

# Problems and Perils of a Prime Minister Asō Tarō and Japan's Political Autumn

Bert Edström

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Prime Minister  
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Email: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu)

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The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute  
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies  
1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785  
E-mail: [caci2@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu](mailto:caci2@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Bert Edström at: [bedstrom@isdpeu](mailto:bedstrom@isdpeu)

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## Executive Summary

Japan's political autumn in 2008 evolved with the dominant party, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), facing a Sword of Damocles dangling above its head – the upcoming Lower House election. In the bicameral Diet (the Japanese parliament) the outcome of the Lower House election will decide which party or parties will form the government. According to the constitution, the election has to take place in September 2009 at the latest. The prime minister, however, has the prerogative to dissolve the Lower House and announce the election at any time before that. When the general election will actually take place, therefore, is anybody's guess.

The activities of Japanese political parties and politicians after the resounding victory of the political opposition in the Upper House election in July 2007 have continued to be played up in anticipation of the upcoming Lower House election. The Upper House election was a severe setback for the ruling coalition formed by the LDP with the small New Komeito. Both parties came out severely weakened, since they lost their majority in the Upper House.

The situation has been seen as precarious for the LDP. It has ruled Japan almost continuously since the party was founded in 1955, and has long been used to its convenient situation of commanding a majority in the Lower House, either on its own or in a coalition with some small party or parties. The political opposition spearheaded by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been encouraged by its victory in the Upper House election and has been pursuing a course characterized by opposition and intransigence in a stalwart determination to take over. The LDP has not been able to adjust to the parliamentary situation. The senior figures in the LDP, who are used to being able to get parliamentary acceptance of their policies, have shown little enthusiasm for adjusting to the political situation by reaching compromises with the political opposition. As a result,

important policies have floundered and parliamentary proceedings stuttered.

Polls published by media have continued to be important in Japanese politics. One victim of the verdict of polls was Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo. When neither his performance at the G8 summit on July 7–9, 2008 nor a cabinet reshuffle a month later, as well as a large economic stimulus package, improved his and his party's popularity, he gave up. His announcement that he was going to resign was unexpected and came as a shock, not least to members of the LDP. His announcement was an unpleasant *déjà-vu* of the sudden stepping down of his predecessor Abe Shinzō just a year before.

Fukuda was replaced as prime minister by Asō Tarō on September 24, 2008. He was born into the ruling elite of Japan, into a family that has been involved in government throughout Japan's period of modernization ever since the Meiji Restoration in 1868. On account of his family background, he possesses the social status that made him seem predestined to occupy the political top post.

With the LDP in dire straits because of its unpopularity that has continued to worsen since the 2007 Upper House election, the party picked Asō as its most suitable leader to take the party into the upcoming Lower House election that was expected to take place shortly. Defeat for the party is inevitable if defeat means winning fewer seats in the House than before the election. With the popular Asō at the helm, the party calculated that the margin of defeat could be lessened. This was also the argument forwarded by Asō himself as to why he was the most suitable person to be the new party president.

Since the Upper House election in 2007, Japanese party politics has to a large extent become a Herculean combat between the leaders of the LDP and the DPJ. In the autumn of 2008 the DPJ leader Ozawa Ichirō faced his third contestant, Asō Tarō, after having prevailed over his predecessors Abe Shinzō and Fukuda Yasuo.

The cabinet lineup presented by Asō on September 24 included well-known and experienced politicians, among them a number of former ministers, and was an apparent bid to forge internal support for the prime minister's leadership. The appointment of politicians who have blocked change in the past signaled a break with the reform line that the LDP had previously followed and which was, in large part, the legacy of former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō. The looming prospects of the upcoming Lower House election caused Asō put emphasis on tackling the immediate economic problems that were seen to saddle the everyday lives of the Japanese people and he saw probably no need for, or space for, any drive for reform à la Koizumi.

The LDP strategy of making the popular Asō the front figure in quickly organized Lower House elections suffered a serious blow, however, when results of polls published immediately after he had become prime minister showed that his popularity that the party had thought would save it was nothing more than illusory. The honeymoon period that a new prime minister customarily enjoys had been short for his predecessors, but was non-existent in the case of Asō. From the start his popularity figures as measured in polls continued to decrease and at the end of 2008 had reached a nadir, with figures indicating that his days in office are numbered. The question seems to be not if, but when, he will have to leave.

Prime Minister Asō and his party showed fairly quickly that they had understood the message from voters conveyed by polls. Shortly after he had ascended the political throne, the prime minister as well as leading members of his party clarified that priority was on solving the severe economic problems that Japan faces. Dissolution of the Lower House and an election campaign would create a political vacuum that would be dangerous. It would also be irresponsible given Japan's important role in the international economy. Given his prerogative to choose when and if to dissolve the Lower House, the prime minister has bided his time waiting for the right moment.

In the political power game played out during the autumn 2008, the LDP seemed unable to free itself of the pervasive gloom that had gripped the

party after the 2007 Upper House election. The new prime minister Asō was picked partly because he is a “cheerful” politician thought be able create a feel good mood that was so sadly missing in the party and the country. So far, however, no turn for the better has been seen. Instead, the gloomy mood has worsened with each passing day of depressing reports of the economic situation that Japan faces.

The LDP is in a dilemma. Twice it has appointed a leader because of his popularity, only to see how the hope that this popularity would translate into success for the party evaporate. In quick succession, party leaders like Abe Shinzō, Fukuda Yasuo, and Asō Tarō became severe liabilities for the ruling party. Abe left after ten months in office, Fukuda after a year, and soon after Asō’s elevation, his survival in office was a top item of political debate. From a strategy of quickly convening an election in order to minimize the inevitable loss of seats in the Lower House, the strategy of the LDP and Asō as its leader changed to trying to muddle through, waiting for some unforeseen turn of events that will save the party. The prime minister is thus playing a wait-and-see game – not for a victory for the LDP à la 2005, which everyone realizes is totally out of reach, but the moment when the defeat can be minimized and, hopefully, the ruling coalition’s majority of the Lower House can be maintained.

Asō’s mounting unpopularity has become a severe liability for the LDP. Shortly after he became the leader of the LDP, leading members of the party weathered their dissatisfaction of his leadership that seemed destined to ruin the party’s prospects in the upcoming general election. Some of the party’s leading MPs began to plan for the post-Asō situation. The anti-Asō mood in the party spread quickly with his increasing unpopularity concurrent with the fact that prospects for LDP candidates in the upcoming Lower House election become bleaker with each passing day under Asō’s leadership.

When the LDP picked Asō to succeed Fukuda, it was a retreat away from the reform path of the party that constitutes former Prime Minister Koizumi’s legacy. As a politician, Asō is a representative of traditional LDP politics. His elevation to the political top came after a prolonged period

with Japanese politics in flux. The general public and reporters have had ample opportunities to watch how Japan's political system seems unable to deliver solutions to pressing problems that have afflicted Japan and its political system for years, if not decades. The world has changed and with it the international and national situations that confront Japan, the Japanese, and its leaders.

What we are witnessing is a political system gone astray in a world where the parameters of the Japanese political system, set in the immediate postwar period, no longer fits the situation that Japan finds itself in. The need for an overhaul of the Japanese political system is more acutely felt than ever.

## Perils of a Prime Minister

For a people like the Japanese who recall with pride the era of high-growth that laid the foundation of the country's present wealth and affluence, times have tested its stamina. After the end of the Cold War, the country experienced "the lost decade," groping for remedies for the economic slowdown that had replaced decades of high economic growth. Economic woes afflicted not only the 1990s, but continued into the new millennium. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had been in power almost without interruption since its founding in 1955, and was led by a group of old-timers who were bent on sticking to policies that had been highly rewarding and profitable in the past. The rallying cry of the LDP's stalwart party apparatus was not change and reform but a preservation of the status quo. In 2001 Japan saw the emergence of a politician, Koizumi Jun'ichirō,<sup>1</sup> who promised to bring about what was seen to be badly needed – reforms. Promising change, Koizumi came to power on a reform agenda and was greeted with enthusiasm by ordinary Japanese but with disdain by LDP bosses who were not enamored of his reform ideas. When he was elected leader of the LDP, and subsequently prime minister of Japan, his public approval rating reached the unprecedented level of over 80 per cent. With his popularity, the new prime minister began implementing his reform agenda, only to experience that his mandate was not unyielding enough to enable him to institute the reforms he had promised. By 2005, after years of bickering and obtaining few results in terms of reforms, Koizumi had had enough. Unable to force through a key reform proposal – the privatization of the postal system – he used his prerogative as prime minister to dissolve the Lower House of the Diet (the Japanese parliament) and called for a general election. The election turned out to be a huge success for Koizumi, who received overwhelming support for his reform project, thus displaying

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese names are given in traditional Japanese order: surname first, given name second.

his remarkable traits as a politician with an acute sense of the prevailing situation. The LDP and its partner in the coalition government, the New Komeito, the political branch of the nation-wide and influential Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, secured a two-thirds majority in the Lower House. At the ballot box, voters dealt a blow not only to the opposition parties but also to Koizumi's political enemies inside his own party. It was a clear sign that voters sided with the prime minister in his Herculean fight against the LDP bosses.

In 2006 Koizumi proved once again that he was a remarkable politician. All too often Japan has seen politicians and holders of high office clinging to power long after they have lost support or the necessary backing, but Koizumi stepped down as prime minister once his term in office ended, despite the fact that he enjoyed solid popularity and that many had called on him to stay on. His staying in office would have enabled the party to continue to garner support on the coat-tails of the popular prime minister. Throughout his years in power he had canvassed firm support, and his term in office could have been extended, according to party statutes. A clear precedent was found. When Nakasone Yasuhiro had been due to step down as prime minister in 1986, his term in office was extended by one year due to his popularity among the general public and the electoral success of the LDP in the 1986 general election.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite pressures on Koizumi to continue in office, he kept the promise he had previously given and stepped down when his term in office ended.

In retrospect, it seems more and more likely that Koizumi's term in power was an *interregnum*. He replaced a string of fairly short-lived prime ministers and became one of Japan's longest-lived premiers in the postwar period. With his successor, Abe Shinzō, one saw a return to just another stop-gap premier of the type that Japan has seen so many of since the beginning of the 1970s. From the beginning of the *Heisei* era when the new Emperor ascended the throne, no less than thirteen premiers have occupied

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 105.

the Prime Minister's Office (see Table 1). Their terms in office have been so short that the selection of prime minister has been described as a sort of rotating system.<sup>3</sup> Koizumi is the only exception in recent decades with his five years and five months in office.

**Table 1. Japanese Prime Ministers During the Heisei Era, 1989–**

<i>Prime Minister</i>	<i>Took Office</i>
Uno Sōsuke	June 3, 1989
Kaifu Toshiki	August 10, 1989
Miyazawa Kiichi	November 5, 1991
Hosokawa Morihiro	August 9, 1993
Hata Tsutomu	April 28, 1994
Murayama Tomiichi	June 30, 1994
Hashimoto Ryūtarō	January 11, 1996
Obuchi Keizō	July 30, 1998
Mori Yoshirō	April 5, 2000
Koizumi Jun'ichirō	April 26, 2001
Abe Shinzō	September 26, 2006
Fukuda Yasuo	September 26, 2007
Asō Tarō	September 24, 2008

The reason for the short tenure of Japanese premiers has been the fact that Japan's political system has functioned, as the political scientist Inoguchi Takashi has characterized it, as a "karaoke democracy." In other words, there is a menu offering a range of orchestral accompaniments that anyone can sing along to; the background music and lyrics are set and prime ministers are left only to decide what to wear and how to sing the songs. An effect of this type of politics is that the LDP, which has supplied almost all Japanese prime ministers since it was founded in 1955, "followed a

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<sup>3</sup> Kan Naoto, *Daijin* [Minister] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1998), p. 42.

convention that allowed most elements within the party to share positions in government and in the party organizations as equitably as possible.”<sup>4</sup>

Abe Shinzō was picked following Koizumi in the expectation that his popularity would make him an “election locomotive” in the Upper House election in July 2007. This proved to be a miscalculation, however. The LDP recorded one of its worst election results since the party was founded in 1955. Winning only 37 seats, the party’s share of seats decreased from 110 before the election to 83, and the ruling parties, the LDP and the New Komeito, lost their majority in the Upper House. Many well-known and senior members of the LDP were rejected by voters. 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 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 leaving their posts after poor performances.<sup>5</sup> His resolve was to no avail: a reshuffle of his cabinet did not help and Abe resigned suddenly amidst recriminations.

Abe’s successor Fukuda Takeo was a politician who differed markedly from his predecessor. While Abe had been the Golden Boy of Japanese politics when he was elevated to high office, his reputation subsequently being badly tarnished at the time of his resignation, Fukuda had an image of being a non-glamorous but singularly competent political manager.<sup>6</sup> The shift in politics from Abe’s lofty nationalistic goals of revising the constitution and changing the education system in a patriotic direction, to Fukuda’s down-to-earth aim of returning to traditional LDP politics did not

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<sup>4</sup> Takashi Inoguchi and Purnendra C. Jain, “Introduction,” in Purnendra Jain and Takashi Inoguchi, eds, *Japanese Politics Today: Beyond Karaoke Democracy?* (New York and Melbourne: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Iio Jun, *Nihon no tochi kōzō* [The structure of Japan’s government] (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 2007), pp. 112f.

<sup>6</sup> Bert Edström, *Struggle, Strife, and Stalemate: Yasuo Fukuda and Present-day Japanese Politics*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper (March 2008), p. 32.

improve the precarious situation that the party found itself in. When he took over, his cabinet enjoyed a support of 57.5 per cent while the disapproval rate stood at half that, 27.3 per cent.<sup>7</sup> The new prime minister found himself almost immediately involved in an uphill struggle to improve the standing of his party and secure his own survival as prime minister. Fukuda's honeymoon with the public became as surprisingly short as it had been for his predecessor. The only difference was that the plunge downwards set in even more swiftly for Fukuda than for Abe.<sup>8</sup> As had been the case for Abe, Fukuda was unable to regain voter confidence, thus causing nervousness to spread among the LDP leadership and the party's rank and file – the party seemed to have entered a downturn that it was unable to stop.

Prime Minister Fukuda faced a situation in which the activities of the political parties in the Diet were devised and carried out in a manner akin to jockeying for power and influence, in anticipation of the Lower House election that was to take place sometime before September 2009. The Upper House election on July 29, 2007 had created a parliamentary situation that was inconvenient for the LDP – which formed the government together with the relatively small New Komeito – in that the ruling parties lost their majority in the Upper House.

According to the constitution, the prime minister can dissolve the Lower House at any time and call for elections. The prerogative has been used by many incumbents and, consequently, only a minority of Lower House members have served a full four-year term.<sup>9</sup> Ever since the Upper House election in July 2007, much of the interest of the parties and politicians

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<sup>7</sup> “Fukuda naikaku shijiritsu 57.5%, Yomiuri shimbunsha yoron chōsa” [Yomiuri shimbun poll: Support rate for the Fukuda cabinet 57.5%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 27, 2007, [http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/fe\\_070927\\_01.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe5700/fe_070927_01.htm). Hereinafter newspaper articles on current affairs were downloaded on the day or the following day of publication.

