pledges showed that domestic politics took precedence over foreign policy, which contrasted to his predecessor's political agenda. Not even the intractability of the legislation to extend the Maritime Self Defense Forces (MSDF) logistical and refueling support for U.S. vessels involved in antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan counted enough to be ranked as a top priority. Avoiding making it an explicit priority can be seen as a way for the prime minister to open up for collaboration with opposition parties; putting it higher up on his political agenda would only risk aggravating confrontation with the political opposition.

Listing "active Asia diplomacy" as a priority was a subtle signal that Fukuda was intent on modifying Japan's foreign policy in a way that would open up for agreements with the opposition parties over issues that had stalled proceedings in the Diet. At the same time, it signaled that the new prime minister had a personal agenda and was not averse to loosening the grip of the standard LDP mode of running foreign policy; that is with its heavy bias on the United States as the starting point of foreign policy. The legacy of his father's "Fukuda Doctrine" and the peace and friendship treaty with China was easy to discern. No sooner had he taken the reins of power than articles began to appear foreseeing that a "new Fukuda Doctrine" was in the offing. Another aspect of making relations with Asia a foreign policy priority was that it was likely to make Fukuda win the support of Japan's liberal media, who had expressed concern over Japan's souring relations with its neighbours during Koizumi's tenure and who had applauded Abe's efforts to improve relations.⁶⁰ This may prove important, furthermore, since the Japanese media nowadays plays an important role in making or breaking politicians.

⁶⁰ Robert C. Angel, *Japan Considered Podcast*, Vol. 03, No. 33, Sep. 17, 2007, <http://www.japanconsidered.com/Podcasts/Scripts/071102JapanConsideredPodcastTranscript.html>

Pledges and Polls

The flurry of activities initiated by the new man in the Prime Minister's Office seemed to pay off. Or was it rather that those questioned by polling companies were relieved that the hapless Abe had been replaced by a man who radiated stability and trustworthiness? As usual, the media hurried to poll people and the results were reassuring to Fukuda. In a *Yomiuri shimbun* poll conducted on September 25–26, 2007 the approval rate for the new government was put at 57.5 percent, while the disapproval rate stood at half that, at 27.3 percent. What is more, the poll indicated that Fukuda's political pledges won him credence.⁶¹ Another poll by the *Asahi shimbun* gave roughly the same figures: support stood at 53 percent and non-support at 27 percent.⁶²

Asked what tasks the new administration should prioritize, 67 percent of respondents asked by the *Asahi shimbun* cited “the pension issue” as the most important, followed by 55 percent for “diplomatic problems” and 49 percent for “economic disparities.” The *Yomiuri shimbun* reproduced roughly the same result but added as important the problems of the economy, unemployment, and the consumption tax. Since the latter issues were part and parcel of political reform, the evaluation revealed in the poll of Fukuda's political pledges as new prime minister made it clear that the priorities he announced corresponded to the expectations of the Japanese in general. Given the outcome of the Upper House election, this should not be seen as surprising—but in a sense it was. When Abe was prime minister, the Japanese grew used to a premier offering his ideas and visions to the public, regardless of the fact that polls showed that his priorities were only approved of by a minority of the general public. Abe seemed aloof to voter preferences, as revealed in opinion polls and later in the election outcome, and preferred to stick to his personal priorities, even when it caused both him and his party to reflect increasingly badly in opinion polls. When polls indicated that the upcoming Upper House election would spell disaster, it made the LDP

⁶¹ “Fukuda naikaku shijiritsu 57.5%, Yomiuri shimbunsha yoron chosa” [Support rate for the Fukuda cabinet 57.5% according to Yomiuri shimbun poll], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Sep. 27, 2007, http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/fe_070927_01.htm

⁶² “Fukuda naikaku shijiritsu 53%, ‘furui jimin’ 56% honsha yoron chosha” [Opinion poll of our company: Support of the Fukuda cabinet 53%, for ‘old LDP’ 56%], *The Asahi shimbun*, Sep. 27, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/special/070912/TKY200709260416.html>

modify its election platform—but it was too late and only increased the skepticism of voters. When the mishandling of the pension issue became a top priority of voters according to polls, Abe announced that the problem would be solved within a year but the practicality of his promise was openly questioned. He also got it wrong with the tax issue when he indicated that the government was considering raising the consumption tax, a sure way to increase the wrath of voters adamantly opposed to any such move.

The political pledges of the Fukuda government meant a return to the concerns of ordinary Japanese as the lodestar for LDP politics. Abe's nationalistic political agenda was abandoned and seen now as an unfortunate deviation away from the issues that bred confidence among voters. Embracing Abe's rightist ideas left the room open for the DPJ to usurp the centre ground of Japanese politics that the LDP had occupied for decades. In the campaign for the Upper House election, the leading opposition party key slogan was "Putting people's lives first," and enabled the party to excel in what used to be the home turf of the LDP. This paid off handsomely for the opposition party, and caused the LDP to perform poorly in the Upper House election.

The result of the LDP's *de facto* about-face that Fukuda proclaimed in the wake of the Upper House election can be seen in popularity figures for the prime minister. In a poll reported on August 30, only 9.4 percent of those polled said they had confidence in Abe as premier because they pinned their hopes on the cabinet's political reforms, while a mere 2.2 percent found him a strong leader.⁶³ In the *Yomiuri shimbun* poll taken immediately after Fukuda's policy pledges were announced, the new prime minister received a fair result. 50 percent of those polled said that the reason for their support of Fukuda was "the sense of stability in the prime minister." The substantial increase in support for the prime minister must have been reassuring to Fukuda. He was certain to need it in the battles and infighting that could be foreseen to take place in the Diet.

⁶³ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, p. 24.

Personal Histories that Count

The political fight that took place after Fukuda's elevation to the post of prime minister had its roots in the personal history of confrontation between Fukuda and his main rival for power, opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa. Fukuda's experience of policy-making at the highest level was abundant after having been secretary to his father, who was a long-time political leader of the LDP and prime minister for a period, and having served later as the right hand of Prime Ministers Mori and Koizumi. Fukuda had more than enough experience of the cross pressures that the top leadership position entailed. His encounter with Ozawa brought back memories of Japan's modern political history.

In Japan history counts, and when Ozawa faced Fukuda, one saw a clash of two political camps in Japanese politics. Ozawa has a long career in Japanese politics, having been re-elected 13 times. Once, he was a member of the political faction of Kakuei Tanaka (prime minister 1972–74), who became the unbending political enemy of Takeo Fukuda as a result of their bitter fight over the leadership of the LDP at the beginning of the 1970s. Ozawa had been a key power wielder in the LDP and, at the age of 47, had been appointed its secretary-general before leaving the party in 1993. That year, he was instrumental in bringing about the first government since 1955 that did not include the LDP. It was an unlikely eight-party coalition comprising all the parties in the Diet except the LDP and the Japan Communist Party.⁶⁴ Abandoning the LDP was an action that split the party, and the ensuing rivalry between him and his erstwhile friends in the party he left became a source for well-publicized stories fed to reporters.

One of the reasons Abe gave for stepping down was that the opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa had refused to meet him when the prime minister had requested a meeting to discuss legislation to extend the Maritime Self Defense Forces (MSDF) logistical and refueling support for U.S. vessels involved in antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan. Abe's claim was immediately denied by

⁶⁴ J.A.A. Stockwin, *Governing Japan: Divided Politics in a Major Economy*. 3rd ed. (London: Blackwell, 1999), p. 81.

Ozawa.⁶⁵ The exact truth is unclear but Abe's claim makes the Japanese recall another moment in Japan's modern political history also involving Ozawa. On April 1, 2000, Ozawa met the then Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, but their talks did not break the political stalemate prevailing between them. According to Obuchi, discussions did not go well because of Ozawa's uncompromising stance that destroyed trust, and the prime minister subsequently decided to end the coalition between the LDP and Ozawa's Liberal Party.⁶⁶ Later the same day, Obuchi suffered a stroke, fell into a coma, and did not regain consciousness, dying six weeks later. Far from a *cause célèbre*, the meeting was an unfortunate moment for the LDP but, above all, for Ozawa whose intransigence in the meeting with Obuchi continues to tarnish his reputation. It contributed to cementing his reputation as "the destroyer" of Japanese politics; a nickname earned by his actions in making and breaking political parties, and which was often alluded to in comments over events and developments in Japanese politics after the Upper House election in July 2007.

To a large extent, at the beginning of the campaign for the Upper House election and its outcome, Ichiro Ozawa regained his position as the star actor of Japanese politics. Being the star of Japanese politics is not bad as a qualification for securing political gains in a political system that has been characterized as a case of "theatre," with the key part in recent years enacted by Koizumi, another sterling performer of the political stage whose political style was dubbed "theatre politics" by critics and adherents alike.⁶⁷ While Ozawa's advances toward securing a grip on power for the DPJ cannot be denied, the actions taken by him after the Upper House election brought back memories of his activities in the past when he was known to have been busy making and breaking political parties. His capability as a political strategist cannot be doubted but, likewise, his setbacks throughout his political career can no less be denied.

⁶⁵ "Japan: Abe resignation," *International Herald Tribune*, Sep. 13, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/09/13/news/140xan-Aberesignation.php>

⁶⁶ Takenaka Harukata, *Shusho shihai: Nihon seiji no hembo* [Prime ministerial control: Change in Japanese politics] (Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 2006), pp. 126f.

⁶⁷ Uchiyama Yu, *Koizumi seiken: "Patosu no shusho" wa nani o kawaeta no ka* [The Koizumi government: What did "the patos premier" change?] (Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 2007), p. iii.

Parliament (In)Action

The political strategies of the front figures of Japan's two political camps, Yasuo Fukuda and Ichiro Ozawa, clashed right from the start. With Abe eliminated, Ozawa faced an opponent whose qualifications as a political mastermind were equally supreme. Fukuda declared his interest in cooperating with the political opposition, but Ozawa's strategy of confrontation resulted in a duel between the two sides. One move in the election campaign for the Upper House was Ozawa's attack on the coalition government and his announcement that he would not only step down as party leader but even leave politics if his party did not win. His declaration was almost Koizumian in its dedication and paid off handsomely. His "now or never" attitude won credence among voters and contributed to handing the DPJ victory in the election. After his party's victory in the election, Ozawa saw no reason to depart from the confrontationist track but announced that the DPJ was set for an all-out confrontation in the Diet with the ruling coalition. The ultimate goal for Ozawa and his party after the election was to force an early general election by using the momentum created by the party's victory in the July election.

