



PRIME MINISTER NAOTO KAN WINS THE BATTLE, LOSES THE WAR

Bert Edström

On June 2, Prime Minister Naoto Kan of Japan prevailed over the all-out attack in the Diet launched by the political opposition. With 293 to 152 in the Lower House, the ruling coalition defeated the non-confidence motion submitted in a joint action by three opposition parties.

It is sometimes said that the role of opposition parties in a parliamentary system is to oppose the government. This is true, but it is also the role – and the duty! – of the opposition to present an alternative to the government and to be ready to form a government. In submitting this motion, the three opposition parties, the LDP, New Komeito, and Tachiagare Nippon, acted irresponsibly. As pointed out by the Japan Times in its editorial on June 4: “The fact is that those three parties had no concrete plan for taking over power in case the motion was passed.”

Prime Minister Kan’s Pyrrhic Victory

It was an easy victory for Kan, but his win was a Pyrrhic victory. At a party gathering that convened the day before the crucial voting in the Diet, he announced: “I would like to hand over my responsibility to the younger generation once the situation over this great earthquake reaches a certain point.”

Thus, the prime minister won the battle in the Diet only by announcing that he was going to resign. The question was when. His retirement was agreed upon in discussion with his predecessor, Yukio Hatoyama, a former leader of the DPJ, who claimed that the prime minister had agreed that he would resign after disaster-related legislation clears the Diet and the second supplementary budget was drafted. However, DPJ Secretary-General Katsuya Okada countered immediately and said that the timing of Kan’s resignation was not necessarily linked to these matters.

Okada’s comment was yet another example of the DPJ-internal discord that has been increasingly noticeable with Kan at Japan’s political rudder. His political position eroded from the start and has worsened with the ever-mounting protests and dissatisfaction over the government’s handling of the consequences of the triple disaster, the earthquake, tsunami

and Fukushima that hit Japan on March 11. Too many victims still have to stay in gyms, reconstruction work does not seem to speed up, the Japanese economy is in bad shape and the government’s finances are in a deplorable condition.

The verdict of the ruling DPJ seems to have been that to save the party’s position in the government, Kan has to go. In fact, it might even be a question of saving the party. By declaring that, eventually, he would leave, Kan saved his party from the humiliation of having to hand over power to its arch enemy, the LDP. Kan agreed with Hatoyama to keep DPJ intact so the LDP cannot return to power. Prior to the Diet voting, Hatoyama had even declared that he would vote with the opposition. He was only one among many. Kan’s increasingly shaky position made many DPJ MPs reconsider their support for their party leader. If he was allowed to cling on to power, many of them would surely lose their seat in the Diet in the snap election that is likely to come, sooner rather than later. In the choice between supporting the prime minister and keeping their seat, most leaned to the latter.

Ichiro Ozawa’s Move

Instrumental in making them opt for this option was the move by Kan’s opponent in the fight for party leadership last year, Ichiro Ozawa. A former leader and former secretary-general of the party, Ozawa is recognized as the party’s most skillful politician in playing the political game. Having been a key actor in Japanese politics ever since the end of the 1980s, once the secretary-general of the then ruling LDP, he has a long career that has made him being nick named “the Destroyer” for his unsurpassed ability to play his cards cleverly, wrecking parties and careers, but, also, equally known for his ability to come up with innovative political moves. When the DPJ won in the 2009 general elections, Ozawa was the strategist behind



its landslide victory. Many DPJ MPs secured their seats in the Diet thanks to Ozawa's ingenious strategy in that elections. They know they owe him gratitude.

In the infighting for party leadership last year, Ozawa lost to Kan. Subsequently, in February, Ozawa's enemies inside the party stripped him of his powers within the party. He is likely to stand trial for shady business deals, and this was used by Kan and his cohort in a move to eliminate Ozawa's influence in the party.

With last week's showdown in the Diet approaching, the question was how Ozawa was going to act. The answer came quickly. In a high-profile demonstration against Kan, Ozawa abstained from taking part in the voting. He was not the only one to do so. The opposition parties that were behind the non-confidence motion reaped a success in that their motion was supported also by some DPJ MPs. Before the voting, rumors floated that around 50 DPJ lawmakers would refuse to lend their support to Kan but when voting neared, they were seized with misgivings, and, in the voting, 14 MPs joined Ozawa and stayed away from the voting session.

The anti-Kan demonstration by Ozawa and MPs loyal to him did not meet the approval of Japanese in general, tired as they are of the malfunctioning Diet and the government's inept management of post-disaster relief work. A Kyodo News poll published on June 4 showed that 89.4 percent of the respondents disapproved of the anti-Kan moves that those loyal to Ozawa excelled in. Almost half of those polled – 49.8 percent – thought that Ozawa should leave the DPJ and launch a new party, while 25.6 percent called on him to remain in the DPJ and help establish party unity. A consolation for the embattled prime minister was that support for the cabinet stood at 33.4 percent, an increase from 28.1 in a similar poll taken in mid-May.

It seems one of Ozawa's leading foes within the DPJ, Secretary General Katsuya Okada, took a chance to act quickly

after the voting. In a meeting with party executives including Azuma Koshiishi, the leader of the DPJ caucus in the Upper House and a well-known Ozawa loyalist, Okada proposed that Ozawa should be ousted from the party. The anti-Ozawa move was no news. In February, Okada was instrumental when Ozawa's DPJ membership was suspended after he was indicted over an alleged falsification scandal involving financial reports submitted by his fundraising group. But this time Okada failed. Facing strong opposition from Koshiishi and others, Okada withdrew the proposal, fully realizing that if Ozawa is forced out of the party, he might take his loyalists with him and form a new party. The DPJ would then find itself in a fight for survival.

The DPJ's Precarious Situation

In 2009, voters were tired of the increasingly tired and worn out LDP and voted the DPJ into power. After two years of the DPJ-led government, voters have found that few of the promises launched in the 2009 DPJ Political Manifesto have materialized. Consequently, support for the DPJ is down to low levels. After the 2009 general elections, the DPJ-led ruling coalition has a solid backing in terms of number of seats in the Lower House. Despite this, the DPJ-led coalition government finds itself in a precarious situation. In a snap election, that might take place rather soon, the LDP is likely to make comeback in the government.

Bert Edström is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

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