<sup>8</sup> Edström, *Struggle, Strife, and Stalemate*, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> In the bicameral Japanese Diet, the rules and roles of the two chambers differ. The Lower House can be dissolved at any time by the prime minister, while the Upper House cannot be dissolved in this way.

focused on whether the prime minister would dissolve the Lower House or not. This was the declared interest of the political opposition, brimming with confidence as it was by its victory in the Upper House election. In parliamentary work, the political opposition flexed its new-found muscle and succeeded in crippling the government's ability to obtain parliamentary approval for its policies. The opposition parties, spearheaded by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and its leader Ozawa Ichirō, acted out of the conviction that an early election was a way to bring down the coalition government. The declared policy line of Ozawa and his party was to pursue incessant confrontation with the government and play up a battery of measures that made parliamentary work cumbersome, in order to prove to the general public – that is, the voters in the upcoming election – the inability of the LDP-led cabinet to govern, much less rule the country.

### **The G8 Summit and Fukuda's Attempt at International Leadership**

One reason for Prime Minister Fukuda's failure to improve popularity figures both for himself and his party was that he failed to project an image of himself as an international leader. He had hoped that his popularity would be boosted by his leadership at the G8 Summit in the resort Tōyako on the northern island of Hokkaidō on July 7–9, 2008. The conference site was seen as a suitable site for this top-level meeting, because climate change was a key topic on the agenda. Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro argued that it was time for “some Japanese gold medals at the Olympic Games of politics that the Summit is.”<sup>10</sup> Fukuda did his best to see to it that this materialized. In preparation for the Summit, he put in a decisive effort to put together a proposal on how to handle the issue of climate change. Indeed, an acquaintance of the author of this paper, with first-hand knowledge of what was going on at the conference, observed that

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<sup>10</sup> Nakasone Yasuhiro, “Fukuda shushō ni ‘kokueki’ no shugoshataru jikaku wa aru ka [Is Prime Minister Fukuda conscious of being a protector of the “national interest”?], *Seiron*, August 2008, pp. 52f.

Fukuda exercised noticeable leadership behind the scenes.<sup>11</sup> In front of the cameras, however, Fukuda looked like a regular Japanese prime minister, timid and friendly, far from being the picture of a resolute and dynamic leader that he might have been trying to project. Polls after the event showed the miniscule impact of the G8 Summit on Fukuda's popularity. A poll taken by the *Asahi shimbun* showed that respondents perceived a distinct lack of leadership on the part of the Japanese prime minister. 24 per cent believed that he had demonstrated leadership, as opposed to 60 per cent who disagreed.<sup>12</sup> *Post festum*, Hugo Dobson made the pertinent observation that "it is difficult to pinpoint the G8 summit as a specific factor in the changes in approval ratings. Generally, unpopular prime ministers continue to be unpopular and popular prime ministers continue to be popular."<sup>13</sup> Polls showed that this was also the case for Fukuda, whose popularity ratings did not improve but continued to display a downward trend. Considering the political risks that he took, his demonstration of Japanese international leadership on an issue that is at the top of the global agenda – climate change – did not receive the credit that it actually deserved, according to a leading Japanese scholar.<sup>14</sup> For a politician like Fukuda whose strong hand was foreign policy, the G8 Summit was a missed opportunity. While it was seen by Japanese as befitting of Japan, as a country and a nation, that their prime minister should act in such a way as to demonstrate international leadership before and during the G8 Summit, it was more mundane yet pressing issues that concerned them.

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication with a well-known Japanese political science professor.

<sup>12</sup> "Naikaku shiji yokobai 24%" [Cabinet support sidling at 24%], *The Asahi shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Hugo Dobson, "The 2008 Hokkaido-Toyako G8 Summit: neither summit nor plummet," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 48-1-08, November 24, 2008, [http://japanfocus.org/\\_Hugo\\_Dobson-The\\_2008\\_Hokkaido\\_Toyako\\_G8\\_Summit\\_\\_neither\\_summit\\_nor\\_plummet](http://japanfocus.org/_Hugo_Dobson-The_2008_Hokkaido_Toyako_G8_Summit__neither_summit_nor_plummet).

<sup>14</sup> Tadakoro Masayuki, professor of international relations, Keio University, Tokyo, interview by author, August 4, 2008.

## Fukuda's Cabinet Reshuffle

After the G8 Summit the perseverance and stamina of Prime Minister Fukuda and his cabinet continued to be tested. Work in the Diet was characterized by political struggle and strife. The government had made strenuous efforts to muddle through and avoid a total standstill in the Diet. The lack of impact of the G8 Summit on Fukuda's standing, as revealed in polls, was a key reason behind his next move to improve his personal standing and that of his cabinet. On August 1 the prime minister announced a cabinet reshuffle. To undertake an overhaul of the cabinet might have seemed a clever idea in a situation where the popularity ratings of the government and the prime minister had diminished. At the time of the cabinet reshuffle, support and non-support levels had dropped so low that it called into question the very legitimacy of the government, and which in the past under similar circumstances had brought about the downfall of the prime minister.

The Fukuda cabinet had been in power for ten months and the prime minister would sooner or later have to alter his team. To entrust the rudder to Fukuda had been an attempt by the LDP to replace the unfortunate Abe with an experienced hand, but it was a move that did not work since it did not reverse the party's slide in popularity. The reshuffle was an attempt to do something about it. The reason given by Fukuda for reshuffling his cabinet was that the new cabinet was going to launch policies that would improve the living conditions of the people.<sup>15</sup> If the lack of support for the LDP continued, the upcoming Lower House election spelled doomsday for the party.

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<sup>15</sup> Shushō kantei [Prime Minister's Office], "Fukuda naikaku sōri daijin kisha kaiken (Fukuda kaizō naikaku)" [Press conference by Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo (Fukuda government reshuffle)], August 1, 2008, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hukudaspeech/2008/08/01press.html>.

A factor behind the cabinet overhaul was that Fukuda wanted to pick his own team in order to form a cabinet with “a Fukuda color” [*Fukuda kārā*], instead of continuing with a lineup that had been hand-picked by Abe. When Fukuda took over after Abe, only one month had elapsed since Abe changed his cabinet and it seemed at the time inopportune to sack ministers after such a short period in office; so fifteen of Abe’s seventeen ministers had continued to serve under Fukuda.<sup>16</sup>

Fukuda’s cabinet reshuffle was close to a total overhaul, if focus is on the number of new ministers. Retaining only four ministers, the new cabinet boasted no less than 13 new appointees. If Fukuda had aimed at excelling in presenting new and fresh faces, his new crew was a disappointment, however, since the new cabinet gave an unmistakable feeling of *déjà vu*: most of the new ministers had been ministers before. Only one of the new ministers lacked cabinet experience. Among the well-known politicians lining up on the stairs of the Prime Minister’s Office for the customary celebratory snapshot, only Noda Seiko in charge of food safety and consumer issues lit up the otherwise grey-suited assemblage with her light-green coat.

In selecting a cabinet with a “Fukuda color,” the ministerial lineup was intended to project an image of competence and experience, devoted and able to tackle the problems that the government faced, not to speak of those of the country. A number of senior LDP politicians were included among the new ministers, among them Machimura Nobutaka, the leader of the largest faction of the LDP. That Fukuda included senior LDP politicians made sense since he himself had only held one ministerial post before he was appointed prime minister, and his months in office had been a torturous uphill battle to forward policy proposals to the Diet let alone to obtain parliamentary approval. Assistance from experienced colleagues versed in the intricacies of the political power play in the Diet must have seemed attractive to Fukuda. The respected former Prime Minister

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<sup>16</sup> There is, however, also a tradition in Japanese politics that a new prime minister does not change the cabinet lineup if he comes into power unexpectedly due to the death or illness of his predecessor.

Nakasone Yasuhiro expressed his appreciation that Fukuda had put together a *jitsuryokusha naikaku*, a cabinet composed of influential leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Appointing experienced politicians, many of whom had been seen in senior posts in the government and the party over the years, matched Fukuda's image of being competent and experienced. As Japan's longest-serving chief cabinet secretary in the postwar period, he had acquired an image of solid competence and supreme ability to handle problems, which was the reason why the LDP had picked him as its leader, when the party needed to clear up the mess created by Fukuda's predecessor Abe Shinzō.<sup>18</sup>

The appointment as ministers of senior and experienced LDP politicians had a flip side, however. To appoint them was to pick politicians who had been heavily involved in the LDP political debacle and who were themselves responsible for the fact that Japan's political leadership had not handled the country's political, economic, and social problems in a way that exuded confidence. Fukuda's lineup was a bouquet of old faces, devoid of new ideas and visions. His ministers were experienced but the question was whether their experience counted so much in the political situation that Japan encountered.

A reason for caution for Fukuda when he considered a cabinet reshuffle was that – or, at least, should have been – the effect on public opinion of previous cabinet reshuffles had been modest, if any. What is more, earlier cases showed that the cabinet's standing in public opinion had not necessarily improved with a reshuffle – but that even the opposite might be the case. According to data compiled by the *Yomiuri shimbun*, the previous twelve reshuffles resulted in improved approval ratings in seven cases and a decrease in five.<sup>19</sup> A similar survey in the *Sankei shimbun* showed figures at variance with the above in that the effect was positive in a larger majority of

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<sup>17</sup> "Nakasone motoshushō: Ikkagetsukurai de kaisan o" [Former Prime Minister Nakasone: Dissolve the Diet in about a month!], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Edström, *Struggle, Strife, and Stalemate*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> "Survey: Shuffles don't equal ratings jump," *The Daily Yomiuri*, August 2, 2008.

cases but confirmed that the change in support ratings was rather modest.<sup>20</sup> With the precarious situation that Fukuda found himself in, the reshuffle was one of the few cards that he could throw on the table. But with not one exiting appointment, it was a foregone conclusion that doubts were heard whether Fukuda's new ministerial lineup would boost support for the government.

Survey results reported by media did not give a conclusive picture. The *Yomiuri shimbun* reported a considerable improvement in the support rate to 41.3 per cent, from 26.6 per cent in the last regular, face-to-face survey two weeks before, with the disapproval rate declining from 61.3 to 47 per cent.<sup>21</sup> The result in a similar poll conducted by the *Asahi shimbun* was strikingly different, when it reported that the approval rating continued to stand at 24 per cent; the disapproval rating had decreased modestly from 58 to 54 percent.<sup>22</sup> Other polls showed modest positive effects of the reshuffle on the popularity of the cabinet. According to the *Sankei shimbun*, a percentage change of 7.6 per cent was reported; in the *Kyōdō tsūshin*, 4.7; and in the *Mainichi shimbun*, 3 per cent.<sup>23</sup> No wonder that one of the LDP's bigwigs, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, commenting on the widely diverging results of polls, found them somewhat lacking in credibility and no grounds for basing decisions on.<sup>24</sup> It was an assessment that was fairly reasonable. Roughly a week later, the *Yomiuri shimbun* reported the results of another poll, which was a far cry from the result of the poll taken immediately after the cabinet reshuffle. Given the breakthrough the paper had reported that the reshuffle had resulted in, the

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<sup>20</sup> "Moroha no tsurugi: Naikaku kaizō" [Cabinet reshuffle: a double-edged sword], *The Sankei shimbun*, July 30, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> "Naikaku shiji kōten 41%" [Cabinet approval improving to 41%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> "Naikaku shiji yokobai 24%" [Cabinet support sidling at 24%], *The Asahi shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> "Aimai: Naikaku no inshō" [Government impression: vague], *The Sankei shimbun*, August 5, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Comment in Tahara Sōichirō's talk show "Sunday Project" on TV Asahi, August 3, 2008.

new poll was a surprise since support and non-support ratings for the government were back at previously low levels—the approval rate was 28.3 and disapproval rate 59.7 per cent.<sup>25</sup> Questioned by the *Yomiuri shimbun* whether their valuation of Fukuda had changed with his cabinet reshuffle, only 12 per cent of respondents said that their appreciation had increased, while 72 per cent found no reason to change their view.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Reshuffle and “the Asō Effect”**

When Fukuda announced the cabinet reshuffle, he drew an unexpected card out of his sleeve by appointing Asō Tarō as the new secretary-general of the LDP. Asō had been Fukuda’s antagonist in the fight for the presidency of the LDP after Abe Shinzō but had not been named successor, to the great disappointment of not only Asō himself but also many party members. While he had been seen as the most likely successor in the aftermath of Abe’s resignation, he had found himself almost immediately side-stepped in a process that was over in a few days, when the LDP factions threw their support behind Fukuda. It was Asō’s third unsuccessful attempt to become the top man. After his loss he retreated into the shadows somewhat as an ordinary MP but began to systematically build up his support base. His comeback was a return to an important post that he had held before. He had left his post as foreign minister in Abe’s first cabinet to take over the important post as LDP secretary-general, the No. 2 in the party, when Prime Minister Abe had reorganized his cabinet. At that time, Asō’s hope was that he could improve the standing of his party after its debacle in the Upper House election, which showed that the popularity of the party had plummeted to dangerously low levels. This

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<sup>25</sup> “Naikaku shijiritsu 28%, bukka taisaku ‘futekisetsu’ wa 89%...Yomiuri chōsa” [Yomiuri survey: Cabinet support 28%, price policy ‘unsuitable’ 89%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 11, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080811-OYT1T00645.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> “Naikaku shiji 41% ni kōten, ‘Asō kanjichō’ hyōka 66%...Yomiuri chōsa” [Yomiuri survey: Cabinet support improves to 41%, Secretary-General Asō 66%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 3, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080802-OYT1T00907.htm>.

hope continued to accompany him and made him accept Prime Minister Fukuda's offer to assume the task as the LDP's No. 2.

If the purpose of the reshuffle was to lend the government a Fukuda *kārā*, as was claimed beforehand, Fukuda's surprise move to appoint Asō was awkward. With Asō's charismatic persona – but also one that easily gives rise to ill feelings among non-supporters – it was likely that the *kārā* of the Fukuda cabinet would be more Asō's than Fukuda's. At the time Asō returned to a political top post, it was rumored that he and Fukuda had agreed on the latter stepping down and handing over his post to Asō before the upcoming Lower House election, as a result of Fukuda realizing that his lack of popularity made him a liability for his party.