The confrontationist stance of the DPJ and Ozawa was not reciprocated by the prime minister. Fukuda's strategy in dealing with the post-election situation in the Diet and the severely limited political clout of the LDP after the election was to pursue a conciliatory approach, declaring his sincere interest in cooperating with the political opposition. He made his stance abundantly clear from the start when announcing his political pledges. In his first policy speech as prime minister, he stressed his intention to work in consultation with the opposition. His speech was delivered only three weeks after his predecessor had presented his second and final policy speech. Abe's abrupt disappearance only days after he addressed the Diet met with criticism. Many denounced his

behavior as immature and irresponsible.⁶⁸ Worse was that Abe's almost unprecedented behavior could be taken as rude and impolite to the Diet and unworthy of a prime minister. This may be one reason why Fukuda stressed that he was going to concentrate on handling Diet matters, but it was also a natural statement given the situation he found himself in: he had to deal with the LDP's political opponents who had declared their will to wreck the coalition government.

Fukuda's conciliatory tone toward the political opposition in the Diet in his first and so-far most important political declaration indicated his strategy of non-confrontation—a clear contrast to the heritage left by his predecessor, who used to hammer in his displeasure with political foes and opponents. But Abe's custom of indulging in high-profile statements had failed to garner success for his party, neither in public opinion nor at the ballot-box, but instead placed the LDP in the unusual situation of lacking the support in the Diet needed to obtain parliamentary approval of its policies and bills. The convenient pre-election parliamentary backing that the ruling coalition enjoyed as a result of the postal election of 2005 was a luxury no longer afforded to Fukuda. His appeasing stance was not surprising given the new political landscape that the outcome of the Upper House election created, but nonetheless, with the Upper House in the hands of the political opposition, Fukuda and his ruling party were placed in an unfamiliar situation.

Ever since it was formed in 1955, the LDP has been able to secure a convenient parliamentary backing in both the Upper and Lower Houses. When election outcomes did not give the party enough seats to command a majority, it persuaded independents to join the party and/or formed a coalition government with some minor party or parties. This parliamentary strategy had worked to the advantage of the LDP and had enabled it to keep its position as the ruling party ever since it was formed, with only a brief gap in the 1990s. But even in 1993, when Ozawa's skillful maneuvers enabled the political opposition to unseat the LDP for the first time in 38 years, the party demonstrated skillful political

⁶⁸ Yoshino Takashi, "'Lost decade' of politics must not be repeated," *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 15, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200711150065.html>

management, which brought it back into the government after only eleven months in political opposition and capturing the post of prime minister after two years. Contrary to what was expected when the LDP was unseated at that time, the party succeeded in eliminating its erstwhile political rival, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), to an extent that brought the LDP's erstwhile leading political foe to the verge of extinction.

The reason for the stalemate that reigned in the Diet after the July election was the clash of the ruling coalition and the political opposition. Already at the start of the 168th session, the DPJ declared its intention to initiate an uncompromising offensive in the Diet and pursued its confrontationist strategy energetically.⁶⁹ Thus, throughout the session, parliamentary work got stuck in the quagmire of a few conflict issues raised to prominence by the opposition leader, who singled them out as the crowbar with which he intended to break up the LDP's power position. The strategy followed by the opposition consisted of relentless opposition that would force the prime minister to dissolve the Lower House and call a snap election. After its landslide victory in the Upper House election, prospects seemed conducive to robbing the coalition parties of the majority also in the Lower House.

Ozawa in Action

After the Upper House election in July, Ozawa and his party launched an all-out battle in the Diet, taking on the prime minister in the hope that he would be able to unseat the LDP. The starting-point for the success of his plans seemed promising with a new prime minister and the coalition parties smarting from their defeat in the Upper House election. The opposition leader's energetic actions made headlines, as did his eminent ability to get things going, and he seemed to be able to make his party come closer to gaining the upper hand in Japanese politics. Damaging to Ozawa, however, was that despite four decades of political work and recognized qualifications as an eminent political strategist, he momentarily lost control and acted in a way that may have spoilt his and his

⁶⁹ "DPJ to go on attack over MSDF fuel," *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, Sep. 30, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070930TDY03002.htm>

party's chances of getting into government. What seemed like a happening more suited to a museum of modern art than a political performance at a national level made headlines at the beginning of November. The main actors in the drama were Ozawa and Fukuda. What really took place is anybody's guess but the contours are now known, or, at least, the contours of what are thought to have taken place. The real story is left for historians of Modern Japan to unearth.

On October 30 and November 2, Prime Minister Fukuda held talks with Ozawa and sought the opposition leader's cooperation in enacting a new law to allow continuation of the MSDF's refueling operation in the Indian Ocean. At their first meeting Ozawa refused to accept this proposal. When it was revealed that the possibility of the DPJ forming a grand coalition with the LDP had been broached, it was news that rocked Japanese politics. Afterwards, Ozawa stated publicly that promises made by Fukuda during the talks led Ozawa to believe that "there would be value in beginning policy discussions because Japan's national security policy would be fundamentally altered." The concessions offered by the prime minister were so fundamental according to the opposition leader that he found reason to seek the approval of the other leaders of the DPJ. Others in the DPJ leadership were not convinced of the advantages and rejected the idea. At a press conference Ozawa asserted that he saw rejection as a vote of no confidence in his leadership.⁷⁰ Visibly dissatisfied at the rejection and having given vent to his displeasure with his own party and discounting its prospects of winning the next general election, Ozawa announced his resignation as party president. Turmoil broke out in the DPJ. At the urging of the other leaders of the DPJ, three days later Ozawa agreed to continue as president of the party.

Already after the first meeting between Fukuda and Ozawa, rumors spread that the idea of a "grand coalition" had been brought up as a subject of discussion. The prime minister commented on the rumor to journalists the following day but his comment failed to shed more light on the matter. The observation made by Secretary General Kazuo Kitagawa of the DPJ pointed to the problem: "Is it

⁷⁰ "Ozawa abruptly announces resignation," *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 5, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200711050058.html>

about a coalition formed by parties fighting each other in elections? It's not easy with the single-seat constituency system.”⁷¹ But the idea met approval from the LDP and its faction leaders. From the opposition, resistance was equally noticeable. Disregarding whether the notion of a “grand coalition” was used in the Fukuda–Ozawa talks, Ozawa went to his party with the proposal to enter into, or, rather, continue discussions with the LDP. After a heated discussion among the DPJ leadership, Ozawa's proposal was rejected. The ensuing debate was lively both in the parties and outside the circle of politicians. A prominent voice was that of Jiro Yamaguchi, a political science professor, noted for his writings on party politics and political reform. He found the idea of a grand coalition “complete nonsense” because “The public supported the DPJ [in the Upper House election], hoping for a change in government. A grand coalition would go completely against their will.”⁷²

Yamaguchi's claim is, of course, nonsensical. It would be natural for someone affiliated with the political opposition to put forward such a view since it has legitimate reasons to adhere to this view, but Yamaguchi is a professor of political science and thus well versed in parliamentary rules. Certainly, the electorate handed the political opposition the majority in the Upper House on July 29, but the distribution of seats among parties in the Lower House based on the outcome of the election in 2005 gives the ruling coalition the upper hand. The distribution of seats in the Lower House is an equally legitimate expression of the will of the people. And since §59 of the Japanese Constitution gives the Lower House far more weight than the Upper House—a situation prevailing in most bicameral parliaments—it must be said to play according to parliamentary rule if a decision by the Diet is taken according to the rule prescribed by the constitution. This can be done and has been done before, for example when the government chose to override its Upper House rejection with a two-thirds majority vote in the Lower House resorting to a provision in the Constitution

⁷¹ “Shusho ‘wadai narazu’-‘daireritsus’ okusoku” [Prime minister: “No topic”-speculations about “grand coalition”], *Nikkei.net*, Oct. 31, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20071031AT3S3100G31102007.html>

⁷² Quoted in Masami Ito, “‘07 political storm really the calm before ‘08? Pundits wonder if Fukuda can keep election on back burner under DPJ pressure,” *The Japan Times*, Jan. 1, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080101ofi.html>

concerning override vote [*saigiketsu*]. Nevertheless, this way of solving the problem of obtaining parliamentary approval of the government's politics has been used with extreme caution. When the Diet took the decision on the anti-terrorism law on January 11, 2008, the previous occasion of a decision having been taken by override vote was as far back as in 1951, that is, 57 years ago.⁷³ The lack of protests—apart from the outbursts of anger from representatives of the political opposition, indicates that in general the Japanese public accepted the decision since it had been taken fully in accordance with the prescriptions of the constitution.⁷⁴

The above description both hides and hints at the complications of the Fukuda–Ozawa tête-a-tête, which caused wide-spread and intensive debate in Japan. The view of Harukata Takenaka, one of Japan's leading political commentators, is worth quoting at some length:

Why did Fukuda make this suggestion, and why did Ozawa respond favorably? From the prime minister's standpoint, this was a natural idea given the current state of affairs in the Diet. As noted above, the election in July for the upper house left the ruling coalition in the minority, and without the DPJ's cooperation it is now almost impossible for the government to get its bills enacted. The prime minister presumably thought that forming a grand coalition would facilitate the process of ironing out the policy differences between the LDP and DPJ and drafting mutually acceptable legislation.

Ozawa, meanwhile, has explained that he responded favorably because he believed that by joining the cabinet and showing its ability to participate in

⁷³ “57 nemburi Shuin saigiketsu” [Upper House override vote after 57 years], *The Asahi shimbun*, January 12, 2007.

⁷⁴ One reason for Prime Minister Fukuda to tread carefully was the legacy of an incident in Japan's modern history, when another prime minister solved the problem of a Diet unwilling to take a decision he wanted passed. In 1960, the grandfather of Fukuda's predecessor as prime minister, Nobusuke Kishi, was premier and to effectuate a decision to ratify the revised security treaty with the United States, which met tough resistance in the Diet, he “called police into the Diet to remove Socialist MPs and their male secretaries... and, then, late at night with only Liberal Democratic members present and with many of them unaware of what was planned, held two votes in quick succession. The first to extend the Session and the second to ratify the Treaty.” See Stockwin, *Governing Japan*, p. 52.

running the government, the DPJ could more readily persuade the electorate to vote it into power in the future.

The ostensible reasons for the two leaders' moves are doubtless as given above, but it seems likely that additional considerations were in play. The key is the connection between formation of a grand coalition and the issue of the electoral system. As I noted above, the 1994 reform created a system under which the majority of lower house members are elected from single-member districts; this acts as a hurdle to the formation of a coalition between the two top parties, the LDP and the DPJ, since they are direct rivals for votes at the district level. It thus seems plausible that the grand coalition proposal was accompanied by consideration of revising the electoral system—specifically, a return to something like the pre-1994 system of “medium-sized” districts, each electing multiple members (generally three to five under the previous system).⁷⁵

When rumors spread that the idea of a “grand coalition” had been discussed at the Fukuda–Ozawa meeting, a heated debate broke out about who had brought up the idea. The two party leaders pursued a part of their discussions with no others present and no notes were taken.⁷⁶ This made it unclear—if it ever came up, that is—who first put forward the controversial idea. At first, it was reported that it was the prime minister who had launched the idea.⁷⁷ In an early report, the *Yomiuri shimbun* floated the news that it was Ozawa.⁷⁸ He denied that he was the initiator and claimed that such reports “were defamatory and slanderous, and intended to eliminate me politically and deal a fatal blow to the DPJ’s

⁷⁵ Takenaka Harukata, “Fukuda’s Rise and the Return to the Old LDP,” *Japan Echo*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (December 2007), p. 14.

⁷⁶ “Futsuka nidome no toshukaidan, shusho to Ozawa daihyo” [Second party leaders talk between the prime minister and President Ozawa on Nov. 2], *Nikkei net*, Nov. 2, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20071101AT3S0102W01112007.html>; “Toshukaidan, zurera ninshiki ‘goinaki hanashiai’ ni owaru” [Party leader talks with differing perceptions end in ‘discussions with no agreement’], *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 5, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/1105/TKY200711050321.html>

⁷⁷ Masami Ito, “DPJ nixes Fukuda’s coalition offer to Ozawa; But opposition chief open to the MSDF bill,” *The Japan Times*, Nov. 3, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/nn20071103a1.html>

⁷⁸ “Ozawa raised coalition idea, not Fukuda,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Nov. 4, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071104TDY01306.htm>

image. I'm furious, and object very strongly to these reports."⁷⁹ One of the targets of Ozawa's anger was the *Yomiuri shimbun* and its chairman and editor-in-chief, Tsuneo Watanabe, who continued two months later to maintain the story that it was Ozawa who had come up with the idea.⁸⁰ According to DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama, Watanabe had brought up the idea of the grand coalition in a debate with him in August. Hatoyama explained that he had dismissed the idea since it would mean that the DPJ would not be able to fight the LDP at elections.⁸¹ This view was also held by some leading figures in the LDP like Sadakazu Tanigaki, who argued that one had to proceed cautiously since it would blur the boundaries between candidates.⁸²

To judge the suggestion that the ruling LDP and the opposition DPJ should form a grand coalition as "a natural idea" in the way Takenaka does, seems a bit farfetched. The argument for this assertion is that to put forward the idea of a grand coalition would have been an easy solution to the tricky problem the government faced in getting its bills accepted by the Upper House, with the political opposition intent on wrecking the ruling coalition's policies. Forming a coalition with the largest opposition party would have obviated such a scenario. Opponents pointed to the idea of the ruling party joining hands with the opposition as a way of making a mockery of the very idea of democracy and in abject opposition to the verdict of voters over the political situation as expressed in the most recent general election, the Upper House election on July 29, 2007.

If it was Fukuda who had fathered the idea of a grand coalition, it can be seen as ostensibly offering Ozawa a power sharing arrangement. It was claimed afterwards that Fukuda and Ozawa had discussed ministerial posts and that

⁷⁹ "Ozawa slams 'groundless' reports," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Nov. 5, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071105TDY01305.htm>

⁸⁰ "Watanabe Yomiuri kaicho ga uchimaku 'daireritsushu kozo, Ozawa shi kara apurochi'" [Yomiuri chairman Watanabe: "The grand coalition idea Ozawa's approach"], *Nikkei.net*, Dec. 22, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/main/20071222AT3S2200G22122007.html>

⁸¹ "Minshu-Hatoyama Yukio kanjicho 'daireritsushu kozo, hachigatsu ni kiita'" [DPJ Yukio Hatoyama: "I heard of the grand coalition plan in August"], *Nikkei net*, Nov. 8, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20071108AT3S0800Co8112007.html>

⁸² "Tanigaki shi, daireritsushu ni shincho 'seikai hencho no kakugo ga iru'" [Mr. Tanigaki skeptical to grand coalition: "Change of perception of political world is needed"], *Nikkei net*, Nov. 7, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20071107AT3S0601To6112007.html>

Ozawa was to become deputy prime minister.⁸³ More than about demonstrating to the public that his party was able to govern, as Takanaka maintains, Ozawa claims that the reason why he brought back to his party the idea of collaborating with the government was to demonstrate to the public that his party was able to govern. According to him, what he was about to achieve through the offer extended to him by the prime minister was a total makeover of Japan's foreign policy, something that Ozawa had worked for for a long time. It was a bait that the opposition leader could not resist.

Whether the idea of a grand coalition had come up or not in the Fukuda–Ozawa talks, and whether it was Ozawa or Fukuda who had fathered the idea, it is clear that Ozawa did not recollect a comment once made by former Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita about the coalition government that the leading opposition party formed with the LDP in the mid 1990s with the then socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. The former LDP president and prime minister commented that “we have swallowed the Socialists and are now digesting them.” The positive reception given to the idea of a grand coalition that LDP leaders professed might indicate that it was really Fukuda who was behind it, as Ozawa claimed, or, if Ozawa was the initiator, that LDP leaders discerned positive prospects for their party should the coalition materialize.

But what was later said to have been a proposal of a grand coalition by Fukuda may have been a matter of speculation rather than anything more concrete. It should be noted that when the prime minister answered questions from the press about his meetings with Ozawa, his formulation indicated in no way that Fukuda and Ozawa had held very far-reaching discussions. Fukuda told the press, “I told him [Ozawa] it would also be good to create a new framework to overcome the situation in the current Diet.”⁸⁴ The talk of a grand coalition having been launched seems more far-reaching than proposing “a new framework” and might have been produced by bystanders with a vested interest

⁸³ “Watanabe Yomiuri kaicho ga uchimaku ‘daireritsu kozo, Ozawa shi kara apurochi’”.

⁸⁴ Quoted in, inter alia, “Fukuda proposes formation of grand coalition to Ozawa, DPJ rejects,” *Kyodo News*, Nov. 2, 2007, <http://home.kyodo.co.jp/modules/fstStory/index.php?storyid=346075>

in putting forward this idea, as Robert C. Angel argued in an early comment.⁸⁵ Still, whatever took place during the discussion between the two politicians, the notion of a “grand coalition” took root and became a self-playing piano.

Ozawa Playing for High Stakes

Worse still than the possibility that Ozawa would leave the party, and which served to further incur the ire of DPJ party members, was his derogatory comment about the party: “In various aspects, we are lacking in ability and gaining victory in the next Lower House election will be extremely difficult.”⁸⁶ Ozawa’s way of playing down the prospects of his party prevailing over the LDP in the next general election might be seen as a valid point of view and a stroke of realism considering the demonstrated ability of the LDP to mobilize voters (notwithstanding the exception of the July 29 Upper House election) had it not been for the reason for his pessimism—the “lack of ability” that he discerned in his party. It is easy to understand that it was not easy for the DPJ leadership and the party’s rank and file to put its house back in order, since “the lack of ability” view came to the fore just after the DPJ under its president Ozawa had launched an all out fight with the coalition government and party members were still rejoicing over their party’s victory in the Upper House election, a victory that the party had gained not least thanks to its efficient election strategy.

The damage done to the DPJ by Ozawa’s activities is easily pinpointed. His demeaning comments about his party’s ability caused considerable damage to the party’s unity. The hope and satisfaction felt by party members after the resounding victory in the July election soon tuned to gloom. What compounded the dismay was the weakness of the party, which was laid bare when others in the DPJ leadership humiliated themselves and begged Ozawa to remain as party president despite his derogatory view about his party. This action graphically demonstrated that the DPJ leadership was at a loss without Ozawa’s strong

⁸⁵ Robert C. Angel, *Japan Considered Podcast*, Vol. 03, No. 40, Nov. 9, 2007, <http://www.japanconsidered.com/Podcasts/Scripts/071109JapanConsideredPodcastTranscript.html>

⁸⁶ “Ozawa abruptly announces resignation,” *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 5, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200711050058.html>

leadership. The lack of self-confidence among the leadership fueled speculation that Ozawa could leave the party, taking with him so many MPs that the party would lose its majority in the Upper House, turning the DPJ into a lame duck with poor prospects of winning the Lower House election. The *Yomiuri shimbun* quoted an Ozawa aide who told the newspaper that they “secretly counted those who would follow [Ozawa] and found only 14 in the upper house that would surely do so,” and the journalist speculated that the smaller-than-expected figure prompted Ozawa to withdraw his resignation.⁸⁷

That Ozawa had proceeded with negotiations with the LDP over entering into collaboration, maybe even forming a coalition, baffled the DPJ’s rank and file, causing distrust and suspicion toward him to spread in the party. The autocratic leadership style once again demonstrated by Ozawa was a bitter pill to swallow for those who represented the party. Party members found it hard to go along with discarding vital policies that they had fought hard for during the election campaign and now were expected to skip just on the whim of the party president. His reportedly far-reaching discussions with the prime minister nullified much of the credibility that the party and its representatives had built up over the years and which had led to the resounding victory in the Upper House election. The *Asahi shimbun* editorialized: “What he has done verges on betraying the trust of those who voted for Minshuto [the DPJ] in the last election.”⁸⁸ No wonder another newspaper, the *Yomiuri shimbun*,² reported that Ozawa’s influence in the party was declining and that it would likely take some time to eradicate the negative sentiment in the party.⁸⁹

Making Bad Worse

Ozawa’s comments when he made a comeback after having been away a few days added to the damage that he had caused his party by his comment on its abilities. On November 6, DPJ Secretary-General Yukio Hatoyama met with

⁸⁷ “DPJ tried to preserve Ozawa’s dignity,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Nov. 8, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071108TDY03302.htm>.