The above notwithstanding, for Fukuda as the head of the government, it was attractive to involve Asō. He was a veteran politician but, unlike many other veterans, he was popular. Making him general-secretary of the LDP and, thus, the key man for managing party affairs, was an attempt by Fukuda to cash in on Asō's popularity.<sup>27</sup> His appointment was thus a move aimed at making him the party's "face" in the upcoming Lower House election. A survey presented by the *Sankei shimbun* showed that Asō was not only Japan's most popular politician by far, but also that his popularity increased with his appointment to secretary-general of the LDP. Fukuda's popularity had also increased, but much less, and he was trailing far behind his subordinate, 23 vs. 6.4 per cent, when respondents were asked whom they found the most suitable as prime minister.<sup>28</sup> Similar results were presented by the *Yomiuri shimbun*, only more devastating to the incumbent prime minister. The top contender was Asō with a support of 25 per cent, while Fukuda was fourth with the miniscule support rating of only three per cent.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Aso picked to boost unpopular Cabinet," *The Daily Yomiuri*, August 2, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> "Posuto Fukuda, Asō shi fudō" [Post-Fukuda, Mr. Asō not moving?], *The Sankei shimbun*, August 5, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> "'Shushō ni fusawashii' toppu wa Asō san 25%...Yomiuri chōsa" [Yomiuri survey: Mr. Asō in top with 25% as "the most suitable prime minister"], *The*

Asō's popularity made Fukuda's decision to make him secretary-general of the LDP a popular move. The *Asahi shimbun* reported that 51 per cent supported his appointment, while the *Yomiuri shimbun* reported a support rating as high as 66 per cent.<sup>30</sup> The much higher popularity that Asō enjoyed was also reflected in assessments of the new cabinet. Both the *Sankei shimbun* and the *Yomiuri shimbun* attributed the Fukuda cabinet's improved standing after the cabinet reshuffle to the "Asō effect."<sup>31</sup>

Appointing Asō was a bold but also risky move for the prime minister, since his own lack of popularity by contrast would stand out even more, leading to the risk of his being deposed by party members in favor of Asō. For Asō, it was risky for his future to align with Fukuda, whose lack of popularity risked endangering Asō's own popularity.<sup>32</sup> If the reshuffle did not result in improved popularity for the party, he could fall together with the prime minister.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the policies pursued by Fukuda and the policies preferred by Asō were divergent, and as a member of the cabinet, Asō could not continue to be free-wheeling and outspoken but would have to tone down his own ideas. When he was asked why he had accepted to join Fukuda, he answered in his characteristically forthright manner: "The survival of the LDP is at risk. I want to lend my strength. The party

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*Yomiuri shimbun*, August 14, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080814-OYT1T00711.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> "Naikaku shiji yokobai 24%" [Cabinet support sidling at 24%], *The Asahi shimbun*, August 3, 2008; "Naikaku shiji kōten 41%" [Cabinet approval improving to 41%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> "Asō kōka? Hajime no kaifuku" [The first improvement: An Asō effect?], *The Sankei shimbun*, August 5, 2008; "Tō-naikakushintaisei ni 'kitaikan'" ["Expectations" towards the new party-cabinet system], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> "Aso picked to boost unpopular Cabinet," *The Daily Yomiuri*, August 2, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> "Asō shi, posuto Fukuda e kake: Shippai nara tomodaore" [Mr. Asō's post-Fukuda gambling: Failure means joint collapse], *The Tōkyō shimbun*, August 3, 2008.

chairman asked.”<sup>34</sup> What is interesting in this comment is that Asō’s sense of responsibility was towards the party and not the country.

### **The Reshuffle and the End of the Koizumi Era**

It was obvious that through his cabinet reshuffle Prime Minister Fukuda had tried to regain ground that the LDP had lost to the DPJ. His announcement that the new cabinet would focus on matters that the populace at large valued, like inflation, wages, and pensions, meant a return to traditional LDP politics. It was a signal that the drive was over for instituting reforms that had been the lodestar for the top leadership of the LDP during the Koizumi years. It was also a step away from ambitions to increase Japan’s international presence and have a greater voice in international affairs, something that had been important for Prime Minister Abe. The shift from Koizumi and his reform ideas and Abe’s focus on lofty pies in the sky could not have been made clearer in Fukuda’s declaration, after he had presented his new team, that: “I will give everything I’ve got in building a government that puts itself in the people’s shoes, a foundation in which people can live without worry, and an economic society in which the people can feel affluence.”<sup>35</sup>

The renewed priorities of the LDP were thus seemingly concurrent with voter priorities. For voters, however, surging prices on gasoline and foodstuffs counted more than the ambitions on the part of the political leadership. A *Kyōdō* survey showed that 29 per cent of the Japanese put priority on measures for economic growth and employment, 28.6 per cent on social security issues, and 11.5 per cent on the widening gap between rich and poor.<sup>36</sup> This implied that the efforts by the LDP to get parliamentary approval for its policies were immersed in issues that were

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<sup>34</sup> “Shushō settoku, Asō shi oreta” [Mr. Asō gave in to the prime minister’s persuasion], *The Sankei shimbun*, August 2, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> “Fukuda vows action on oil, terror: Anticlimactic Cabinet reshuffle casts doubt on prime minister’s ability to tackle tough issues,” *The Japan Times*, August 3, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> “New Cabinet polling at 31.5% after reshuffle,” *The Japan Times*, August 3, 2008.

seen to be of lesser importance by the people. This had grave implications for the LDP and the Fukuda-led government, since it projected the image of a government not tackling the serious economic problems that afflicted the country. No wonder that Fukuda wanted to signal a shift of the LDP's course, especially since it would mean a return to the LDP's home ground which had enabled the party to dominate Japanese politics. The policy shift also meant a return to traditional policies pursued by the *hoshu honryū*, the conservative mainstream of the LDP that had dominated the party since its founding in 1955, and which was a prolongation of the pre-1955 political currents that, in their turn, built on pre-war party politics, and which was the hallmark not least of Prime Minister Fukuda's own father, Fukuda Takeo (prime minister 1976–78).<sup>37</sup>

But the shift away from politics à la Koizumi was no news. The change was laid bare by Fukuda in his second policy speech at the beginning of 2008, in which he made an attempt to display that he understood the sentiments of the people. Echoing the DPJ's slogan *Kokumin no seikatsu ga daiichi*, or "People's Lives First" that had proven attractive to voters, the prime minister stressed that laws and systems should "put people first."<sup>38</sup> The prime minister listed as important issues the strengthening of the economy, maintenance of the social security system, and measures to deal with the low birth rate, the increase in the number of temporarily employed workers, and flagging local economies. The departure from Koizumi was made overtly clear when the prime minister did not use the word "reform" even once in his speech, while "people" was heard 48 times and "environment" 23 times. The speech was rich in words but short on new ideas.<sup>39</sup> This did not mean that ideas were lacking, but rather that they were firmly entrenched in traditional LDP principles.

With his cabinet reshuffle, Fukuda continued to direct the priorities and policies of his party away from the ideas that had been pursued by

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<sup>37</sup> Edström, *Struggle, Strife and Stalemate*, p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> "Some good ideas, but can he do it?" *The Japan Times*, January 20, 2008 (editorial), <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ed20080120a1.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Edström, *Struggle, Strife and Stalemate*, p. 79.

Koizumi. The key task of the new government was to take on pressing issues like oil supply and terrorism, considered a vital national priority; and to focus on solving the prevailing economic problems rather than pursue reform – the latter brought the party back to politics that had been traditionally advocated and pursued by the *hoshu honryū*, the conservative mainstream, that the Koizumi years had represented a break with.

The direction away from Koizumi's reform agenda was laid bare in two of Fukuda's ministerial appointments. What evidenced that reform was no longer a priority for governmental policies was not least the appointment of Motegi Toshimitsu, the minister for financial services and administrative reforms. During the Koizumi years, reform was the banner for a political movement spearheaded by the prime minister, who had even risked his position, if his policy was not accepted by the Diet, by dissolving the Diet and announcing a general election. Motegi revealed in a popular talk show that Prime Minister Fukuda had reminded him before he was appointed minister that Motegi, as a minister, was now responsible for reforms.<sup>40</sup> This implied that the reform policy was no longer handled by the prime minister, as under Koizumi, but by one of the cabinet's junior ministers. Put simply, reform had been degraded as a priority. Another appointment that signaled a direction away from the Koizumi path was Noda Seiko's return to a ministerial post. It was the comeback of one of the LDP heavyweights, who had been against Koizumi's plan to privatize postal services and had been cast out into the political wilderness as a result of her resistance. Her return was a signal that senior politicians with a clear anti-reform agenda were not only tolerated but even highly regarded by the post-Koizumi leadership of the LDP.

### **Fukuda Throws in the Towel**

The economic situation changed during the summer of 2008. The problems that Japanese households and companies faced, amid an economic crisis fast embroiling the whole world, were steadily getting worse, and pressure

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<sup>40</sup> Motegi made his statement on Tahara Sōichirō's talk show "Sunday Project" on TV Asahi, August 3, 2008.

increased on the government to act speedily and decisively. For the government, the rising prices of petrol and everyday goods such as sausage, soya, egg, and wheat were a cause for serious concern, since the wrath that the price rise met among consumers foreboded a disastrous outcome in the Lower House election. The Japanese were stunned, for instance, when signboards in their shops informed that their bread and buns were being made from rice meal, with bakeries having begun to use rice meal instead of more expensive wheat-flour. To housewives, a key group for Japanese political parties, it became overly clear that the economy was in trouble when the food maker Q.P. Corp. raised the price of mayonnaise for the first time in 17 years.<sup>41</sup> At the end of July, inflation had gained speed and pushed the overall national consumer price index to 1.9 per cent, the highest recorded in 15 years.<sup>42</sup>

The price of gasoline rose drastically and reached record levels. Economic forecasts painted a gloomy picture with increasing unemployment and companies reporting a fall in profits, cutting down, or even abandoning the bonus that had traditionally been paid out (in June and December) to employees, usually amounting to as much as 1-3 times the monthly basic salary. Newspapers and news broadcasts were filled with reports that the longest economic boom in the postwar period was over.

With the LDP's lack of fortune in being able to pursue its agenda in the Diet, and economic prospects turning grimmer with rising oil prices and economic growth slowing down, Prime Minister Fukuda acted quickly and ordered his new minister for economic and fiscal policy, Yosano Kaoru, to act resolutely to improve business conditions. On August 22, Yosano delivered a draft of the planned measures to the prime minister, and the headache for the government was now how to secure financial resources

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<sup>41</sup> "Mayonnaise, rice bowl costs hint at Japan inflation," *Reuters*, May 26, 2008, <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/070514/3/31sys.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "Food, fuel prices push CPI to 15 1/2-year high," *Daily Yomiuri Online*, July 26, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/business/20080726TDY01301.htm>.

for an economic stimulus package to boost economic growth.<sup>43</sup> On August 29, the cabinet unveiled a major economic stimulus package amounting to ¥11.7 trillion (US\$120 billion). Income taxes for low-income earners and highway tolls were to be cut, and money was earmarked for loan guarantees to small and midsize companies.<sup>44</sup>

For Fukuda, the economic rescue package was to no avail, however. No increase of popular support could be traced in the polls. To the lack of any effect of Fukuda's leadership at the G8 Summit was now added the lack of improvement in his popularity when the economic stimulus package was presented. With the plummeting support of the government, it was a foregone conclusion that a rough time awaited Fukuda. However, on September 1, shortly after the economic package was presented, a press conference was convened and Fukuda announced his retirement. The reason Prime Minister Fukuda gave for stepping down was forthright. He explained that he "would end up inconveniencing the public if he stepped down immediately after the opening of an anticipated extraordinary Diet session. Turmoil would erupt in the Diet if he were to do so."<sup>45</sup> He had been appointed in a move by the LDP to manage the upcoming Lower House election, but like his predecessor Abe he had been equally unsuccessful in improving the popularity of his party, and he handed over the reins of power to his successor.

The news that Fukuda would step down came out of the blue. Many were flabbergasted over Fukuda's sudden move that resembled only too well the way his predecessor Abe Shinzō had withdrawn. There was a difference, however. Abe is Fukuda's junior by two decades and might attempt a

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<sup>43</sup> Kanako Takahara and Takahiro Fukada, "Additional budget for stimulus in the works," *The Japan Times*, August 23, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nb20080823a2.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Kanako Takahara and Takahiro Fukada, "Stimulus package ready for Diet OK," *The Japan Times*, August 30, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nb20080830a1.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Fukuda's decision was his own / Outgoing prime minister didn't consult anyone before opting to resign," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 3, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080903TDY03105.htm>.

future comeback; but this is not the case with Fukuda. Twice he has retired from politics, and at the age of 72, this time it is for good.

## **Factoring in Asō**

### **The Election That Was No Election**

Preparations for the LDP presidential election commenced immediately. While the Lower House election does not need to be held until September 2009, when the term of the present members runs out, the prime minister can dissolve the Lower House at an earlier date and call for a general election. The fact is that few Lower House members have served a full four-year term. With the historic victory that the DPJ and the other opposition parties secured in the Upper House election in July 2007, the party had since pursued a parliamentary strategy devised to make the prime minister find no way out but to call for a Lower House election. With the resounding victory that the then Prime Minister Koizumi and the LDP captured in the 2005 Lower House election, which gave the ruling coalition more than two-thirds of the seats in the Lower House, the ruling coalition cannot avoid a defeat, if by defeat is meant that it will lose seats in the Lower House. The 2005 “postal election” was a triumph of historic dimensions for the LDP but the victory was wholly ascribable to Koizumi, and the LDP will be in no position to repeat its performance, whoever heads the LDP.

It was fairly obvious that both the LDP leadership and the leading candidate, Asō Tarō, made the assessment that a snap election after his coming to power would limit what was seen as an inevitable defeat for the party. Important too was that the New Komeito pressed for an early election, and the views and wishes of the LDP’s coalition partner could not be lightly dismissed. To do so could endanger the cooperation between the LDP and the New Komeito, which would make the LDP lose its position as a ruling party. While the New Komeito is a fairly small party with its 21 seats in the Upper House (out of a total of 242) and 31 in the Lower House (out of 480), its support is vital for the LDP by the virtue of the proven ability of Soka Gakkai, the influential Buddhist organization behind the party, to steer the votes of its supporters to parties it wants to support – in a

way that decides the outcome of the election. No LDP prime minister can afford to alienate the LDP's present coalition partner. In many electoral districts LDP candidates rely upon support from followers of Soka Gakkai to get elected.<sup>46</sup> The New Komeito is a pacifist-leaning party and its resistance to some LDP policies had surfaced occasionally. When the then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō contemplated visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, he was warned by the New Komeito not to do so, and the warning was later repeated.<sup>47</sup> The LDP's coalition partner made it clear that it resisted other key governmental policies too, like Prime Minister Fukuda's push to renew the new Antiterrorism Law by continuing to supply free fuel to ships in the Indian Ocean to support U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan.

### LDP's Presidential Campaign

When the campaign for selecting Fukuda's successor began on September 10, five prime ministerial hopefuls had filed their candidacy.<sup>48</sup> This was a record number and there was a reason for it. With support for the LDP at a nadir, the party leadership wanted to orchestrate a campaign that it hoped would excite the public and deflect voters' attention away from the political impotency of the party in the Diet with the opposition controlling the Upper House. Apart from Asō Tarō, who was seen as the favorite to replace Fukuda, four other leading LDP politicians lined up: former LDP Policy Research Council Chairman Ishihara Nobuteru, former Defense Minister

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<sup>46</sup> Kabashima Ikuo, "Jimintō no Kōmei izon to Minshutō no 'yakushin'" [LDP's dependence on the New Komeito and DPJ's "rapid progress"], in Kabashima Ikuo, *Sengo seiji no kiseki: Jimintō shisutemu no keisei to hen'yō* [The track record of postwar politics: Creation and change of the LDP system] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2004), pp. 371–87.