⁸⁸ “Ozawa’s flip-flop” (editorial), *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 8, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200711080080.html>

⁸⁹ “DPJ tried to preserve Ozawa’s dignity.”

the press and announced that Ozawa was not going to retire. He quoted Ozawa as saying: "This may seem really embarrassing, but I understand how my party members feel, and I want to take another shot."⁹⁰ The following day Ozawa held a press conference and retracted his derogatory comment about his party but did so in a circumscribed way that showed that he was not altogether willing to admit his blunder: "If my phrasing and choice of words were too strong, I'd like to withdraw them."⁹¹ Ozawa's background as perhaps the foremost strategist among Japanese politicians and one of the few visionaries of Japanese politics and with a political career spanning four decades make it surprising that he acted in the way he did. After the Upper House election, the DPJ was regarded as being the closest it had ever been to achieving a change in political power, but Ozawa's discussions with the prime minister and its aftermath made the likelihood of this happening a distant prospect.

The reason for what turned out to be calamitous behavior on the part of Ozawa was probably quite straightforward. He was overworked, with a heavy burden during the DPJ campaign for the Upper House election. When the election was over he disappeared for a time, explaining when he reappeared that he had been totally exhausted and had had to take a break. Since the flurry of activities increased and the power position of his party had improved significantly as a result of the election outcome, pressure on him did not decrease after the election. It is likely that his workload was the reason why he acted in such a manner, and then, acting too much in a rush when trying to repair the damage. This was also his own explanation for why he had acted in a way that "created misunderstandings."⁹² For all his eminence, Ozawa acted in a way that was "too abrupt and bizarre," to quote an editorial in *The Japan Times*.⁹³ Once again, Ozawa had been at his worst and best, depending on one's outlook, in making

⁹⁰ "Ozawa to remain as Minshuto president," *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 7, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200711060374.html>

⁹¹ "Coalition talks started before Fukuda's rule," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Nov. 8, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071108TDY01306.htm>

⁹² Setsuko Kamiya and Masami Ito, "Ozawa eats humble pie, puts blame on fatigue," *The Japan Times*, Nov. 8, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20071108a1.html>

⁹³ "Bizarre offer to quit," *The Japan Times*, Nov. 7, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ed20071107a1.html>

things move or get stuck. His actions lay bare what is his Achilles tendon: his autocratic bulldozer style as a political leader which has earned him the nickname of “destroyer” for making and breaking political parties in the past. At the press conference he held after his brief retreat, he referred to his one-and-a-half year old promise to his party that he had to change his political style as leader of the DPJ and promise that he would make his utmost to bring about a change of government. It must have been painfully obvious to members of his party that, having caused considerable damage to his party, Ozawa’s autocratic leadership style had not changed but was in full sway. He explained that in preparation for the upcoming Lower House election, he would set up an election headquarters together with three other DPJ leaders, Kan, Hatoyama, and Koshiishi. It was a first step toward making a restart according to Ozawa, but it was also obvious that he still saw himself as the key person in his party since he did not announce any measure that would involve party members.⁹⁴

A Blessing in Disguise—for Fukuda

Ozawa’s activities during those few days at the beginning of November were a blessing in disguise for Prime Minister Fukuda and the ruling coalition. Ozawa’s moment of unbalance changed the political momentum and damaged the hope harbored by the leading opposition party of wrecking the government by using the divisive issue during the session of the Diet: the government’s proposal to enact a new law to allow continuation of the MSDF’s refueling operation in the Indian Ocean. Whatever the outcome, Fukuda would come out of it on top. If the DPJ gave in and allowed the antiterrorism law to be enacted, he would be seen as the stable hand on the wheel of the state; if the opposition continued its resistance and the law had to be taken by an override vote, he would be seen as a snubbed leader who had done his utmost to muddle through. No wonder that Ozawa’s unexpected blunder energized the ruling coalition

⁹⁴ “Watakushi ni totte saigo no issen’ Ozawa daihyo no jiiriyu zembun” [Full text of President Ozawa’s reasons for withdrawing his intention to resign: “For me it’s the last battle”], *The Asahi shimbun*, Nov. 7, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/special/071102/TKY200711070289.html>

parties, and that despair among LDP members over the prospects of the Lower House election vanished.

A few days after the Ozawa-induced commotion that threw the DPJ into confusion and helped the LDP regain its fighting spirit, LDP Secretary-General Bunmei Ibuki said that the coalition parties might call for a snap election if the opposition continued to block passage of the law.⁹⁵ And, shortly, Ibuki was back again with a message that would have pleased the opposition parties before Ozawa's pirouettes, but was now more disturbing when he said on TV news: "If the Democratic Party of Japan fails to come to a conclusion over the bill [by prolonging debate on the bill in the upper house], it can't be denied that Prime Minister Fukuda would consider it tantamount to the bill being voted down."⁹⁶ The prime minister raised the stakes during an official visit to the United States. In his meeting on November 16 with President George W. Bush, the Japanese prime minister promised to do his utmost to have the bill passed to allow Japan to resume its refueling mission in the Indian Ocean in support of U.S.-led antiterrorism operations in and around Afghanistan.⁹⁷

If not earlier, Fukuda's commitment was a point of no return. He probably meant it to be taken that way and that he was not going to throw in the towel in the parliamentary battle with the DPJ but use the power position the coalition government enjoyed in the Lower House. His message was the same as the then defense minister, Yuriko Koike, had delivered to her counterpart on a visit to the United States during the last days of the Abe cabinet.⁹⁸ The difference was that it was not the prime minister who conveyed his message directly to the president. The confidence that Fukuda demonstrated in his meeting with

⁹⁵ "Japan's LDP May Call for Snap Election, Ibuki Says," *Bloomberg*, Nov. 11, 2007, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601101&sid=aYmuwlEhU9Co>; "Japan's ruling party threatens snap election," *AFP*, Nov. 11, 2007, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20071111/wl_asia_afp/japanpoliticsvote_071111074937

⁹⁶ "Ibuki: Lower house dissolution possible," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Nov. 13, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071113TDY03104.htm>

⁹⁷ Fukuda kantei, "Fukuda sori no ugoki, Beikoku homon" [Prime Minister Fukuda's activities, Visit to the United States], <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hukudaphoto/2007/11/15usa.html>

⁹⁸ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, p. 15.

President Bush was based on the fact that Ozawa's moment of unbalance made the opposition lose the support of public opinion. The prime minister had the two-thirds majority needed in the Lower House and the political opposition encountered skepticism in public opinion due to Ozawa's antics, which made the resistance of the political opposition to the refueling bill of no avail. From now on, the passage of the law was just a question of time.

After the Lower House took the decision on January 11 to enact the antiterrorism law—a decision that was taken by the Lower House with more than a two-thirds majority and thus equal to a decision by the Diet—Prime Minister Fukuda was humble. He noted that the decision was exceptional [*reigaiteki*] but “could not be avoided considering the parliamentary situation.”⁹⁹ In the Upper House, it was rejected by a measure of 133 against and 106 for, but in the Lower House the coalition bill enjoyed a solid support and was approved of with 340 in favor and only 133 against; that is exceeding with a wide margin the 316 votes that constitute a two-thirds majority. In parliamentary terms, there is no doubt of the legitimacy of the new law paving the way for the SSDF to resume refueling activities in the Indian Ocean in support of U.S.-led antiterrorism operations in and near Afghanistan—such being the stated purpose of the legislation.

Despite that it is the way the constitution stipulates how to solve a parliamentary situation with the Upper and Lower Houses taking conflicting decisions, the choice was an excruciating one for the government and taken first after the parliamentary session had been prolonged twice. The shrill voices from the political opposition notwithstanding, the decision taken by the Diet was legitimate—which is one reason why popular resistance was muted and largely absent when the decision was finally taken by the Diet.

The Snap Election Option

Considering the blow that the Upper House election constituted for the LDP and the New Komeito, dissolution of the Lower House and a snap election was an attractive option for the political opposition. From the standpoint of the

⁹⁹ “57 nemburi Shuin saigiketsu.”

political opposition with its resounding victory in the Upper House election, dissolution of the Lower House and a call for a snap election was a reasonable way to solve the parliamentary stalemate and something that the DPJ supported. There were certainly precedents: in Japan, almost all Lower House elections have taken place before the full four year term of office has passed. The prerogative to dissolve the Lower House and call an election is invested in the prime minister and he has a free hand to do so whenever he finds that an election would be beneficial to him and his party (unlike the Lower House, the Upper House cannot be dissolved). With the parliamentary situation after the July 29 election, many argued that it was not unreasonable to expect the prime minister to declare a snap election if the work of the Diet became stuck. The likelihood of this seemed great when reading Japanese newspapers and media, or listening to representatives of the political opposition, given that the political opposition commanded the majority of seats in the Upper House. It was made even more clearly by the political opposition's declaration of its intention to do whatever needed to stall proceedings in the Diet in order to force the prime minister to call an early election before the four-year term of Lower House members ends in September 2009.

The snap election was a topic that the leaders of the opposition liked to bring up and the necessity of an early Lower House election was forcefully made by Ichiro Ozawa, the party leader of the largest opposition party. But given the overwhelming majority that the coalition government had in the Lower House, there was no need for the prime minister to act in haste. Why dissolve the Lower House when his majority in the Lower House is of historic proportions? Still, the new parliamentary situation with the coalition government in an awkward situation made even prominent representatives of the LDP discuss in earnest the option of a snap election.