<sup>47</sup> Masami Ito, "Give Yasukuni a miss: New Komeito: Ota of LDP's junior partner sends hawkish Abe camp a clear signal," *The Japan Times*, September 30, 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20060930f1.html>; "Soka Gakkai's new chief urges Abe to shun Yasukuni," *The Japan Times*, November 18, 2006, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20061118a5.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Johnston, "LDP rivals offer more reform or regression: Short stint may await whoever is next prime minister," *The Japan Times*, September 11, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080911a2.html>.

Ishiba Shigeru, State Minister for Economic and Fiscal Policy Yosano Kaoru, and – deemed most “exciting” of all – Koike Yuriko, a former environment minister and defense minister. Not only was she the first woman to run for the LDP presidency, but she was also endorsed by former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō, Japan’s most popular politician bar none. That he endorsed Koike was maybe not so surprising, since Koike was the only candidate who declared allegiance to his reforms. At the outset of her campaign, Koike declared that she was a champion of reform à la Koizumi and that she would streamline the government and drastically reduce the number of Diet members if elected.<sup>49</sup>

Quite soon it dawned that the LDP was going to elect Asō and that the campaign for selecting Koizumi’s successor was merely a staged event to prop up the party’s flagging public support. With the LDP in dire straits, hopes were pinned on Asō for two main reasons. One of the LDP’s kingmakers, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō, in a comment one week before the LDP was due to pick Fukuda’s successor, was pivotal in deciding the political climate in favor of Asō. On a primetime talk show he said: “Many people in the Liberal Democratic Party are talking about Asō as the next man. And of course, I agree with them. His remarks are entertaining, and they go down better than Fukuda’s dry talk. We need to make good use of Asō’s popularity.”<sup>50</sup> Another good reason for choosing Asō was that polls showed that he was the most popular among the political leaders that the party could put forward.<sup>51</sup> In polls, Asō came out far ahead of the other

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<sup>49</sup> “Jimin sōsaisen: Shijō saita gonin ga rikkōhō todokede” [LDP presidential election: Historical record five candidates filed], *The Mainichi shimbun*, September 10, 2008, <http://mainichi.jp/select/seiji/news/20080910k0000e010035000c.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Iwami Takao, “‘Sundome’ ni natte inai” [It doesn’t become ‘stopping short of the line’], *The Mainichi shimbun*, November 29, 2008, <http://mainichi.jp/select/seiji/iwami/news/20081129ddm002070038000c.html>.

<sup>51</sup> “Jimin sōsaisen Asō shi 37% Sankei FNN gōdō yoron chōsa” [Sankei FNN joint poll: LDP presidential election: Support for Mr. Asō 37%], *The Sankei shimbun*, September 12, 2008,

<http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/080912/stt0809121222003-n1.htm>;  
 “Shushō ni fusawashii no wa dochira?...Yomiuri kinkyū yoron chōsa” [Yomiuri quick poll: Who is suitable prime minister?], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 12,

candidates and, most important in this context, he was far more convincing as a national leader according to polls than the prime ministerial candidate of the opposition camp, the DPJ leader Ozawa Ichirō. Asō captured 59 per cent, 21 more than Ozawa in a *Yomiuri shimbun* poll taken ten days before the LDP was to choose its new leader.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it made sense to pick Asō if the election campaign was to center around who they perceived would make the LDP prevail in the upcoming Lower House election, if not necessarily who would be best suited to take the country and its people out of the difficulties. Announcing his candidacy, Asō had made himself a spokesman for the view that the key aspect of picking Fukuda's successor was who would be best suited to take on the DPJ.<sup>53</sup> This strategy was also natural for his party to adopt, since he was its secretary-general and thus the key official for deciding the strategies of the party. Since those who were electors in the LDP presidential election ballot, in many cases, were themselves up for election or re-election, Asō's popularity over Ozawa was an important consideration.

The LDP strategy outline was to pick a new man at the helm, dissolve the Lower House, and call for general election more or less in one sweep, thereby taking advantage of the rising popularity of both the prime minister and his party that was seen as a customary bonus of picking a new leader. This was the same calculation as the one that led to Abe Shinzō being picked as leader of the party. At that time, with the prospect of an Upper House election one year hence, it was important for the LDP that Abe seemed to be a politician who would lure the electorate to vote for the

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2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080911-OYT1T01062.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> "Shushō ni fusawashii no wa dochira?...Yomiuri kinkyū yoron chōsa" [Yomiuri quick poll: Who is suitable prime minister?], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 12, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080911-OYT1T01062.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> "Dare ga Minshūtō to arasou no ka ga kanshin' Asō Tarō shi" [Mr. Asō Tarō: "Concern is who can fight the DPJ"], *The Sankei shimbun*, September 10, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/080910/stt0809101132003-n1.htm>.

party.<sup>54</sup> His appointment turned out to have been a serious miscalculation on the part of his party. The LDP experienced a shattering defeat in the election, which threw the party into turmoil that became a headache for the party's leadership as well as its rank and file. Despite the warning that the Abe debacle should have been, the LDP was in such bad shape when Fukuda left the party that it entrusted itself once again to the same strategy. But as conservatives they preferred to stick to old means and measures that had been used to their advantage many times; albeit the party was probably well aware of the possible flaws of a strategy that took only popularity into consideration.

With the election of Asō as Fukuda's successor a foregone conclusion, the candidates excelled during the presidential campaign in the usual verbosity of Japanese politicians on such occasions. The policy "debates" among the five candidates became a stream of monologues without exchange of ideas and views.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, true debate was stifled and the LDP strategists failed completely in their ambition to increase interest in, and support of, their party through a lively and stimulating debate among candidates.

### **Asō, the Candidate**

Asō's strong position in the presidential race was indicative of changes that have taken place in Japanese politics. He is a member of one of the LDP's minor factions that had been formed by one of the leading representatives of the LDP, Kōno Yōhei, who is well-known for his dovish and liberal views. For a while Kōno had been seen as, and acted as, a political maverick but that was back in the 1970s, when he had left the LDP and formed a new and reform-inclined party, only to lose reform momentum and return to his political *alma mater* after a decade. Last he had served as speaker of the Lower House after having held a number of key posts in the LDP and the government. Asō had been a member of Kōno's faction from the start and

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<sup>54</sup> Bert Edström, *Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper (May 2007), p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Yuji Anai, "LDP race fails to excite public," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 24, 2008, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080924TDY03106.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080924TDY03106.htm).

was a close collaborator with him. When Kōno formed his faction, Asō became a member fully aware that being a member of a small faction meant that he would have to toil for a long time outside of LDP politics, the latter basically being the preserve of the large factions. But it also demonstrated his sense of loyalty, perseverance, and stamina; and it was rewarded when Asō inherited the party group headed by Kōno when it was dissolved in 2006.<sup>56</sup>

As a member of a small faction, Asō would have found it difficult to attain the post of prime minister given the strong hand that factions had previously enjoyed, the prime minister being picked by a coalition of LDP factions with a member of one of the largest factions regularly chosen. There are exceptions to this rule: a prime minister could hail from a small faction but such cases do not abound – Miki Takeo (prime minister 1974–76) was the head of the small Miki faction, and Kaifu Toshiki (prime minister 1989–91) a member of the same small faction. Both became premier when the LDP found itself in difficult waters – Miki after Tanaka Kakuei had had to leave because of a money scandal; Kaifu when several of the LDP's top ministers, including the incumbent prime minister, were involved in another such scandal. The election of Asō is an indication that factions are no longer the political powerhouses they used to be.

To Asō, the LDP presidential election in 1998 had been instructive. Kajiyama Seiroku belonged to a small faction but had put up an unexpectedly strong show and came as the runner up. According to Asō, this demonstrated that the era had arrived when even a candidate from a small faction had the chance to become prime minister. But a candidate would have to fight for it himself.<sup>57</sup> This insight might be the reason why Asō took the chance in every LDP presidential election since 1998. Three times he had offered his services; three times he had lost. His perseverance illustrates that Asō had learnt the philosophy of his revered grandfather

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<sup>56</sup> Hisane Masaki, "Dove Fukuda Vs Hawk Aso," *Japan Today*, September 18, 2007, <http://archive.japantoday.com/jp/comment/1165>.

<sup>57</sup> Soga Takeshi, "'Futoku mijikaku' o tōsu sontoku" ["Result not length" excels over win or loss], *The Asahi shimbun*, November 11, 2008.

Yoshida Shigeru, who had made it one of the lodestars for Japanese politics after its defeat in the Second World War to be “a good loser.”<sup>58</sup> Not giving up, and having the long-term goal constantly in mind, will, eventually, bring success.

In 2008 it was Asō’s fourth attempt to become prime minister. The year before he had put himself forward to the party when Abe retired but had been rejected. In fact it had been widely expected that Asō would come after Abe. Asō was popular in the party and also a close friend to Abe, who endorsed Asō. But Abe had become so thoroughly disliked because of his performance as prime minister that *his* support was far from a plus. The party picked Fukuda as Abe’s successor, despite the fact that Asō was much more popular among ordinary Japanese.

### **Asō’s Focus on the Economic Concerns of the Japanese**

Asō Tarō’s campaign for the LDP presidency focused on criticizing the DPJ and emphasizing the need to increase government spending to prop up the flagging economy, and to postpone raising the consumption tax until the economy had revived. He was careful to distance himself from the idea of reforms championed by Koizumi and instead argued that fiscal policy should be used flexibly to bring the Japanese economy back on track. His dislike of reforms à la Koizumi was no news, however. It had come to the fore when Asō was one of the speakers in a series of seminars organized by up and coming LDP leaders, the purpose of which was to discuss policies of the future and formulate the agenda of the party. He spoke about Japan’s role in the world. His speech in the seminar series was given in April 2007, when the mood in the LDP was such that its move away from Koizumi’s

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<sup>58</sup> Hiroshi Nara, ed., *Yoshida Shigeru, Last Meiji Man* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 49. Yoshida saw Japan’s role in the aftermath of defeat as to act as a “good loser” and as prime minister he behaved accordingly. At the most, he hoped to be able to persuade the Americans to eliminate what he saw as scandalous mistakes, but if his ideas and views were not accepted by the Occupation authorities, he would accept stoically whatever follies were committed, he later confessed. He knew that if he did not accept measures and acts taken by the Occupation, he would no longer be prime minister.

reform path was clearly discernible and the time was over when a politician could become the leader of the LDP only if he was a defender of the Koizumi legacy, as had been the case with Abe Shinzō when he was elected.<sup>59</sup>

Asō began his speech by referring to talks with journalists. He said that he often heard the comment that “Japan under Koizumi has really changed!” to which he used to comment: “Well, changed how?” This counter-question left the journalists nonplussed, he said. Asō did not deny that change *had* taken place but found more important the way the world valued Japan.<sup>60</sup> His outright dismissal of what had been, and still at the time seemed to be, the key political lodestar – reform – was astounding but did cause much of a stir, maybe because the seminar was closed and he was only one of several LDP seniors who tried to boost the spirit of the party rank and file.<sup>61</sup> The LDP bosses felt on safe seas with Asō at the rudder. They saw him as “simply focused, in the near term, on reversing the policy mistakes of his predecessors that crushed domestic spending and aggravated the country’s slowdown,” as the president of a Tokyo-based investment research firm reported in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>62</sup> For “mistakes,” read Koizumi’s reforms. Koizumi had been appointed as party head against the wishes of the LDP bosses, and his five-and-a-half years in power had certainly rankled with them.

But for the LDP to sweep aside the Koizumi legacy – or at least to try to do so – points to the dilemma that the party finds itself in. In 2001 Koizumi won his political laurels by attacking the old-style LDP, promising to crush the party if it resisted change, and throughout his years in power, he

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<sup>59</sup> Edström, *Success of a Successor*, pp. 38ff.

<sup>60</sup> Asō Tarō, “Sekai no naka no Nihon o kangaeru” [Thinking of Japan in the world], in Shinku tanku 2005-Nihon, ed., *Jimintō no chie* [LDP’s wisdom] (Tokyo: Seikō shobō, 2008), p. 65.

<sup>61</sup> The seminar series resulted eventually in the publication of two volumes. On the cover of both books, a point is made prominently that the media had not been present.

<sup>62</sup> Jesper Koll, “Able Aso,” *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, September 23, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122211743607264397.html>.

continued to enjoy considerable support, to the chagrin of party elders. Not least the 2005 “postal election” showed the sympathy he met among voters. To rid the party of Koizumi-style ideas clashed head-on with the mainstream currents in the electorate that had carried him to power in 2001 and had secured his party’s landslide victory in the 2005 Lower House election.

# A Political Blueblood On the Political Throne

## A Profile Without a Profile

Asō Tarō became Japan's 92nd prime minister on September 24, 2008. The Upper House is controlled by the opposition parties and had snubbed him by favoring Ozawa Ichirō with 125 out of a total of 240 valid ballots in the second round of polling. The Lower House picked Asō, who garnered 337 or 71 per cent of the total of 478 valid ballots, a decision that prevailed and became the final resolution of the Diet as stipulated by the constitution.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, he became Japan's fourth prime minister in less than 24 months. As is customarily the case, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) had put together a "profile" of the head of the government, also in English. But, this time, all that was put together was a photograph, the name of the new prime minister, and the information: "Born in Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan, on September 20, 1940; Member of the House of Representatives Constituency: Fukuoka 8th District (Elected 9 times)."<sup>64</sup> While similar profiles for Asō's predecessors had hardly been a mine of information, the facts about Asō were unusually scarce. The "milestones" that gave stamina to the profile of previous premiers were lacking in the case of Asō, and the "ideals" that embellished the "profile" of former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō were nowhere to be seen.<sup>65</sup> For a person who held the highest office in the country, second only to the venerable Emperor, information was so meager as to verge on meaninglessness. The version of Asō's life

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<sup>63</sup> "Taro Aso becomes Japan's 92th prime minister," *Xinhua*, September 24, 2008, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-09/24/content\\_10104676.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-09/24/content_10104676.htm).

<sup>64</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, "Profile of Prime Minister Aso," [http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/asoprofile/index\\_e.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/asoprofile/index_e.html) (downloaded November 11, 2008). In the Japanese version information is somewhat more extensive, adding that Asō is 175 cm tall and weighs 70 kg. See Sōri kantei, "Asō sōri purofiiru" [Profile of Prime Minister Asō], <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/asoprofile/index.html> (accessed November 11, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> See the presentation of recent prime ministers on the homepage of the Prime Minister's Office, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/>.

story presented by the PMO told of a prime minister who – however prominent he was as a politician – was seen as fit to be presented as a veritable *tabula rasa* in the eyes of bureaucrats.

### **Asō's Ascension as Full Circle of Postwar Politics**

The treatment that the anonymous bureaucrats bestowed upon the new premier was not only odd in its lack of information but also gave no hint as to the significance of his having ascended the top political post, namely, the withering away of the reform ideas that had been introduced by Koizumi and which had been introduced into Japan's political system as a belated response and reaction to the upheavals of the world economy and the international system in the aftermath of the Cold War. Put simply, what had been taken for a time to be changes and modifications of Japan's political system, as it had emerged and evolved since the early postwar period, now seem to have been a short-term aberration. The election of Asō was proof of traditional politics bouncing back, regaining terrain lost to reformers. His victory in the LDP presidential election, which automatically made him prime minister, was a victory for forces in the LDP who had despaired when the reformist Koizumi was prime minister, and who had fought what had seemed a lost battle. With Asō's victory they were back in business and Japanese politics back on the track laid down by Asō's grandfather, Yoshida Shigeru. Fukuda had initiated the march away from Koizumi-ism, and Asō's elevation to the pinnacle of power was yet another step in this direction.

After Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. presidential election, one of Japan's leading political scientists, former Tokyo University President Sasaki Takeshi, wrote: "The U.S. presidential election is over. Senator Obama, who chanted 'Change!' has triumphed. The financial crisis was the final tailwind pushing his message of 'Change.' The twists and turns we saw are an omen that the world is entering a once-in-every-twenty years cycle of 'Change.' This election was the warning shot. As for the Asō cabinet, the one thing that is absolutely clear is that it seeks, if nothing else,

to tenaciously prevent 'Change' from occurring in Japanese politics."<sup>66</sup> Asō's triumph was a victory of reactionaries in the true sense of the word, politicians who wanted nothing of the reforms and changes that had been brought into Japanese politics by Koizumi and his followers but wanted traditional old-style politics à la LDP brought back. Asō was their man with what seemed the necessary qualifications for fighting the battle for the old ideals and values that had been cut short during the Koizumi years.

Asō's credentials for a crusade to eliminate the Koizumi legacy were good. He had earned respect through his work in private business, government, and party, but his story was also one of family traditions and good fortune. His pedigree makes him political blue blood and he is carried by an awareness of his responsibilities as yet another link in the chain formed by his illustrious forefathers.<sup>67</sup> Like his immediate predecessors Koizumi Jun'ichirō, Abe Shinzō, and Fukuda Yasuo, he belongs to Japan's political nobility on account of his birth. But the political implications of Asō's family background are even more solid than merely having a premier as grandfather. In a book he wrote about his grandfather Yoshida Shigeru (prime minister 1946–47, 1948–54), it is with considerable pride that Asō tells of his great-great grandfather Ōkubo Toshimichi, a politician of samurai descent who became one of the founding fathers of Modern Japan as a result of the role he played in the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Ōkubo's son Makino Nobuaki was a leading statesman in the early decades of the twentieth century, and was sent to the Paris Peace Conference after World War I as Japan's ambassador, to become later a towering figure in Japanese politics as Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal. Yoshida's biological father Takenouchi Tsuna was one of the leaders of the Movement for Liberty and Civil Rights, *Jiyū minken undō*, and brother of Yoshida Kenzō, who was

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<sup>66</sup> Sasaki Takeshi, "Jidai o yomu" [Understanding the times], *The Tōkyō shimbun*, November 9, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Asō's comments in the postscript of his *Jiyū to han'ei no ko* [Arc of freedom and prosperity] (Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2007), p. 386.

childless and adopted Yoshida Shigeru.<sup>68</sup> His sister is married into the Imperial family and his father-in-law Suzuki Zenkō had been prime minister.

Asō does not hide his admiration for his grandfather. Already as a promising politician on his way up, Asō had published a book about Yoshida in which he describes himself not only as Yoshida's grandchild but also as his political disciple [*kōhai seijika*].<sup>69</sup> The book pays homage to his grandfather who he describes as a man of the modern era, who did not lose his "Japanese *kokoro*" but combined it with the determination of a Meiji person. Above all, he loved his country and was carried by a love for his country unrivalled by any Japanese, according to Asō.<sup>70</sup> His respect for his grandfather informed books he published later and he rejoiced quoting what Yoshida had told little Tarō: "Japan will be good. It will absolutely be good."<sup>71</sup> Grandfather's belief in the future of Japan is something that Asō is an ardent believer in, and is something that he likes to convey to Japanese youth.<sup>72</sup>

The foundations of the political and economic system of present-day Japan were laid during Yoshida's years as prime minister. This is not to say that he can be seen as "the father of postwar Japan," as many do. Albeit Yoshida is a central figure in Japan's modern political history, there is no doubt that the truly path-breaking changes that Japan underwent when he headed the Japanese government were instituted by the Occupation and only

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<sup>68</sup> Asō Tarō, *Sofu, Yoshida Shigeru no ryūgi: The Lessons Grandpa Shigeru Yoshida Has Taught Us* [The ways of Yoshida Shigeru, my grandfather: The Lessons Grandpa Shigeru Yoshida Has Taught Us] (Tokyo: PHP kenkyūsho, 2000), pp. 32ff.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>71</sup> This is the opening chapter in *Sofu Yoshida Shigeru no ryūgi* and the phrase is repeated verbatim in the first chapter of Asō's *Totetsumonai Nihon* [Incredible Japan] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2007), pp. 18ff.

<sup>72</sup> In fact, when a *bunkō* edition of *Totetsumonai Nihon* was published (Tokuma bunkō, 2007), this aspect was stressed when the title was changed to "The starting point of Asō Tarō," and Yoshida's lessons was made a subtitle. It showed Asō's self-esteem and that he saw no need to hide his light under a bushel.

marginally influenced by Yoshida.<sup>73</sup> Thus, his towering presence in postwar Japanese history is partly due to the fact that he has become the symbol of the changes that were instituted during the Occupation.<sup>74</sup> In his boundless love of Japan as it is, with all its flaws and blemishes, the appointment of Asō as prime minister means that postwar politics has come full circle.

Asō's devotion to his grandfather comes to the fore in *Totetsumonai Nihon* [Incredible Japan], which he published in 2007 in order to promote his bid for the post of prime minister in 2007, and which became an instant bestseller.<sup>75</sup> The title of the book is a saying used by his grandfather which had made a deep impression on him. One thing is certain, however. Yoshida was an experienced China hand and had studied the Chinese classics for years and would not like Asō to have used *hiragana*, the Japanese syllabic characters, and write とてつもない for *totetsumonai* in the title of the book. He would have used Chinese characters and written 途轍もない. Asō's way of writing might be that he wanted to stress his well-known image of being a fan of *manga*, Japanese cartoons, not noted for its elegant language. Another element in the title of Asō's bestseller is also worth noting. The title includes 日本 or "Japan," which can be read as *Nihon* or *Nippon*; the first reading is most common today and is often seen as a neutral concept, while the latter has nationalistic overtones in many cases and was common in prewar times. It is likely that Yoshida who was born in the Meiji era and was as much a prewar as a postwar figure, used *Nippon* in the phrase that so impressed Asō, which could make him see it necessary to

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<sup>73</sup> John Dower, "Yoshida in the Scales of History," in John Dower, *Japan in War and Peace. Essays on History, Culture and Race* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), p. 210.

<sup>74</sup> I have discussed the bifurcated image of Yoshida in "Japan's Foreign Policy and the Yoshida Legacy Revisited," in Bert Edström, ed., *Turning Points in Japanese History* (Richmond: Japan Library, 2002), pp. 215–31.

<sup>75</sup> Two weeks before Asō was up for election as leader of the LDP, the book had sold 171,000 copies in its 12th print. It excelled over other best sellers published by his competitors for the post, Yosano Kaoru and Koike Yuriko ("Asō shi ga 'totetsumonai' ninki shinsho demo atsui arasoi" [Mr. Asō "incredibly" popular, hot war also with *shinsho* edition], *The Sankei shimbun*, September 23, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/life/trend/080906/trd0809062326015-n1.htm>).

add *furigana* to show that the reading is *Nihon* and not *Nippon*.<sup>76</sup> Given the fact that *furigana* is used to show the reading of unusual words or characters or, sometimes, for stylistic reasons, to add *furigana* to 日本, which is a very common word, indicates that there lurks a hidden message. It seems likely that adding *furigana* in this way is Asō's way of distancing himself from the reading of 日本 as *Nippon* that would have a nationalistic flavor. To pose as a nationalist is certainly not necessary for Asō, who over years of prolific political activity has made for himself a name as a nationalistic politician, fully in line with the legacy of his beloved grandfather.

But, at the same time, Asō's family background was seen as a cause for concern for some in that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. In this, he resembled his predecessor Abe Shinzō. In an interview before he became prime minister, Abe said that he was aware that his privileged upbringing could pose a problem if troubles would mount if and when he became premier.<sup>77</sup> Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro raised the same concern when he commented on Asō's background: "The problem is that he comes from a cheery, advantaged background. He needs someone beside him with a darker and scarier view of reality, with more experience of common troubles. That will be an important factor for the future of Japanese politics and for the survival power of the LDP."<sup>78</sup> The interesting point here is that what the experienced Nakasone singled out as a problem – the fact that Asō came from an advantaged background– was seen as a

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<sup>76</sup> Ueda Mannen's authoritative *Daijiten* [Large lexicon] (1917, reprint ed. 1963) gives only *Nippon* as the reading of 日本.

<sup>77</sup> Interview of Abe Shinzō, in Shinohara Fumiya, *Dare ga Nihon o sukuu no ka: Posuto Koizumi yūryoku seijika ni miru ningenryoku* [Who will save Japan? Personal capabilities seen in influential post-Koizumi politicians] (Tokyo: Chichi shuppansha, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> "Round-table talk on Fukuda's resignation: what about perseverance and forcefulness? (Pt 2)," *The Mainichi shimbun*, September 5, 2008, <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/features/fukuda-aso/archive/news/2008/09/20080905p2a00m0na013000c.html>.

strong point by party strategists, according to whom Aso's forte was his cheerful personality.<sup>79</sup>

### **From the Yoshida Doctrine to the Asō Doctrine**

With his family pedigree and being a vocal proponent of Yoshida Shigeru's legacy, foreign policy is a central concern to Asō. He has headed a number of ministries and has occupied key posts in the party, but his most noticeable achievement was when he served as foreign minister from October 2005 to August 2007, in the third Koizumi cabinet and the first Abe cabinet. He had prepared for this post by having served on foreign affairs related posts in the Diet and the LDP. He had been chairman of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Lower House (November 1991 to January 1993) and director of the LDP's Foreign Affairs Division (December 1992 to August 1993). To be noted is that he served in these posts a decade after he had been elected for the first time to the Diet and that these assignments did not last long.<sup>80</sup> As a leading LDP politician Asō had made himself known – notorious in the eyes of many – for his hawkish views. He was known as a strong advocate for a revision of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, generally known as the “peace clause,” so that Japan could more easily deploy its Self-Defense Forces overseas. As foreign minister in the Abe government, he joined hands with the prime minister to tout a “values-based diplomacy” calling for expanded cooperation with democracies, particularly the United States, Australia, and India. He had also a reputation of being a “revisionist” on historical issues and had praised aspects of Japan's colonization of Asian countries in the past and supported official visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Furthermore, Asō's personal

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<sup>79</sup> Masami Ito, “Kawamura promises to keep Aso from tripping over his own feet,” *The Japan Times*, September 29, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080929a5.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Profile of Minister for Foreign Affairs Taro ASO,” <http://www.mofa.go.jp/about/hq/profile/aso.html> (accessed November 11, 2008).

history is troublesome in the sense that his family has a murky past of using POWs as slave labor during World War II.<sup>81</sup>

Asō's interest in foreign affairs is noticeable in the books he issued in the lead up to the campaign to replace Abe. One of these books was *Arc of freedom and prosperity*. It has the sub-title "Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizon" and is based on speeches given by Asō as foreign minister. Also *Incredible Japan*, which is aimed at a wide readership, deals with foreign affairs in two of its seven sections. Most interesting is that the last section of this book has the subtitle "The Asō doctrine." In many ways doctrine is a concept that Japanese policy-makers have tended to shy away from, perceived as being too grand.<sup>82</sup> And while "doctrines" have been declared by, or ascribed to, Japanese prime ministers over the years, they have rarely amounted to more than just rhetoric.<sup>83</sup>

That Asō wanted to issue a foreign policy doctrine was a move fitting the time, however. With his pedigree as Yoshida's grandson with an interest in foreign affairs and serving as Japan's foreign minister at the time, it made sense. Using this buzz word – Incredible Japan – as a slogan indicated that Asō wanted to convey the idea that his views on foreign policy were solid and well thought out and not a haphazard heap of statements lumped together. Equipped with a doctrine, he could stand tall among his competitors before the electorate as well as disprove his own reputation among pundits of being a light-weight. The book *Incredible Japan* was released when he was gearing up his activities as one of the contenders for party leadership for the third time, after two previous unsuccessful

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<sup>81</sup> Julian Ryall, "Japanese PM Taro Aso's family business used British PoWs," *Telegraph.co.uk*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/3836711/Japanese-PM-Taro-Asos-family-business-used-British-PoWs.html>.

<sup>82</sup> The concept "doctrine" resembles national interest, which despite the fact that it is a key value of foreign policy according to textbooks, and is so also in practice, is a concept that came into sway in Japanese politics only at the end of the 1990s. See Bert Edström, "The Yoshida doctrine and the unipolar world," *Japan Forum*, 16:1 (2004), pp. 72ff.

<sup>83</sup> The famous Fukuda doctrine is an exception in that it was issued by the Fukuda Takeo in 1977 to guide Japanese relations with Southeast Asian countries.

attempts. The post of foreign minister has rarely been the springboard for a politician to become prime minister but times have changed. During the campaign to succeed Koizumi in 2006, the key card of the runner-up Fukuda Yasuo was the rumor that he was going to issue a “new Fukuda doctrine.” He suddenly withdrew from the campaign and no such doctrine was launched; but his competitors could witness how foreign policy could be a strong hand for a prime ministerial hopeful.<sup>84</sup> It showed that the noble legacy from his famous father Fukuda Takeo was something that he could cash in on. And since Asō’s personal background was impeccable in a political sense and with Yoshida Shigeru responsible for the most famous foreign policy doctrines of them all, “the Yoshida doctrine,” having his own doctrine could not be anything but a plus for Asō.

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<sup>84</sup> The “new Fukuda doctrine” was eventually launched on May 22, 2008 by Prime Minister Fukuda with his speech “When the Pacific Ocean Becomes an ‘Inland Sea’: Five Pledges to a Future Asia that ‘Acts Together’.”

## Cabinet Formation

In Japan, cabinet reshuffles are so frequent that a leading Western political scientist has found it an extreme example of a rapid turnover of ministers; Japanese scholars have described it as one of the “pathologies” of the cabinet government under one-party dominance.<sup>85</sup> A prevalent view in political circles is that an MP who has been re-elected enough times has the “right” to a stint as minister. Since the number of Japanese parliamentarians is considerable and several politicians have been successfully re-elected many times, the number of politicians thus eligible for a ministerial position is sizeable, and contributes to frequent shifts of cabinet. Frequent reshuffles make it possible for scores of MPs to enjoy the benefit of a ministerial stint, and cabinet reorganization is an important means for the premier to strengthen his political base in the party and the Diet.<sup>86</sup> Some recent governments have been exceedingly short-lived in this system with frequent shifts of cabinet. When Abe Shinzō left as prime minister, his second cabinet had served only about a month, and when Asō took over, ministers in the second Fukuda cabinet had, similarly, served only for one month.