The question was why Fukuda, who as prime minister is the only one who can dissolve the Lower House and call for a snap election, should consider using this as a way out of the political deadlock. After all, the Japanese Constitution is very clear in giving the Lower House the upper hand over the Upper House. The coalition government commands a solid majority in the important Lower

House as a result of the landslide victory in the “postal election” of 2005, riding on the coattail of the popular prime minister at the time, Jun’ichiro Koizumi. In fact, the majority that the coalition government has is larger than the two-thirds needed to force through decisions in the Diet. If the government so chose, it could make the Diet take whatever decision by using its solid majority in the Lower House, and the Upper House controlled by the political opposition could do no more than see its objections and rejections dismissed.

With the powerful card of solid parliamentary backing up his sleeve, Fukuda could choose to try to reach an agreement in the Diet with the opposition parties. Playing bulldozer risked worsening the antagonistic anti-governmental feeling in sway in the opposition parties in the Diet and turn public opinion against the LDP even more so than before. Calling a snap election is a last resort and was treated accordingly as such by Fukuda. After all, the parties forming the government suffered a demeaning defeat in the election in July and public opinion was solidly negative to the governmental bills that the Fukuda government was to put forward for parliamentary approval. No one knew better than Fukuda the damage that would be caused to the image of the government and the prospects for the coalition government parties of winning the next election by sturdy intransigence and a demonstrated lack of interest in reaching consensus. There were good reasons for the prime minister to push his accommodating strategy to the limit.

Fukuda in the Polls

Polls were less frantic when Fukuda came to power, compared to the Abe period when the poll “business” thrived. For a start, support of the new premier as reported in opinion polls was fair but not excellent; this was likely a reflection of relief that the hapless Abe had left and that there was a new successor deemed as competent and who effused a sense of stability in a domestic political system that was otherwise volatile. In the *Yomiuri shimbun* poll conducted on September 25–26 quoted above, the approval rate for the new government was 57.5 percent, while the disapproval rate stood at half that, at 27.3 percent. In another poll conducted at the same time by the *Mainichi shimbun*, the support rating for Fukuda’s government stood at 57 percent, the fifth highest inaugural

rating for a premier since the newspaper began carrying out the surveys in 1949.¹⁰⁰ The increase in support for the government compared to the final days of the Abe cabinet was striking and can be interpreted as a consequence of the increased trust in the prime minister that came with Fukuda's appointment, since his cabinet lineup was almost identical to that of the reshuffled Abe government. But it could be seen to reflect the standard "welcome" that a new prime minister is greeted with. The historically high support rates verified that Fukuda commanded comparatively strong support.

In a poll taken by the *Yomiuri shimbun* two weeks later, support of the government had increased to 59 percent, the fourth highest figure since the newspaper began its interviews survey in 1978.¹⁰¹ Impressive as support was, one figure should have been a cause for concern, since it referred to the fact that Fukuda's predecessor Abe had garnered the third highest figure for support ever recorded when he started as prime minister; and yet, when he left, his popularity figure was equally impressive but for the opposite reason, since his support ratings had dwindled to a record low.

In a development that must have been worrying not only for the ruling coalition but also for Fukuda, the approval rating of the government began to drop a few weeks after his appointment. In an apparent parallel to the initial phase of the Abe cabinet, the drop in approval rates set in unexpectedly quickly. As had been the case with Abe, the honeymoon period supposedly bestowed upon a new premier was swiftly gone. The difference was that the drop set in even more swiftly for the Fukuda cabinet than for its predecessor. While an *Asahi shimbun* poll in mid-October resulted in a support rating of a quite respectable 47 percent for the cabinet¹⁰² and another poll presented by the same newspaper at the beginning of November showed a minor drop in support to 45 percent,¹⁰³ polls

¹⁰⁰ "Support rating for Fukuda Cabinet stands at 57 percent," *Mainichi Daily News*, Sep. 27, 2007, http://www.hdrjapan.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=360

¹⁰¹ "Fukuda Cabinet's approval rating at 59%," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Oct. 10, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071010TDY01306.htm>

¹⁰² "Poll: Support for Fukuda Cabinet slides to 47%," *The Asahi shimbun*, Oct. 16, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200710160114.html>

¹⁰³ "Cabinet approval rating falls to 45%: Asahi," *Associated Press*, Nov. 4, 2007, http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8SN4B900&show_article=1&catnum=0

reported in mid-December must have been disturbing. In a *Kyodo News* poll, the support rate of the government was 35.3 percent, down 11.7 percent compared to the result seen a month before in another poll by the same company. Non-support had meanwhile skyrocketed to 47.6 percent.¹⁰⁴ It was the first survey that showed the percentage of people who disapproved of the Fukuda cabinet exceeding the percentage supporting it. The figures in an *Asahi shimbun* poll taken some weeks later showed a continued decline. The government's support rating was only 31 percent, as many as 13 percentage points down from 44 percent in the previous survey taken by the same newspaper on December 1–2. The non-support rate had risen to 48 percent, up from 36 percent in the previous survey.¹⁰⁵ Another poll by *Nihon keizai shimbun* showed a higher rate of support, 43 percent, which was a drastic fall in the support rate of 12 percent.¹⁰⁶ The less than satisfactory figures made one of the leading figures of the LDP, the political heavyweight Taku Yamasaki, comment: “The Fukuda cabinet shows symptoms of being in the terminal stage. If this trend continues, it's no return to the start.”¹⁰⁷

Yamasaki had ample reason for concern. Whereas figures for the Fukuda cabinet were bad, they were even worse for the LDP. With a support rate in the *Kyodo News* poll of 24.2 percent, the party had suffered a record drop of 13 percent compared with the poll the previous month. In contrast, the DPJ saw an increase by one percent in its support to 28.5 percent. Another poll by the *Mainichi shimbun* confirmed the precarious situation of the LDP, with the support rate attaining a mere 26 percent. The support figure for the DPJ was not much better at 27 percent. Not surprisingly, the lack of trust in the LDP was translated into a distrust of the coalition government led by the LDP.

¹⁰⁴ “Fukuda Cabinet approval rating sinks to 35% on pension blunder,” *AP*, Dec. 16, 2007, http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8TIE6KGo&show_article=1&catnum=0

¹⁰⁵ “Cabinet support rate plunges to 31%,” *The Asahi shimbun*, Dec. 22, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200712220081.html>

¹⁰⁶ “Cabinet approval rating down to 43%: Nikkei,” *Associated Press*, Dec. 16, 2007, http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8TIQ9CGO&show_article=1

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Suzuki Toichi, “Nenkinkoyakuhan de shijiritsu kyuraku, Fukuda seiken ga ochiiru ‘makki shojo’” [Rapid fall of the support rate with denial of pension promise, symptom of the Fukuda cabinet sliding to its terminal stage], *Shukan daiyamondo*, 12.29–1.5 (2007–2008), p. 168.

Supporters of the coalition government constituted a mere 28.5 percent, while 44.7 percent of respondents said they would like to see a DPJ-led government. In the *Asahi shimbun* poll, figures were even worse for the LDP, with support down to 23 percent, 15 percent less than for the DPJ. These figures spread gloom among LDP leaders and depressed the mood of the party's rank and file.

The reason for the plunging support rates was easy to trace. The week before the polls reported a marked decline in LDP approval ratings, especially that of the prime minister's. Fukuda compounded the situation when he became involved in an exchange in a way that made it abundantly clear that the government would not be able to resolve the national pension system mess by March 2008, as the previous cabinet had promised, and that it was likely that some problems might never be resolved.¹⁰⁸

The strange thing was that it was Prime Minister Fukuda himself who emerged the culprit when news spread of his comment: "I don't think that it matters so much as to be called a broken promise." This statement was in overt contradiction to the promise made by his predecessor, who committed the government repeatedly to identifying all the pension accounts unaccounted for "to the last person," a promise that had been repeated by Yoichi Masuzoe, the responsible minister in Fukuda's own cabinet.¹⁰⁹ Reneging on Abe's promise damaged whatever policies the coalition government stood for. Aware of the damage, Fukuda hastened to correct himself: "I think it is inexcusable that this has happened. I will make steady efforts [to settle the problem] on the basis of the government policy decided in July."¹¹⁰ Still, in a comment to a *Asahi shimbun* poll reported on December 22, the prime minister was at a loss as to explain why his support ratings had plummeted: "I might think it could not be helped," he told reporters. "[But] I do not think that I am doing anything wrong."¹¹¹

It is fair to say that the Japanese in general were not impressed when the incumbent prime minister lost himself in a way that was seen as a lack of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 169f.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

¹¹⁰ "LDP pension pledge slips Fukuda's mind," *The Asahi shimbun*, Dec. 14, 2007, <http://mfeed.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200712140087.html>

¹¹¹ Fukuda quoted in "Cabinet support rate plunges to 31%".

interest in clearing up the pension mess. It was seen as subterfuge and this was reflected in polls. They wanted the problem of the pension mess solved and Abe had promised to do so but now it emerged that it was a promise worth little. To ordinary Japanese, what amounted to Fukuda's momentous loss of his political *Fingerspitzengefühl* must have seemed worse than whatever shortcomings Abe had displayed, since Fukuda with his repute of being both able and competent did not seem to have even the ambition to solve the problem, something you could not accuse Abe of—if you took him by his words, that is, which few did.¹¹²

¹¹² Edström, *Japan's Upper House Election, July 29*, p. 10. According to a poll conducted by the *Asahi shimbun*, only 16 percent answered yes when they were asked if they considered that the Abe government's actions to rectify the problem were trustworthy, 75 percent answered no. See "Minshu 29%, Jimin 23%" [DPJ 29%, LDP 23%], *The Asahi shimbun*, June 12, 2007; quoted in *ibid.*

The Fukuda Era, So Far—Continuities and Discontinuities

The change in Japan's political landscape that the outcome of the Upper House election resulted in was noticeable. The defeat for the LDP was also a defeat for Abe's personal agenda with its ideological profile. His strong stand on nationalistic issues, his forceful drive for the need for constitutional reform and other right-leaning issues had been accepted by his party when he was picked as president of the LDP. His agenda had been accepted as a price to pay in return for someone the party saw as an unbeatable vote getter in the forthcoming general election. At the time of his election, the message conveyed by polls could not be misunderstood. In the months before the party was to pick its poster boy, Abe's lead in polls was solid. But seldom have polls been more misinforming of *jidai no nagare*, the trends of the time. Despite that polls taken by newspapers and other media showed Abe to be the most popular politician in the LDP, his time in office proved disastrous both for himself and his party. After an unusually short honeymoon, Abe and his party began a downward slide in popularity. The political platform that in a relatively short space of time had made him Japan's most popular politician and an unbeatable candidate for the top post, suddenly became a drag for his party. Even though LDP voters are conservative, Abe's agenda turned out too right-wing for them. The space of time from being a vote getter to disappearing into obscurity was astoundingly short in the case of Abe, who was accused by LDP members and leadership of being responsible for the defeat in the Upper House election.

Fukuda's Change of Style

Fukuda was elevated to the post of chief cabinet secretary due in large part to the intervention of prime minister-to-be Jun'ichiro Koizumi, at the time the key official of the Mori faction. The longest serving figure in this post, Fukuda could observe at close range how both Mori and Abe emerged in the media as

singularly weak leaders, while Koizumi stood out as their very opposite based on his talents in securing the support of public opinion and skill in dealing with the press. With Abe in office, a return of the tendency of journalists and reporters to deride the prime minister could be noted. Fresh in the memory is how the leader of the faction that both Abe and Fukuda belonged to, Yoshiro Mori, was short-lived as prime minister partly because journalists and reporters were apt to expose his gaffes and ill-advised actions. One of Japan's leading political commentators, Makoto Iokibe, goes as far as claiming that the press right from the start of Mori's tenure decided that he was not equal to his office.¹¹³ This was also the same in Abe's case. Week after week, leading newspapers such as the *Asahi shimbun* published polls and analyses presenting the shortcomings of the prime minister and blaming him for sagging support. Abe tried to cope by changing his style and performance in front of the cameras but to little effect.

One lesson that Fukuda could not avoid drawing from Abe's period as prime minister was the risk of not attending to relations with the media with sufficient assiduity.¹¹⁴ During Fukuda's record-breaking tenure as the government's leading spokesman, he was used to running the show and was sometimes even short-tempered, failing to hide his irritation when press conferences dragged out.¹¹⁵ His style as prime minister differed, however, showing greater understanding of the need for journalists to acquire news.

To change the approach in relations with the media as Fukuda did was to emulate his predecessor, albeit with one important difference. While it became obvious that Abe at least tried to appease journalists and TV audiences,¹¹⁶ Fukuda made it clear from the start that he was going to be much more forthcoming than his predecessor. Apparently trying to avoid friction and not repeating the mistake of creating a strained relationship with the media, he

¹¹³ Author's interview of Makoto Iokibe, President, National Defense Academy of Japan, Tokyo, November 18, 2006.

¹¹⁴ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, pp. 9f.

¹¹⁵ "Kiso kara wakaru 'Fukuda Yasuo'".

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

announced that he would field questions from reporters twice daily.¹¹⁷ He also began issuing an e-mail magazine of the type that Koizumi had launched and went one step further in using modern media posting English-language messages on the video-sharing Internet site YouTube. But it was not only the prime minister who was active. The LDP started its YouTube LDP Channel featuring official party videos designed to reach a younger, wider, and more global audience¹¹⁸

That Fukuda as premier changed his approach to the media compared to his time as chief cabinet secretary is understandable, since Mori's case shows that media can make or break a premier. Furthermore, Koizumi's appearance as a formidable contender for the post as prime minister relied on his strong standing in public opinion, and his years in office proved that a charismatic politician can endure due to popular support even without the full approval of the party apparatus. But as demonstrated by the tenure of Toshiki Kaifu (prime minister 1989–91), in the end the will of the party leadership usually prevails and the premier will have to leave however strong his backing is in public opinion.¹¹⁹ In contrast, the case of Keizo Obuchi (prime minister 1998–2000) proved that a candidate can be elevated to the post of prime minister despite minuscule support in public opinion. Not being a charismatic leader like Koizumi, Fukuda is likely to have concluded that he has to have the backing of his party as well as the support of public opinion if he wants to avoid becoming just another stop-gap premier that Japan has seen so many of in the post-Cold War period.

Scandals, Old and New

Scandals have continued to rock Japanese politics. In a poll by the *Yomiuri shimbun* taken immediately after Fukuda had become prime minister, the pension system mess was judged by respondents as by far the greatest problem.

¹¹⁷ "Fukuda takes softly-softly way. Prime minister opts for harmony in dealings with media, ministries," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Oct. 1, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071001TDY03302.htm>

¹¹⁸ Hiroko Tabuchi, "Japan's PM greets world on YouTube," *usa today*, Jan. 2, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/products/2008-01-02-1170575812_x.htm

¹¹⁹ Edström, *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine*, p. 141.

That Fukuda gave the highest priority in his pledges when he had become prime minister to solving this problem was not surprising. In a sense, his focus on the pension issue showed that he understood the importance of heeding to *jidai no nagare*, the trends of the time, a concept that is elusive but keenly felt by most Japanese. Fukuda's problem was that the pension system mess was a problem that was bound to continue to sour Japanese politics. As Fukuda was the man at the helm, he was certain to be singled out as the one to blame if it was seen not to be resolved.

As if the pension scandal was not enough, Fukuda had to face scandals linked to the lineup of political appointees—both ministers and high officials. They added to scandals that lingered on as a heritage from Abe, whose proven inability to tackle political problems caused his fall in the wake of the voters' verdict in the Upper House election. The rush with which Fukuda took over after Abe and the few changes that he made in the lineup of ministers invited concern. A reasonable conjecture was therefore that new scandals involving his team would break out. The difference compared to his predecessor was, of course, that this time Fukuda was a man well-used to handling tricky personnel affairs and had a proven ability of defusing potential or actual scandals

Notwithstanding the above, Fukuda's rich experience of handling scandals by working backstage as well in front of the cameras did not prove sufficient to avoid new scandals from breaking out. The most sordid scandal had a slightly unexpected origin in that it did not involve a minister or other political appointees but a former high-ranking official. The issue of "politics and money" was one reason why voters fled the LDP in the Upper House election, and the well-publicized misconduct of high-ranking officials affiliated with the Ministry of Defense, as was revealed after the election, was seen as highly inappropriate. The extensive coverage in the media made the government lose sympathy and support.¹²⁰

The Takemasa Moriya affair was a scandal that escalated, with more and more incriminating facts disclosed by the day. The scandal cast gloom over what had been intended to be a landmark year for Japan's defense establishment. At the

¹²⁰ See, e.g., "Cabinet approval rating down to 43%: Nikkei".

beginning of the year, Prime Minister Abe realized his long-cherished dream of seeing the Japan Defense Agency upgraded to a full ministry. But subsequent scandals and embarrassments amassed. The year saw Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma leave office after having made a comment that was inexcusable according to Japanese political standards, when he seemed to belittle the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Moriya scandal was a blow to the Fukuda government. Not that corruption involving defense procurement was unprecedented, but the arrest of former Vice Defense Minister Takemasa Moriya was a high-profile collusion scandal bound to strengthen the sizeable current of anti-military feeling in public opinion. Moriya was the government's top defense bureaucrat for four years, retiring in 2007 after a row with the then Defense Minister Yuriko Koike, who, in turn, had to leave herself after a row with Prime Minister Abe.¹²¹ Koike was replaced by an experienced defense politician, Shigeru Ishiba, who could be expected to be capable of handling delicate issues and scandals that might arise. But also the experienced Ishiba found himself in trouble when it surfaced that fuel provided in connection with the MSDF antiterrorism support mission in the Indian Ocean had been used in a way that went contrary to the decision taken by the Diet authorizing this activity. The affair was piquant for Ishiba since it took place back in 2003, during his previous stint as defense minister. Four years later, in 2007, the reputation of the defense establishment had grown so bad due to scandals that he barely escaped public wrath by telling that officials who prepared the report that they did not see the correct data which made them misreport to the Diet.¹²² Ishiba's move was to announce that 2008 was going to be a year to reform the ministry "drawing on the lesson of various incidents" and reform panels were set up by the government. The political opposition dismissed the panels, however, as ineffective "after so many scandals

¹²¹ Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, pp. 18f.

¹²² "Ishiba says civilians had right fuel data," *The Asahi shimbun*, Oct. 27, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200710260359.html>

over many years,” since panel members were current defense bureaucrats, SDF brass, or in other ways related to defense circles.¹²³

Farewell to “Beautiful Japan”

That the change from Abe to Fukuda meant a change of the political agenda was made abundantly clear in an action taken a couple of weeks after Fukuda took over, when it was announced that an office established by his predecessor to promote his initiative to build “a beautiful nation” was a waste of money in the eyes of the prime minister. The office was a venue for the meeting of experts to promote, both at home and abroad, Abe’s pet idea of making Japan “a beautiful nation.” Spending amounted to ¥49 million in its six months of existence before it was scrapped when Abe resigned. After three weeks in office, Fukuda told reporters that he felt it was “a bit too expensive to spend that much money only for holding meetings.”¹²⁴ It was a clear indication that the down-to-earth Fukuda cold-shouldered Abe’s vision and saw it more as a slogan that lacked specific steps to address what were the immediate concerns of him and his party. This was all the more important as the outcome of the Upper House election had disqualified it as a key idea for a party that wanted to be seen as professing responsibility and offering solutions to what the Japanese in general saw as pressing problems.

The distancing of the LDP and the coalition government from the disgraced former party leader and his ideas became even more apparent when another of the fundamental ideas on Abe’s political platform was discarded by his successor. On December 24, the Fukuda government officially abandoned the plan to create a Japanese version of the U.S. National Security Council, which was aimed at reinforcing the role of the Prime Minister’s Office as the control center of diplomacy and national security. The idea to establish such a forum among a key ministerial group in order to enable speedy policy decisions and strengthen the prime minister’s leadership was one of Abe’s pet projects. In the

¹²³ Kakumi Kobayashi, “Defense Ministry’s inaugural year one to forget,” *The Japan Times*, Jan. 8, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080108fz.html>

¹²⁴ “Abe ‘beautiful country’ panel waste of funds, Fukuda says,” *The Japan Times*, Oct. 19, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20071019a2.html>

background lingered Abe's view that such a strengthened capacity for quick action was befitting of the larger international security role that he aspired for Japan to play.