A few hours after his appointment, Asō presented his ministers. His way of putting together his team was both unexpected as it was surprising. It was unexpected in the high degree to which he picked low-profile politicians instead of factional bigwigs, which would make it easier for him to demonstrate his leadership, but also in the degree to which it showed that he valued loyalty. It is obvious that he did not draw the same conclusion as his friend and predecessor Abe Shinzō that forming a ministerial lineup of

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<sup>85</sup> Jean Blondel, *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World* (London, Beverly Hills, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1985), p. 96; Hitoshi Abe, Muneyuki Shindō, and Sadafumi Kawato, *The Politics and Government of Japan* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1994), p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> Abe, Shindō, and Kawato, *The Politics and Government of Japan*, p. 30.

“buddies” could cause problems. One of the reasons Abe was unlucky in high office turned out to be that some members of his cabinet of “buddies” were unable to rise above the political turmoil that evolved. One lesson that could be drawn from Abe’s way of forming his government was that being a close friend or acquaintance of the new premier was not qualification enough to be minister, since members of his first team excelled in political shortcomings and gaffes, denoting his time in office as one marred by ministerial blunders, with no less than five ministers disappearing from his team. Abe was accused of having selected only friends and yes sayers for his first cabinet, and when he presented the list of ministers in his second cabinet, he admitted indirectly that critics had been right, since the ministerial line up that time was dominated by experienced and senior LDP politicians.

Asō’s lineup was a case of *déjà-vu* in that his approach to forming a cabinet resembled Abe’s. Also for Asō it was payback time for his supporters. When he formed his government, the composition was similar to that of Abe’s first cabinet in the sense that, as the *Asahi shimbun* reported, it was “packed with buddies” who had helped him in the LDP presidential election.<sup>87</sup> The *Nihon keizai shimbun*, Japan’s leading economic daily, reported: “Freshly elected Prime Minister Taro Aso formed a cabinet Sept. 24 packed with close allies and political veterans. With Aso already looking ahead to the impending lower house election, the roster has been noted for featuring a number of lawmakers with long-held ties to the prime minister, suggesting a hasty selection process.”<sup>88</sup> As could be expected, Asō had another view. Already during his first press conference as prime minister, he was questioned about his cabinet lineup and rejected that it consisted of his own connections: “Different people say different things about personnel allocation but I think the basic idea should be placing the right person in

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<sup>87</sup> “Aso takes top job, packs Cabinet with his buddies,” *The Asahi shimbun*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald/asahi/TKY200809240334.html>.

<sup>88</sup> “Aso fills team with allies, old-timers,” *Nikkei net interactive*, Vol. 46, No. 2356, September 29, 2008.

the right place. This is the way to meet the expectations of the people.”<sup>89</sup> To reward support and loyalty might be seen as a decent thing to do but the footprints from Abe’s first cabinet should have made Asō wary. Obviously, it did not.

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<sup>89</sup> Shushō kantei, “Asō naikaku sōridaijin kisha kaiken” [Press conference by Prime Minister Asō], September 24, 2008, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/asospeech/2008/09/24kaiken.html>.

## Taking Off, Stumbling Start

True to his reputation of being a “cheerful figure,” Asō saw the need to cheer up his party and people. His key message on taking up his duties as prime minister was that his mission was “to make Japan a vibrant and strong nation.”<sup>90</sup> This was a slogan that he would reiterate on many occasions in months to come. Another measure he took as newly appointed prime minister was an unabashed attempt at soothing the negative wide-held feelings that Asō knew his cabinet would meet. He did what Abe did when his reshuffled cabinet met for the first time, that is, he cut the salaries of ministers. It was announced that Asō and his ministers had agreed to a 10 per cent cut in their monthly salaries in order to promote administrative and fiscal reforms. It was certainly meant to induce a friendly mood among voters towards the new government, but it missed its aim. It was an extravagant but fairly meaningless gesture since it is hard to see a link between ministerial pay and administrative and fiscal reforms.<sup>91</sup> It would have made more sense if the declared purpose would have been to improve government finances in a situation where the state coffers were empty and the Diet was discussing how to handle the precarious economic situation; that had been the reason when Abe had required ministers of his second cabinet to return ten per cent of their salary.<sup>92</sup>

Asō’s start was not what was expected since he had to attend to foreign policy rather than focusing on the economic situation. Since he is an outspoken politician and has had pointed views also about Japan’s relations with other countries, concerns had been heard before he assumed his office over how he would handle foreign policy. Nevertheless, his start in the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> “Aso, Cabinet members OK 10% pay cut,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 26, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080926TDY02314.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Bert Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan: The Demise of Shinzo Abe*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper (September 2007), p. 23.

field of foreign affairs was impressive. After only three days in office, he had delivered Japan's speech in the General Assembly of the United Nations. His flying start as prime minister was fitting for a politician who saw himself as a disciple to Yoshida Shigeru, Japan's prime minister in the early postwar period who laid the foundation of Japan's present-day foreign policy as it has been practiced ever since.

Despite the fact that the speech in the United Nations was slightly piquant since Asō had not yet presented his policy speech in the Diet, his presence was mandatory since neither Abe nor Fukuda had attended the General Assembly, and the Japanese premier could hardly be absent a third time in a row. With the precarious situation that the LDP found itself in, he went in the hope that his appearance on the international diplomatic stage would improve the LDP's electoral prospects. The question was whether Japanese voters were impressed or not in the light of other more pressing problems closer to home linked to health and pensions.

Back in Japan after his speech to the General Assembly, Asō found himself back on political home ground, where his election as new prime minister had been a draw in the power game that evolved in anticipation of the upcoming Lower House election. As already noted, the calculation of the LDP was that if the election took place early, when the new prime minister enjoys a customary "honeymoon" period, its inevitable loss of seats could be limited. The idea was to hold a "snap" election at the earliest possible time, as the honeymoon period of both Abe and Fukuda had been unusually short and the same risked being the case also with Asō. The sense of urgency was reflected in the presentation of his cabinet; it was described by a leading daily as an "election management cabinet."<sup>93</sup>

A snap election was hoped to function as a quick fix for the LDP to slip out of the grip that its bad image and the stalled parliamentary proceedings had created. The party wanted to take advantage of the new premier's high

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<sup>93</sup> "'Asō karā' zenmen ni jijitsujo no 'senkyō kanri naikaku' [Fullfledged Asō colour, de facto "election management cabinet"], *The Asahi shimbun*, September 24, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0924/TKY200809240321.html>.

approval ratings while the party was still in a celebratory mode. “He will get a bump in support just because he is new and he’s actually popular with the public,” said Gerald Curtis, a political science professor at Columbia University in New York. “Before he gets a chance to show that he can’t get anything done any more than Fukuda could he’ll call an election.”<sup>94</sup> But a newspaper reported that many in the LDP were more cynical, saying, and not as a joke, that it would be best to have the election before Asō made some gaffe and his flaws became conspicuous.<sup>95</sup>

### The LDP’s Miscalculation

In his preparations for taking over, Asō’s strategy was to dissolve the Diet after the supplementary budget had passed the Diet. The dissolution could take place either on October 9, if the budget passed the Diet, or October 21 if deliberations in the Diet dragged on.<sup>96</sup> The *Yomiuri shimbun* cited sources that claimed that if the DPJ cooperated so that the extra budget could be passed without delay, the Lower House would be dissolved after the budget had passed; if the opposition party tried to postpone deliberations, the Lower House would be immediately dissolved.<sup>97</sup>

Immediately after Asō’s appointment, the LDP began to prepare for an early election. Members of the Asō faction had already made preparations for this campaign before he was elected party president in order to be able

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<sup>94</sup> Brian Fowler and Bill Austin, “Fukuda Resignation May Leave LDP Fate in Aso’s Hands,” *Bloomberg.com*, September 1, 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601101&sid=ayThOghrsuDw&refer>.

<sup>95</sup> “Shasetsu: Asō-Jimin shinsōsai rinen mo seisaku mo naki shōri” [New LDP chairman Asō’s election a victory for neither principle nor policy (editorial)], *The Mainichi shimbun*, September 23, 2008, <http://mainichi.jp/select/opinion/editorial/archive/news/20080923ddm005070054000c.html>.

<sup>96</sup> “Shūinsen, jūichigatsu futsuka tōkaihyō...shūshō ikō” [Lower House election day Nov. 2...prime minister’s intention], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20080925-OYT1T00082.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> “Aso elected premier / Announces Cabinet lineup himself; poll likely on Nov. 2,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080925TDY01303.htm>.

to get going quickly.<sup>98</sup> An advertisement after his appointment placed in a large-circulation daily three days after his elevation depicts Asō as a politician offering voters resolute, firm determination and presenting his commitments to the people.<sup>99</sup> Notable in the advertisement is that it is not the LDP but rather Asō that takes the center-stage, which served to clarify the preeminent role of the new party president in the election strategy of the party. Almost equally as quickly, however, it began to dawn on party strategists that the prospects that Asō could be an election locomotive might not have been so well founded. Polls published by several media did not show the climb in popularity of the office-holder that had been expected. The customary rise in the popularity ladder that a new government was used to enjoy did not materialize. The *Mainichi shimbun* reported that the approval rating of the Asō government stood at 45 per cent, 12 points lower than Fukuda when he took over.<sup>100</sup> Another poll published in the *Asahi shimbun* put the approval figure somewhat higher, 48 per cent, but a poll two weeks later in the same paper showed a support rate of 41 per cent.<sup>101</sup> The situation got even worse, when the Asō cabinet faced the danger of being derailed almost right from the start. The resemblance with the start of Abe's first cabinet was disturbing. Barely 48 hours after Asō had presented his new team Japan found itself in political *déjà-vu* with scandal enveloping one of the new ministers. In interviews after his appointment, Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism Minister Nakayama Nariaki made a series of what were immediately

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<sup>98</sup> “Shushō’ to shinmitsu kyōchō Asōhagiin hashiridasu” [Asō faction MPs get going: stress on intimacy with “prime minister], *The Asahi shimbun*, September 24, 2008, [http://mytown.asahi.com/kanagawa/news.php?k\\_id=15000120809240002](http://mytown.asahi.com/kanagawa/news.php?k_id=15000120809240002).

<sup>99</sup> *Asahi shimbun*, September 27, 2008.

<sup>100</sup> “Asō naikaku: Shiji 45% zenseikenhi 12% pointo gen” [Asō cabinet: support 45%, 12% less than the preceding government], *The Mainichi shimbun*, September 26, 2008, <http://mainichi.jp/select/seiji/aso/news/20080926k0000m010110000c.html>.

<sup>101</sup> “Asō naikaku shiji 41%, fushiji 42, honsha renzoku chōsa” [Regular poll by our company: Asō cabinet support 41%, non-support 42%], *The Asahi shimbun*, October 5, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/1005/TKY200810050172.html>.

castigated as gaffes, and made him a political liability for the prime minister. His row of inappropriate statements was made with such an unlikely speed that it was highly likely that more were to come, which worried LDP members who were concerned over election prospects. Too fresh in the memory were Abe's cabinets that had been undermined by a steady stream of scandals caused by politicians making inappropriate comments.

As could be expected, Nakayama saw the need to retract his ill-fated comments: "Since this is the first time I am working in the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, there were many things I did not understand"<sup>102</sup> – but it did not help much. The retraction of his statements was made in a way that his gaffes would continue to haunt the prime minister. There had been several culprits for the minister's displeasure and in only one case had he refused to retract his denunciation. He was a former education minister, which made it noteworthy when he characterized the Japan Teachers Union, the nation's largest teachers' union, as a "cancer on Japanese education," and claimed that students' academic abilities were low in areas where the union is influential.<sup>103</sup> Since Nakayama was right in that the union is powerful, its vocal members would make sure that it would take time until the minister's blunder would be forgotten.

Heavily criticized by party members, and after a consultation with his wife who had been appointed minister by Asō, Nakayama handed in his resignation. It was a foregone conclusion that his resignation was accepted by the prime minister, who hoped that a quick ending of the tenure of his unfortunate minister would minimize the negative impact on the party. In a comment after the row, Asō admonished Nakayama's remarks for being "extremely inappropriate" and he apologized to the public.<sup>104</sup> According to

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<sup>102</sup> "Gaffes by minister put Aso in a bind," *The Asahi shimbun*, September 27, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200809260354.html>.

<sup>103</sup> "Nakayama resigns over gaffes," *The Asahi shimbun*, September 29, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200809290053.html>.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

a leading Japanese daily, if Nakayama had not taken the step himself, he would have been fired without further ado by the prime minister.<sup>105</sup>

The embarrassing comments made by the fired minister were doubly annoying to Asō, not least because he had broken the custom that the chief cabinet secretary announces the names of new ministers and had done so himself. The *Yomiuri shimbun* quoting sources close to Asō said that this was intended “as a show of his leadership qualities,”<sup>106</sup> while the *Asahi shimbun* reported that the move was meant to demonstrate Asō’s great expectations of his new team.<sup>107</sup> Whatever his strategy, it backfired and his well-intended gesture became a disturbing liability since the premier had demonstrated his trust in a person that he had to fire almost immediately. It was quite an embarrassment to the new party leader. In a move to reassert that he was in charge, Asō forthrightly acknowledged responsibility for having appointed Nakayama. Incidentally, Nakayama’s tenure of only five days is the second shortest in the postwar period, after Hasegawa Takashi.

Another *déjà vu* moment was when Asō’s key hit man, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura Takeo, had to run the gauntlet in the media, when it was revealed that he had spent ¥15 million on office and personnel fees even though the home of his secretary was registered as a rent-free office. It smacked too much of expenditures for purposes he was trying to disguise.<sup>108</sup> His actions had an unfortunate resemblance to those of a predecessor in his post: the chief cabinet secretary in the first Abe cabinet,

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<sup>105</sup> Kohei Kobayashi and Hajime Furukawa, “Nakayama resignation casts shadow on LDP,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080930TDY03104.htm>. Later, Nakayama announced that he would retire from politics. See “Nakayama zenkokōshō: seikai o intai” [Ex-Transport Minister Nakayama to retire from politics], *The Mainichi shimbun*, October 4, 2008, <http://mainichi.jp/select/seiji/news/20081004ddm002010094000c.html>.

<sup>106</sup> “Aso to outline cabinet himself,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 24, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080924TDY01305.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> “Asō shushō ga tanjō, kakuryō meibō, jishin de” [Appearance of Prime Minister Asō, /presents/ minister list himself], *The Asahi shimbun*, September 24, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0924/TKY200809240234.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Masami Ito, “Kawamura under fire over office expenses,” *The Japan Times*, Friday, Oct. 3, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20081003a6.html>.

Shiozaki Yasuhisa, had also been accused of being involved in the type of shady money dealings that had forced ministers out of government.<sup>109</sup> But, as with Shiozaki, Kawamura managed to avoid being hounded out of his post by the media.