In a comment directed at the scrapping of the planned forum, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura said that it was most unlikely the bills would pass in the prevailing political climate.¹²⁵ Scrapping the idea did not mean that Fukuda abolished the notion that the function the Prime Minister's Office had to be enhanced, however. In a comment, he said that he liked "the chief cabinet secretary, foreign minister and defense minister to cooperate more tightly, and realize the kind of function that was expected of the Japanese NSC."¹²⁶ This meant that he wanted to continue a policy that had been initiated under Koizumi and sharpened by Abe, but did not embrace Abe's idea of centralizing national security decision-making to a few top officials.

Return of the Factions?

One aspect of the way in which Fukuda ascended the political throne was that it meant a return of politics from pre-Koizumi days; in the sense that it was the faction leaders who had encouraged Fukuda to stand as candidate and who saw to it that he was elected. But the return of the influence of the factions could be noted already when Abe reshuffled his cabinet in August. After the Upper House election, he announced that he was going to reshuffle his cabinet but also made the point that he had made no decisions about the reshuffle and would take time to seriously think it over. He also suggested that he would not succumb to pressure from party factions.¹²⁷ But when the new cabinet line up was revealed, the result of his effort to rejuvenate the cabinet was that all party factions bar one were represented in the new cabinet.

¹²⁵ "Japan decides to scrap plan to establish national security council," *Associated Press*, Dec. 24, 2007, http://breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8NKGoo8show_article=1

¹²⁶ "Fukuda officially scraps Abe's NSC plan," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Dec. 26, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20071226TDY01301.htm>

¹²⁷ "Abe's big chance to clean out deadwood," *The Asahi shimbun*, August 15, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708140399.html>

Fukuda's ascendancy confirmed that the factions had reasserted their position after having been marginalized by the charismatic and popular Koizumi. On occasions in the past, the LDP factions have been declared to be anachronistic—even by the LDP's leaders—giving expression to a “modern” way of making politics. The reshuffle of Abe's government was a hint that the faction leaders had regained lost ground, with Fukuda's elevation to the post of prime minister as prime minister with the help of faction leaders proving this beyond doubt. Since Fukuda did little to change the lineup of ministers but largely took over Abe's ministers, his cabinet reflected the strength of LDP factions. It should not be a surprise given the key role that the LDP faction bosses played when the party picked Fukuda as its leader. But did it indicate that it was a payback from Fukuda to party bosses who engineered his assignment? The answer to this question will only become more apparent when Fukuda reshuffles his cabinet when his own priorities vis-à-vis the factions will be laid bare.

The Gasoline Diet, or Japanese Politics Backing into the Future

That the change from Abe to Fukuda signaled a return to old-style politics was graphically laid bare by the fact that the 169th session of the Diet that commenced on January 18, only two days after the previous session had ended, was quickly nicknamed “the Gasoline Diet.” No longer prominent were issues that had loomed large under Abe such as constitutional reform, patriotic education, and a “departure from the postwar regime.” Now, the focus found itself shifted to more down-to-earth matters such as the gasoline tax that the DPJ wanted to scrap but the ruling coalition wanted to keep in order to secure revenues. After having failed to stop the new law of allowing the continuation of the MSDF's refueling operation in the Indian Ocean being enacted, the DPJ leadership selected the gasoline tax as an issue to use in its confrontation with the ruling coalition, since taxes are unpopular among Japanese in general. Abolishing the tax would make gasoline cheaper but would not be conducive in a situation where a hike in taxes is inevitable for financial reconstruction. With a national debt that has increased at an exploding rate and is now in excess of 150 percent of GDP, the Japanese government is facing increasing problems in securing the sizeable amount of money that is needed each year to cover

government expenditures. In FY 2005, 18,442.2 trillion yen or 42 percent of the 82,162.9 trillion yen government expenditures were financed with government bonds, and 22 percent of Japan's budget was spent on paying off the interest of its national debt.¹²⁸

Fukuda as Full Circle of Japan's Postwar Politics

The first months in office have proved that Fukuda is a shrewd politician with stamina and perseverance. His way of dismantling the DPJ's frontal attack in a situation when the opposition party had just enjoyed a landslide victory in the Upper House election was a masterly move. Whether it was planned by Fukuda or not, it derailed the DPJ's onslaught on the coalition government and robbed the opposition party of its golden opportunity to usurp power from the coalition government.

Fukuda's recognized forte is foreign policy but his range of action to engage in foreign policy has been restricted. Instead of being elected to office on a domestic agenda but then having to divulge in foreign affairs—as is the experience of many Japanese premiers—the domestic political power play has more or less consumed Fukuda's time. Lamenting over the lack of Japanese initiative in the foreign policy field, a commentator remarked that the prime minister has been “too busy putting out fires at home.”¹²⁹ Apart from his brief trip to the United States and his visit to Singapore to attend the East Asia Summit, both taking place in November, and his visit to China at the end of December, Fukuda has had to spend much of his time in parliament to take part in deliberations, answer questions, and being grilled by opposition parties. He was picked by a LDP in crisis to clear up the mess left by Abe and, with his masterly handling of the situation that evolved in early November regarding his meetings with DPJ President Ozawa, Fukuda rode his party out of the crisis, as demonstrated by the override vote taken by the Lower House on January 11.

¹²⁸ Charles Hugh Smith, “Tale of Two Debts/Deficits: Japan and the U.S.,” Oct. 9, 2005, <http://oftwominds.com/blogoct06/Japan-debt.html>

¹²⁹ Weston S. Konishi, “Fukuda too distracted to drive diplomacy,” *The Daily Yomiuri*, Jan. 24, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080124TDY02310.htm>

When the 168th session of the Diet was over, 26 new laws had been enacted but this had taken place more or less in passing, with parliamentary work monopolized by bickering over the anti-terrorism law and work in the Diet stalled. The session was brought to a successful end in the sense that Fukuda succeeded in obtaining parliamentary approval of the anti-terrorism law. But what evolved during the 168th session also showed that Fukuda might arguably be what was said about one of his predecessors, Keizo Obuchi—that he was “a vacuum prime minister.”¹³⁰ Fukuda’s elevation was sudden and afforded no room for establishing a political platform—notwithstanding the political pledges he unveiled after his appointment—with work in the Diet being so demanding on his time that he has not had time to throw himself into the challenging task of forging a fully-fledged political program. As prime minister, his schedule is planned minute-by-minute and does not give much opportunity for long-term thinking.

The sad thing about Fukuda’s time in office thus far is that his talents as an eminent manager of political affairs have been consumed by trying to contain the DPJ. At the annual conference of the LDP in January 2008, Fukuda said that the party was facing its biggest crisis since it was founded in 1955. The premier reported that party members were acutely feeling “the people’s distrust in politics, the people’s distrust in the LDP, every day.” There was in his mind no doubt that the LDP was facing a critical time for its survival as a ruling party.¹³¹

It is true that Fukuda’s masterly moves in early November had helped his party, but they may also have come at a high cost—to the country. None of the serious problems that Japan is facing has been attended to by the political parties. It is evident that with more than one fifth of government spending used for

¹³⁰ Obuchi remarked once: “As Prime Minister, I have been given quite a number of nicknames, but perhaps the most prominent one is ‘Vacuum Prime Minister.’ It is often used in an unkind way, suggesting that I have no substance and am empty. A kinder interpretation may be the one used by the Chinese sage Lao Tze. He described a vacuum as an infinite state and felt it suggested a magnanimity and capacity to absorb each and every thing.” In *Community Building in Asia Pacific: Dialogue in Okinawa* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2000), p. 22.

¹³¹ “Take bold steps and listen to public, Fukuda advises LDP,” *The Japan Times*, Jan. 18, 2008, [http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin\(nn20080118a7.html](http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin(nn20080118a7.html)

servicing national debt, and doing so to a large extent with borrowed money, the Japanese government has serious problems to attend to. Add to that several long-term problems such as the ageing and shrinking population that need to be tackled. If such problems are not addressed Japan's future will look bleak indeed.

In Fukuda's New Year's message to his party, he spoke up for that the ruling LDP should stay on course and avoid causing any surprises. His message to party members was: "The LDP should keep to the right path, and I have no surprise moves in mind."¹³² Fukuda's second policy speech in January was symptomatic of his approach. If he is taken on his word, the reform drive that was initiated by former prime minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi, and which elections showed the Japanese people supported, is over. Fukuda's predecessor Shinzo Abe at least maintained the pretense of being a Koizumian reformist (otherwise he would not have been elected), but Fukuda does not seem to have found any necessity to even pretend. Not once did he use the word "reform" in his recent policy speech; his key words in this speech were "people" (used 48 times) and "environment" (used 23 times). Two and a half times longer than his previous policy speech, it was rich in words but short on new ideas.¹³³ In a biting criticism, a commentator in the conservative *Yomiuri shimbun* lamented over what Fukuda could offer the Japanese people. When new ideas and approaches are badly needed "the policies and measures he mentioned in the speech were not new: The government is already pursuing them."¹³⁴

Fukuda's second policy speech does not augur well for the prime minister and the LDP. In July this year, the G-8 summit will take place in Toyako, Hokkaido. Fukuda has stated publicly that since Japan is the host country, there is no time before the summit to dissolve the Lower House and call a snap

¹³² "Fukuda says no surprises to come from LDP," *Mainichi Daily News*, Jan. 7, 2008, <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/national/news/20080107p2a00mona017000c.html>

¹³³ Shusho kantei, "Dai 169 kai kokkai ni okeru Fukuda naikaku soridaijin shisei hoshin enzetsu" [Policy speech by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda to the 169th Session of the Diet], Jan. 18, 2008, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hukudaspeech/2008/01/18housin.html>

¹³⁴ Ayumu Tsuda, "Fukuda speech offers nothing new," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, Jan. 19, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080119TDY03102.htm>

election.¹³⁵ In this statement lurks the message that a snap election could take place after the summit. There are precedents. Japan has been the host country for four such summits in the past, and snap elections for the Lower House have taken place each time.¹³⁶ The LDP has won twice and lost twice. With the strong will among the Japanese to support reforms, and the obvious need for reforms, it seems unlikely that a prime minister devoid of reform zeal and a party lacking interest in reform can gain sufficient support among voters. But Japanese politics might turn up a few surprises. Fukuda's clever acting in November after his talks with Ozawa showed a politician eminently capable of handling an opportunity that presented itself.