### Damage Control

Had the honeymoon been short for Abe Shinzō and Fukuda Yasuo, it was close to negligible for Asō Tarō. The results of polls published in several media outlets after his appointment was a veritable slap in the face for the LDP that had seen the election of the popular Asō as a means to regain popularity in preparation for a speedily organized Lower House election. The effect of polls could be seen immediately. While there had been much talk about an early election before Asō became premier, this idea seemed no longer to be attractive to the LDP. A movement within the party surfaced against the idea of calling a snap election, with the argument that the complementary budget should first be secured. The changed stance showed that party members had grasped the serious implications for their party of the polls.<sup>110</sup>

Prime Minister Asō was not dispirited by his reception in polls that were far less favorable than expected. When the popular and still influential former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō announced his retirement from politics only days after Asō had become prime minister, it was widely interpreted as a protest against the new winds blowing in the party with Asō at the rudder.<sup>111</sup> For the prime minister, it smarted but he took the bull

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<sup>109</sup> Bert Edström, *Japan's Upper House Election, July 29: Down or Dawn for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe?*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Policy Paper (July 2007), p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> "Sōki kaisan ni hantai, Jimintōnai de chōmei undō hajimaru" [Signing movement within the LDP against early dissolution begins], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080924-4471734/news/20080929-OYT1T00887.htm>.

<sup>111</sup> "Koizumi's decision to quit a blow to Aso Cabinet, LDP," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 27, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080927TDY03103.htm>.

by the horns. True to his self-styled reputation as a man of action, though a view not shared by his detractors, he saw attack as being the best means of defense and thus launched a counter-attack on the LDP's political foes. He chose an unexpected occasion to do so.

When Asō took the rostrum to deliver his maiden policy speech in the Diet as the new prime minister, his speech was a virtual diatribe singling out the DPJ for his disapproval and delivered in true "Asō style."<sup>112</sup> With work in the Diet proceeding at a slow pace and important bills bogged down in the parliamentary quagmire, it seems Asō deemed it most rational to adopt the strategy of the opposition parties, which had seen the DPJ constantly attacking the government. His stinging criticism of the leading opposition party was a repetition of his attack on the DPJ one month earlier as newly appointed secretary-general of the LDP. To do so in his policy speech was to take a risk. The prime minister's administrative policy speech, *shisei hōshin enzetsu*, is delivered at the beginning of a session of ordinary or special meetings of the parliament, and is given first in the Lower and then in the Upper House. His general policy speech, *shoshin hyōmei enzetsu*, is given at the opening of a session of the extraordinary meeting of parliament simultaneously to both the Lower and the Upper Houses.<sup>113</sup> As noted by one of Asō's own ministers, the political scientist-turned-politician Masuzoe Yōichi, the policy speech presents the prime minister's views on national policies and important issues and, thus, is a "pillar" of politics in

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<sup>112</sup> "Asōryū minshu ni chōsenjō shoshin hyōmei enzetsu" [Asō style policy speech challenge to the DPJ], *The Tōkyō shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/kakushin/list/CK2008093002000129.html>; "Shoshin hyōmei 'Asōryū' minshu ni irei no gyakushitsumon" [Asō style policy speech unusual counter-questions to the DPJ], *The Asahi shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/special/08014/TKY200809290168.html>; "Shushō no gyakushitsumon ni kotaezu, Ozawa shi ga 'shoshin enzetsu'" [Ozawa gives "policy speech," does not answer the prime minister's counter-questions], *The Sankei shimbun*, October 1, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/policy/081001/plc0810011809002-n1.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> Daigaku kyōikusha, ed., *Gendai seiji jiten* [Dictionary of modern politics] (Tokyo: Burēn shuppan, 1991), pp. 397, 480.

that it clarifies the basic direction of governmental policies.<sup>114</sup> However, issuing such a speech did not suit Asō's on this occasion. He used his policy speech to launch an attack on the DPJ, especially its leader Ozawa Ichirō. Asō's speech was "peppered with questions and provocative expressions."<sup>115</sup> The prime minister took the DPJ to task and criticized the party for its strategy of using the majority that the opposition parties had in the Upper House to block the passage of bills. Taking a strongly confrontational stance he criticized the DPJ for how it handled Diet affairs and claimed that the party "was more concerned with playing politics than thinking about how to secure people's livelihoods." His verdict was stern: "A chamber that blocks any formation of agreement from the beginning is not worthy of being called a parliamentary democracy."<sup>116</sup>

The prime minister's speech was clearly devised with the upcoming Lower House election in mind. Asō's confrontational style laid bare the nervousness in his party. The change in fortunes that the LDP had been expected to enjoy after the unpopular Fukuda was dropped had not materialized. The strategy to try to focus voters' attention on the experience and ability of the political parties to govern, in which the LDP usually was seen to excel, was risky in that work in the Diet had stalled and the economy showed every sign of being in bad shape. A consolation for Asō and his party was that the standing of the political opposition, especially the leading party, the DPJ, was not much better. When it came to the leadership of the two men at the helm, Asō and Ozawa, polls clarified that

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<sup>114</sup> Masuzoe Yōichi, *Nagatachō vs. Kasumigaseki: Saikōkenryoku o dasshu suru mono wa dare ka* [Nagatachō vs. Kasumigaseki: Who seizes ultimate power?] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007), pp. 160f.

<sup>115</sup> Tatsuya Fukumoto, "Aso speech puts ball in DPJ's court," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080930TDY02304.htm>.

<sup>116</sup> "Aso boldly throws down gauntlet / In 1st policy speech at Diet, prime minister tells DPJ to put up or shut up," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080930TDY01303.htm>.

opinion of Ozawa as a leader trailed far behind Asō.<sup>117</sup> This was a change for the better for the governing party from the days of Abe and Fukuda, since Ozawa had fared much better in similar polls under their tenure.

### Insult Added to Attack

Prime Minister Asō added insult to attack on the DPJ. When he entered the rostrum in the Diet to deliver his policy speech, it was obvious from his confrontational approach that he saw the DPJ as a serious threat to the LDP and the government in the coming election. The new prime minister did not present to the Diet and Japanese voters the policies that his party, or the coalition government, wanted to pursue so much as lashing out at key policies of the DPJ telling it “to put up or shut up.”<sup>118</sup> The secretary-general of the DPJ, Hatoyama Yukio, was upset over what he saw as Asō’s reprehensible blunder of attacking his party and commented afterwards: “Japanese have not heard such an “idiotic” speech [*baka ni shita enzetsu*]. We cannot keep silent with such impolite things [*ano yōna shitsurei na koto*] being said.”<sup>119</sup> Unwittingly, or inadvertently, Hatoyama used a wording that brought to memory a famous event in Japanese political history when Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru burst out against an opposition politician *baka yarō!* [You damned fool!], which caused the so-called *baka yarō* dissolution of the Lower House and subsequent election in 1953.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., “‘Shushō ni fusawashii’ toppu wa Asōsan 25%...Yomiuri chōsa” [Yomiuri survey: Mr. Asō in top with 25% as “most suitable prime minister”], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 14, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20080814-OYT1T00711.htm>.

<sup>118</sup> “Aso boldly throws down gauntlet / In 1st policy speech at Diet, prime minister tells DPJ to put up or shut up,” *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 30, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080930TDY01303.htm>.

<sup>119</sup> “Shushō shoshin hyōmei, taiketsu shisei ni yatō issei hampatsu” [Immediate repulse by opposition parties to prime minister’s confrontational stance in his policy speech], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 29, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20080929-OYT1T00631.htm>.

<sup>120</sup> Inoki Masamichi, *Yoshida Shigeru* (Tokyo: Jiji tsūshinsha, 1986), p. 210.

In Hatoyama's outburst against Asō, the re-surfacing of a feud in the early postwar period can be discerned. When Asō was appointed premier, it was also the election of the grandson of Yoshida Shigeru. One of Asō's key political opponents is Hatoyama Yukio, who is the grandson of Hatoyama Ichirō, a politician who was predestined to become prime minister after the first postwar election in 1946, when his Liberal Party became the largest party with 141 of the 464 of the contested seats; the Progressive Party came second with 94 seats.<sup>121</sup> If combined these two parties would have the majority in the Lower House and negotiations between the two parties commenced, with the leader of the Liberal Party, Hatoyama Ichirō, the obvious candidate for the post of prime minister. He was suddenly removed from the scene, however, when he was purged by the Occupation authorities for his prewar activities. In this situation, the Liberal Party picked a new and untested leader in Yoshida, who was a career diplomat and had been foreign minister in the previous government. In due course, Hatoyama returned to politics and replaced Yoshida as premier in 1954. What complicated the succession was that Hatoyama returned "with a sense of burning resentment against Yoshida, who now refused to step down in his favour despite an understanding he would do so when Hatoyama was released from the purge."<sup>122</sup> The feud between the two men would linger on and be transposed to later generations of politicians.

It is well known that the political feuds of the type that was seen between Yoshida and Hatoyama tend to endure, and the relevance to present-day Japanese politics of the Yoshida-Hatoyama clash in the early postwar years became evident with the election of Asō as prime minister.

### **Ozawa's Response to Asō's Onslaught**

Asō's attack on the DPJ and its leader Ozawa got what can be seen as an ample response from Ozawa. The prime minister had attacked the DPJ for

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<sup>121</sup> Ishikawa Masumi, *Sengo seijishi: shimpan* [Japan's postwar political history, new ed.] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> J. A. A. Stockwin, *Japan: Divided Politics in a Growth Economy*, 2nd ed. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), pp. 66f.

not clarifying what the party wanted to do and, now, Ozawa did just that by presenting what press comments afterwards characterized as a policy speech.<sup>123</sup> He did not bother to go into the details of the government's policies or criticize them but only posed two simple questions to the prime minister: whether he planned to dissolve the Lower House, and what the prime minister thought of the speech he had presented. The rest of the time Ozawa dealt with the election platform of the DPJ and its promises on social security, raising children, employment, and support for agriculture and fisheries. Claiming that the DPJ was a party with a sound and solid economic policy, he argued that the pledges that the party made in these areas could be paid for through a redrafting of the government budget, which would free up as much as ¥20.5 trillion in FY 2012. The central issue, he said, was to choose between "continuing with the traditional LDP framework of wasting taxpayers' money or moving to a new framework that would thoroughly weed out wasteful spending." By not going into the policies proposed by the government but concentrating instead on outlining the policies of his party, Ozawa met some criticism for not doing what is usually seen as one of the duties of an opposition party in a parliamentary system: to scrutinize and criticize governmental policies.

Evolving from the rostrum of the Diet one saw a *dance sombre*, with the prime minister delving into the policies proposed by the DPJ and not presenting policies of his party or the governing coalition, and the opposition leader outlining the policies that the political opposition would begin to implement if it succeeded in unseating the government, and thus not bothering to comment on its perceived flaws and failures of policies pursued or preferred by the LDP and its coalition partner, the New Komeito. The two political leaders excelled in talking past each other, and

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<sup>123</sup> "Ozawa shi ga 'shoshin hyōmei enzetsu' zaigensaku-kōteihyō o teishi daihyō shitsumon stāto" [Mr. Ozawa's policy speech proposals for fiscal sources, processes, start for MP questions], *The Sankei shimbun*, October 1, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081001/stt0810011322006-n1.htm>; "Ozawa addresses Diet as if he was prime minister," *The Asahi shimbun*, November 2, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200810010380.html>.

the public witnessed a role reversal with the head of the government acting as if being in opposition and the opposition leader acting as if prime minister. The prime minister scrutinized and criticized the policies of the political opposition, and the opposition leader delivered what had all the pretences of being a policy speech. But in doing so, the two top contenders played roles that they had trained for. The LDP is a party made up of factions. Having been outside of the government since the fall of the Abe cabinet, Asō had worked for a change of government policy and had travelled to 161 places throughout the country during his months outside of the central organs of the LDP. Ozawa, on his part, had trained for becoming prime minister. Books had appeared which presented him as “Prime Minister Ozawa Ichirō.”<sup>124</sup> In the DPJ’s presentation of a recent such book, Ozawa claimed to have been persuaded to field questions from the author,<sup>125</sup> but it was obvious that he enjoyed playing his part and saw no reason to hide that he enjoyed his posing as prime minister.<sup>126</sup>

The most striking aspect of the Asō-Ozawa clash was that both focused on economic matters and how to solve the economic problems saddling many Japanese and the Japanese economy as a whole. For the DPJ, this was a continuation of the strategy used both before and after the 2007 Upper House election and which had turned out to be a success. The DPJ’s master strategist Ozawa Ichirō is a former top official of the LDP and well versed in the key importance of the economy for voters, and he had eagerly seized the chance to create an image of his party as replacing the LDP as the party best at managing economic affairs. Rallying under its banner of “People’s Lives First,” the DPJ had performed impressively in the Upper House election. For the LDP, on the other hand, the return to a focus on the economy meant a return to traditional politics à la LDP that had been

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<sup>124</sup> Itagaki Hidenori’s *Ozawa Ichirō sōridaijin taibōron* [On Prime Minister Ozawa Ichirō’s expectant waiting] (Tokyo: Japan mikkusu, 1994) appeared already in 1994. The author states in his preface that he wrote this book because of Ozawa’s unsurpassed leadership skills.

<sup>125</sup> Ozawa Ichirō website, [http://ozawa-ichiro.jp/profile/book\\_q50.htm](http://ozawa-ichiro.jp/profile/book_q50.htm).

<sup>126</sup> *Ozawa Ichirō sōri (kari) e no 50 no shitsumon* [50 questions to (Acting) Prime Minister Ozawa Ichirō] (Tokyo: Fusōsha, 2008).

initiated already under Fukuda, with Asō resolutely choosing to retreat further from the Koizumi heritage. The lodestar for the LDP now seemed to adhere to Bill Clinton's famous phrase from the 1992 presidential campaign: "It's the economy, stupid." The new focus was back to basic LDP policies of the pre-Koizumi era, with the party re-entering the space that it had abandoned and which the DPJ had occupied for quite some time. With Asō as leader, the LDP went in for re-capturing its trustworthiness in economic matters. It was an area it had monopolized for decades but had left unattended with the ascent of the reform-minded Koizumi.

### **The Volte-face**

For the LDP, the towering problem was the popular mood as reflected in polls. With economic problems mounting, exasperation and gloom spread and could not help but exert a strong influence on the party. While a strong argument for making Asō prime minister had been his "cheerful" and easy-going nature, simply smiling at an audience did not suffice. With problems amassing and poll after poll spelling bad news for the LDP, nervousness spread in the party that it might not be able to ride out the crisis; rather that defeat in the Lower House election could not be avoided, and, worse, came one day closer with each passing day. With Asō as its front figure, the policies of the LDP and the coalition government took their starting-points in policies pursued in the Golden Days – the initial decades of the postwar period – when the party had skillfully mastered the management of the domestic economy in a way that had been seen to benefit the vast majority of the Japanese population.

With the clash between Asō and Ozawa, the stage was set for the race for the Lower House election. Both political camps continued jockeying for positions. With the Upper House majority secured after the successful July 2007 election, and amid the woes afflicting the LDP and the country, the DPJ demanded a quick election. With the sinking support recorded in polls, the LDP, on the other hand, drew the conclusion that there was no hurry to dissolve the Lower House. After all, the governing coalition enjoyed the rare situation of having a two-thirds majority in the Lower House and

could have its policy proposals accepted by the Diet, if it so chose, by exercising the right to take decisions by override vote. Unusual as this procedure is, it had been used by the Fukuda cabinet,<sup>127</sup> and it remained an option for taking important decisions. Whatever the outcome of the upcoming general election, one thing was certain – the ruling coalition would lose its position of having a two thirds majority in the Lower House and thus its ability to force the Diet to take decisions by override vote. Why, then, give it up?