The problem for Japan and its prime minister is that his recipe of "more of the same" as the Right Way, *shodo*, will no longer do, at least not for Japanese politics. The problem for the LDP was laid bare by Fukuda himself in 2006 in an interview, in which he pointed out that the candidates competing to succeed Koizumi, including himself, did not significantly differ as far as domestic politics was concerned. All of them know, he said, the importance of raising the consumption tax.¹³⁷ Despite that the leading LDP politicians know the necessity of reforms and tax hikes, the political system is unable to deliver. The status quo and a no-reform drive might be the mantra within the LDP, but it is no longer a winning formula in national politics. The Japanese are conservative but also acutely aware of the necessity of reforms.

When Fukuda was appointed prime minister, his party was still in shock after the Upper House election and its defeat of historic proportions. When the 168th Diet session was over, it could be summarized that the prime minister had been able to muddle through and start the arduous process of repairing the damage

¹³⁵ Masami Ito, "Fukuda again rejects calling early election," *The Japan Times*, Jan. 16, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080116a4.html>

¹³⁶ Akasaka Taro, "Fukuda ga kaisankaihi o kimeta 'gokuhi chosa'" [Fukuda has decided to avoid a dissolution: "Top-secret report"], *Bungei shunju*, Feb. 2008, p. 224.

¹³⁷ Interview of Yasuo Fukuda, in Shinohara Fumiya, *Dare ga Nihon o sukuu no ka: Posuto Koizumi. Yuryoku seijika ni miru ningenryoku* [Who will rescue Japan? Influential post-Koizumi politicians and their personal capabilities] (Tokyo: Chichi shuppansha, 2006), p. 180.

done to it by the voters' rejection of his predecessor and of the policies the LDP under him had offered to voters.

As pointed out earlier in this report, Fukuda's father did not belong to "the Yoshida School," the group of bureaucrats recruited into politics by Shigeru Yoshida in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Nevertheless, with his career as graduate of the elite Faculty of Law of the Tokyo University and a subsequent career as an elite bureaucrat in the finance ministry before he turned to politics, Takeo Fukuda was the archetypical representative of members of this "school." With "the legacy of a father" that is Yasuo Fukuda's, he has acted as prime minister with all the prudence and cautiousness that can be expected of a political leader belonging to the *hoshu honryu*, the conservative mainstream of Japanese politics. His time in office has been characterized more by efforts to secure the survival of the LDP than on endeavors to begin to tackle the problems pestering Japan as a nation and a country and, in this, he has himself emerged as a politician who can be seen as a worthy disciple of "the Yoshida School." In this sense, Yasuo Fukuda elevation to prime minister means that Japanese postwar politics has in effect come full circle.

Recent elections and the solid support that the reformist Koizumi enjoyed point to the salient fact that the Japanese realize that reforms are needed and are prepared to support reform politicians. Coming up with the clever move of creating the Yoshida School was the arch-bureaucrat and autocratic Shigeru Yoshida's way of solving the problems of governing the country that he faced in the immediate postwar situation and as such belongs to Japan's modern political history. With Yasuo Fukuda representing the completion of a full circle in Japan's postwar politics a new circle is about to begin, the shape of which will be decided when he leaves office; which can very well be decided the next time the Japanese voters go to the ballot-box.

Conclusion

When Yasuo Fukuda ascended the political throne on September 25, 2007, it was one year to the day since his predecessor Shinzo Abe had been appointed. While Abe turned out to be yet another stopgap premier, Fukuda's elevation is an event that will enter the annals of Japanese political history—however short his term in office will be—since it was the first time in Japanese history that a son had followed his father as prime minister. When Fukuda replaced Abe as prime minister, it was more than the man at the helm that differed. Also the political agenda of the LDP was different from the one that Abe stood for. The shift of the political agenda of the LDP that had been instituted already before the election was captured in Fukuda's political pledges presented when he assumed office. It was swift action and a signal that the new prime minister wanted quick and resolute action within the confines of the restrictions given by the new power constellation in the Diet, with the political opposition having the upper hand in the Upper House and the ruling parties controlling the Lower House.

The rush of leaders of the LDP factions to abandon Abe and distance themselves from his policies, despite that they and their party had embraced his ideas with enthusiasm just months before, can be seen as a move to modify the policies pursued by the LDP under Abe that had been rejected by voters in the Upper House election. Their move away from him can be seen as a reflection of the insight and realization of the LDP leadership that the rightist policies that Abe stands for are not approved of by the majority of voters; and that they would spell disaster for the party if they became once more the banner under which the party would try to attract voters in the next election. One factor that has contributed to the LDP's enduring grip on power is that the party factions represent a spectrum of policies ranging from the far right to the liberal left, enabling the party to adjust its look according to shifting voter preferences by

presenting an appropriate mix of left and right policies.¹³⁸ With the shift from Abe to Fukuda, Abe's rightist policy platform was replaced by policies backed by Fukuda that were more moderate and middle-of-the-road. With the party changing hands from Abe to Fukuda, the pendulum swung back as it has done many times in the past, when the LDP—this *de facto* coalition party composed of factions—has seen an onslaught on its grip on power.

After the Upper House election, Ozawa and Fukuda face a challenge that will end with one of them losing and inevitably withdrawing from politics. As prime minister, Fukuda cannot afford to lose the Lower House election that will take place in the not too distant future. If he should lose, and being an old-style politician, he would gracefully bow out and “take his responsibility” for the defeat. Ozawa has challenged the power of the LDP ever since he left the party in 1993 and is very unlikely to survive defeat, especially after his antics in November. His political activities over the years have created many enemies and too many knives have been sharpened within his party. On the other hand, his strong hand has been his proven skills as a political strategist. In the Upper House election campaign he staked his political future on one card by his declaration that he was going to leave party politics if his party lost and he subsequently proceeded to secure victory for his party. It was an impressive act of political courage and impressed ordinary Japanese. Again, Ozawa has declared that he will leave politics if his party loses the Lower House election.¹³⁹ However, what was impressive to voters before the Upper House election has lost its appeal, not least because of the ill-fated aftermath in the wake of his talks with the prime minister in November.

Japanese politics has been enacted where it should—in the Diet. Its 168th session dragged out for 128 days and ended with the Diet approving the key legislation over the refueling issue proposed by the government. While parliamentary

¹³⁸ Uchida Kenzo, *Sengo Nihon no hoshu seiji* [Conservative politics of postwar Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1969), quoted in Kabashima and Okawa, “Fukuda Yasuo no kenkyu,” p. 60.

¹³⁹ “Minshu-Ozawa daihyo, zokuto o seishiki hyomei” [DPJ's President Ozawa formally declaring he will continue], *Nikkei net*, Nov. 7, 2007, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20071107AT3S0702No7112007.html>

proceedings as reflected in the media seemed to be monopolized by the battle between the government and the political opposition, deliberations over other issues and proposals continued and when the session was over, 26 laws had been enacted. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Fukuda's political acumen could be questioned, since the interest of Japanese in general is directed at the more bread-and-butter issues such as incomes, pensions, and regional inequalities, which were not the focus of deliberations in the Diet.

The fact is, however, that legislative work proceeded with new laws enacted drowned in the Herculean fight between two political camps. This was one of the results that Fukuda commented upon at a press conference when the session closed. According to him, it had been "a very long session" and he apologized for causing inconvenience to many. Relieved that he had been able to get Diet approval of law enabling resumption of logistic support for the antiterrorism operations in and around Afghanistan, he took pride in that he had "grappled with the situation as well as he could."

Another comment captures in a nutshell his assessment of the session. On the one hand, he lamented "the Japanese government's inability to carry out its will concerning foreign affairs as a result of the Diet situation and the political climate," only to state on the other that: "When I look back now, I believe that the legislation we have enacted was realized rather smoothly [...] although it has taken time, I feel that I have done the things I should have done. One reason why these bills were enacted was that the opposition parties also had a sense of crisis with regard to Diet management that can be summed up as 'to go on this way will be no good.' In that sense, I would like to thank the opposition parties as well for their deep understanding."¹⁴⁰

Given the fact that a lot of frustration had been vented during the session because of the bifurcated Diet, with the Upper and Lower Houses having majorities at variance with each other, the fact that 26 new laws had been enacted showed that, after all, parliamentary work had proceeded despite the

¹⁴⁰ Prime Minister and His Cabinet, "Press Conference by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda after the Closing of the 168th Session of the Diet," Jan. 15, 2008, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hukudaspeech/2008/01/15_kaiken_e.html

political confrontation between the ruling parties and the political opposition. Characterizing, as Fukuda did, legislation enacted as having been “realized rather smoothly” and thanking the political opposition for “their deep understanding” should be taken note of against the background that the ruling coalition and its political opposition had been unable to reach a compromise in the Diet. The fight of accepting or rejecting the Replenishment Support Special Measures Law proposed by the government almost monopolized deliberations throughout the session and passed only when the government resorted to usage of its more than two-thirds majority in the Lower House to crush objections of the opposition parties. The prime minister’s conciliatory statement *post festum* was probably intended to avoid rubbing salt to the opposition’s wounds but also not to appear as gripped by hubris. A side-effect was that the prime minister drove home the point that he had succeeded to prevail despite the parliamentary situation.

Indirectly, Fukuda’s press conference signaled his ambition for displaying *riidashippu*. His modesty and expression of gratitude to the opposition parties served to save the face of the politicians in the opposition camp, who had wrestled in vain to come to grips with the government and who had frittered away its credibility in the eyes of voters by Ozawa’s flurry of activities and the response to them by the other leaders of the DPJ. With Fukuda’s conciliatory stance the DPJ leaders could tell their supporters and the Japanese at large that while they had not succeeded in derailing government policies, they had at least thrown a spanner into the works of the formidable LDP–bureaucracy machinery. Fukuda, for his part, had no interest in gratuitously disparaging Ozawa and the DPJ. Instead, his words of consolation was an investment for the future and served to soothe lingering ill feelings that could be expected to remain and pester the Diet session that would start in only a few days.

About the Author

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