With a gloomy forecast in the polls, an increasing number of LDP voices were heard arguing for a postponement of the general election to a later date than had been the case before Asō's appointment. Accordingly, high-ranking officials and leading politicians in the LDP argued that the supplementary budget for the fiscal year 2008 and the anti-terrorism bill had to be deliberated upon and passed through the Diet before the general election could take place. Furthermore, with a crisis looming in the world economy, it was argued that it would be irresponsible to create a political vacuum in Japan in a situation where crucial decisions had to be taken. A representative voice was heard on October 1: "[If a supplementary budget is not passed] and the global economy reaches the brink of collapse, how would we explain our actions?" asked Tsushima Yūji, the chairman of the LDP's Tax Commission.

The response from the DPJ was swift. On October 3, the party declared that it "would not cooperate with efforts to swiftly pass a supplementary budget for the fiscal year 2008 without an assurance that the House of Representatives would be dissolved immediately afterward."<sup>128</sup> Prime Minister Asō's retort came on October 6. After a cabinet meeting, he clarified that the most important step to be taken was that the Diet deliberated on the emergency economic measures aimed at countering the on-going economic crisis – and that he was not considering dissolving the Lower House at this stage. He continued his attack on the political

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<sup>127</sup> Edström, *Struggle, strife and stalemate*, pp. 52f.

<sup>128</sup> "DPJ demands dissolution pledge," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 3, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081003TDY01303.htm>.

opposition and reiterated his comments in his policy speech on the necessity of the DPJ to participate in parliamentary deliberations, since parliamentary discussion was natural even in countries where there is a cleavage in the parliament.<sup>129</sup> His move seemed to be a maneuver the purpose of which was to shelve the idea of a speedy election. It was consonant with currents in his party where the idea that the election should be delayed had become increasingly pronounced amid a stream of disappointing poll results.

### **The Key Role of the New Komeito**

The prime minister's comment on October 6 might have been intended as a clever move, since he demonstrated his and his government's will to collaborate in the Diet and could apportioned the blame for the stalled parliamentary proceedings on the DPJ. Whatever calculations he might have done, developments took an unexpected twist, however. A key input to the process that followed was the reaction of the LDP's coalition partner, the New Komeito. The party had long spoken up for holding an election at an early date and, with its strategic position as a crucial supporter of the LDP's power position, had been able to gain understanding for this view. With the prime minister clearly opting for delaying the Lower House election, which went against the interests of the New Komeito, the latter's Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Urushibara Yoshio clarified his party's stand: "If opposition parties oppose during the current session, we're highly likely to pass the bill again [through the Lower House] with yes votes from two thirds or more of the lower house members present."<sup>130</sup> He also declared that the supplementary budget should be passed before the dissolution of the Lower House.

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<sup>129</sup> "Shushō 'Ima, kaisan kangaezu', hoseian seiritsu o saiyūsen - Shūinyosan'ī" [Prime minister: 'Not thinking of dissolution now'. Upper House Budget Committee - priority on the passage of the revised budget proposal], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 6, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20081006-OYT1T00290.htm>.

<sup>130</sup> "Diet 'to discuss revision of new Antiterrorism Law'," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 7, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081007TDY03102.htm>.

The stand taken by Urushibara changed the political situation. On October 8, the DPJ announced all of a sudden that the party would approve the supplementary budget for the fiscal year 2008 and would also give the go ahead for the government's emergency economic measures. After a one-day deliberation in the Budget Committee of the Upper House, the budget could be submitted to the Lower House and would in all likelihood pass the same day; and after a discussion in the Lower House it could be enacted after a week.<sup>131</sup> To make sure that the obstacles to the speedy election referred to by the prime minister were meticulously eliminated, the DPJ announced the following day that the party "did not intend to hold up a vote on the bill to revise the new Antiterrorism Law to extend the Maritime Self-Defense Forces's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean."<sup>132</sup> The stand taken by the DPJ was tantamount to a guarantee that the bill would be passed into law during the current Diet session. The DPJ explicitly referred to the stand taken by the New Komeito and gave it as the reason for having changed its stand. DPJ Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Yamaoka Kenji told reporters: "As [the] New Komeito intends to agree with a second passage [of the bill] with two-thirds majority, we won't extend deliberations unnecessarily. We'll agree to a vote when the necessary discussions are completed."<sup>133</sup>

The opposition leader Ozawa Ichirō is an experienced politician and showed considerable stamina in pursuing his strategy in the Diet, thus enabling the DPJ to slow down, and even obstruct, parliamentary work. But he is also a realist. Behind the DPJ's volte-face was the realization that the

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<sup>131</sup> "Hosei yosan'an kyō yū san'in tsūka e shinterohō mo saitai shūnai shūin tsūka" [Revised budget proposal towards passing the Upper House today New terrorism law passes the Upper House with the week at the minimum], *The Sankei shimbun*, October 8, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081008/stt0810081031001-n1.htm>; "DPJ to approve govt's supplementary budget," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 8, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081008TDY01304.htm>.

<sup>132</sup> "DPJ won't delay vote on antiterrorism bill," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 9, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081009TDY02307.htm>.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

DPJ would likely be punished if it opposed the government's plan; pushing the DPJ's obstructionist tactics in the Diet too far could boomerang by making the party seen as simply going in for obstructing governmental policies and not playing a constructive role in solving Japan's serious economic problems. In fact, the appalling economic outlook for the domestic economy and that of the wider world rendered it almost suicidal for the DPJ to try to delay the stimulus package.

## Asō Dragging His Feet

With the DPJ announcements, the factors that Prime Minister Asō had declared were the reasons for postponing the Lower House election would shortly be eliminated. Following his logic at the time, he had pointed to these factors as *the* obstacles to an early election; with them no longer present, it was time to return to the idea of dissolving the Lower House and announcing a general election. For the prime minister there were solid reasons not to act in this way, however. The vigorous activities of the media to come up with news about the government's standing in the eyes of the public had not abated and information continued to spread about the gloomy prospects of the Asō cabinet. The day before the DPJ announced that it was going to accept the supplementary budget bill, the *Asahi shimbun* reported results of a poll which showed that support for the government was down seven points to 41 per cent and non-support had increased six points to 42 per cent, compared with a poll taken two weeks earlier.<sup>134</sup> A couple of days later, the LDP's misfortunes were confirmed when the *Yomiuri shimbun* reported that 58 per cent of eligible voters were ready to see the DPJ replace the incumbent coalition government, while 38 per cent disagreed with the idea. Since only 46 per cent of respondents thought the DPJ was capable of running the country, while 47 percent said it was not, a sizeable number of respondents saw no problem in handing over the government to a party which they did not think was capable of governing. On the other hand, the proven track record of the LDP made 67 per cent of the respondents think that it had the ability to govern. That a sizeable share of respondents found it reasonable to hand over the reins of power to the opposition party, despite the far more positive assessments of the

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<sup>134</sup> "Support for Aso Cabinet drops sharply; Minshuto inches up," *The Asahi shimbun*, October 7, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200810060300.html>.

incumbent LDP's ability to govern, must be seen as an expression of the dissatisfaction with its recent performance.

### **Muddling Through**

In a surprisingly short space of time, the idea of following up with a swift general election upon Asō's succession as prime minister had been discarded by his party. Not least the prime minister himself had shifted track. The reason was said to be the severe economic situation that Japan was facing, but it was likely to have been a more routine motivation – why call an election when the question only was how large the inevitable defeat would be? Day in day out, the prime minister had to answer the same question over and over again, about whether he planned to dissolve the Lower House and call for election. Throughout October and onwards, the prime minister as well as other leading LDP politicians and top officials tried to keep their options open. But it became increasingly clear that the party was in no mood for an early election. There were simply too many incumbents who would lose their seats in the Lower House and scores of prospective candidates who realized that they would not be successful. The lack of enthusiasm worsened with each poll, since they revealed that support for the government was steadily sinking. With the rapidly deteriorating economy and a halting world economy, prospects for the government to regain voter support did not seem hopeful. The most sensible strategy for the LDP and the prime minister was to try to muddle through by coming up with proposals and measures that would enliven the increasingly depressive mood in the country, in the hope that some unforeseen developments or events would save the situation.

### ***Burasagari* and Blurbs**

LDP party officials had been well aware they had reasons to be a little nervous at Asō's appointment as prime minister; his track record of issuing controversial comments had in the past raised eyebrows. As recently as in August, when he was the new secretary-general of the LDP, he had been reported as saying, in reference to the opposition DPJ, that "Germany had

invited disaster by 'deciding to let the Nazis assume power'." His remark was made in a conversation with Speaker Eda Satsuki of the Upper House, when Eda warned that the electorate was slipping away from the LDP. "People voted for the Nazis too," snapped Asō. "The DPJ needs to act in a more responsible manner."<sup>135</sup> The sting in Asō's remark may have been caused by the fact that the appointment of Eda had robbed the LDP of an important political post. Eda is a former leading politician in the opposition, who had become the speaker of the Upper House after the 2007 election.<sup>136</sup>

On occasions in the past Asō had made statements that he had had to retract or try to paper over. This was the case also this time when he tried to explain away his statement as a misunderstanding and that that he only said it is "important to deliberate matters seriously in the upper house. I do not mean the DPJ are Nazis."<sup>137</sup>

It seems that the LDP leadership decided that it was necessary to take precautions. In an amazing statement shortly after the new cabinet had been inaugurated, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura Takeo clarified in an interview after assuming his post that his job included preventing Asō from stumbling: "I would like to make the most of Aso's distinguishing characteristics but at the same time make sure he doesn't step over the line and stumble."<sup>138</sup> This blunt remark is noteworthy given the fact that what

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<sup>135</sup> "Asō shi aisatsumawari, nachisu o rei ni minshu o kensei Mori shi tomo kaidan" [Mr Asō greetings Nazi example a check of DPJ], discussions also with Mr Mori], *The Sankei shimbun*, August 4, 2008; David McNeill, "Japanese politician likens opposition party to Nazis," *The Independent*, August 6, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/japanese-politician-likens-opposition-party-to-nazis-886107.html>; see also AP, "Aso angers DPJ with remark likening party to Nazis," *Breitbart.com*, August 4, 2008, [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D92BGPUO1&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D92BGPUO1&show_article=1).

<sup>136</sup> For the clash over Eda's appointment, see Edström, *Farewell to Beautiful Japan*, p. 8.

<sup>137</sup> McNeill, "Japanese politician likens opposition party to Nazis."

<sup>138</sup> Masami Ito, "Cabinet interview: Kawamura promises to keep Aso from tripping over his own feet," *The Japan Times*, September 29, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080929a5.html>. The need for people

the *Financial Times* reported as “the unlikely choice of the reserved Takeo Kawamura for the powerful post of chief cabinet secretary” was Asō’s way of announcing that he intended to take on the role as the government’s key spokesperson himself.<sup>139</sup> Speaking in the Diet a week after his appointment, he vowed to watch his language and apologized for his past verbal gaffes: “I’d like to offer my apology for causing unpleasant feelings among people concerned by making indiscreet remarks in the past. As prime minister, I would like to make remarks by bearing in mind the weight of words hereafter.”<sup>140</sup>

But to stick to this solemn pledge was easier said than done. As prime minister, Asō’s activities and statements were closely monitored and his habit of speaking his mind continued to dog him. With the present-day importance of the media for politicians and political parties, a widening interface between them can be seen. The system with the so-called press clubs [*kisha kurabu*], which allows only authorized representatives of media to attend press conferences (excluding in most cases foreign correspondents), still exists, but new forms of interaction between

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behind the scenes to keep check on the man in the political top post brought into focus that the political situation surrounding the premier has changed. The prime minister fulfills two important roles – he is the government’s key decision maker as well as the nation’s top spokesperson. For a discussion, see Bert Edström, “Prime Ministerial Leadership in Japanese Foreign Policy,” in Ian Neary, ed., *Leaders and Leadership in Japan* (Richmond: Japan Library, 1996), pp. 243–64. The latter responsibility makes the prime minister the supreme interpreter of governmental policies and authorized to elucidate the implications and import of policies and decisions. Even the very cautious Prime Minister Satō Eisaku made statements that sometimes had to be “promptly corrected” by his foreign minister. See Bert Edström, *Japan’s Quest for a Role in the World: Roles Ascribed to Japan Nationally and Internationally, 1969–1982*. Japanological Studies Published by the University of Stockholm No. 7, Stockholm 1988, pp. 125f.

<sup>139</sup> Michiyo Nakamoto, “Aso cabinet confirms intention to dominate,” *Financial Times*, September 24, 2008, [http://us.ft.com/ftgateway/superpage.ft?news\\_id=fto092420081241272272&page=2](http://us.ft.com/ftgateway/superpage.ft?news_id=fto092420081241272272&page=2).

<sup>140</sup> “Japan PM Aso vows to watch language,” *AFP*, October 2, 2008, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20081002-164254/Japan-PM-Aso-vows-to-watch-language>.

politicians and media have emerged. With politicians' interest in disseminating messages, and of the media to get hold of information, a mutual interest in hobnobbing with each other has emerged. A new development was seen with the charismatic and media-savvy Koizumi, who was a master of utilizing media for political gains.<sup>141</sup> He began to hold press conferences twice daily (at the end of his tenure, once a day) instead of answering questions when he walked between appointments in the corridors of the Prime Minister's Office or in the parliament building, with journalists scribbling down memos based on the prime minister's responses, a practice known as *burasagari*, literally, "dangling interviews."<sup>142</sup> Asō seemed to accept being surrounded by reporters and journalists and to tolerate and even enjoy *burasagari*.<sup>143</sup>

Asō's extrovert personality afforded reporters ample opportunities to pick up materials for stories. A couple of weeks after he had assumed the post of prime minister, *burasagari* reports confirmed party officials' worries about his habit of making ill-advised statements. Being aware of the risk of talking off the cuff was not enough. In November he seems to have relaxed a bit too much and made statements that were offensive to doctors, then parents, and then, probably worst of them all, was critical of Japan's elderly: "I pay my taxes, so why should I pay money for people who laze around eating and drinking and never do anything?" No wonder that his attack on seniority and ill-health was seen as "completely irresponsible" in a country where one in five voters is over 70 years old, where the healthcare

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<sup>141</sup> Uesugi Takashi, *Koizumi no shori media no haiboku* [Victory for Koizumi, defeat for the media] (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 2006).

<sup>142</sup> Nobuyuki Okumura, "Japan's Media Fiefdom—Mainstream Press is Covertly Disturbing People's Free Access to Information by Monopolizing Daily Interviews with Media-Savvy Prime Minister," *Ritsumeikan Social Sciences Review*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (September 2006), p. 60.

<sup>143</sup> One of the large national dailies, the *Sankei shimbun* was quick to introduce a regular column, *Asō shushō burasagari shōhō* or "Detailed report of Prime Minister Asō's *burasagari*."

system is in crisis, and a general election is looming, as *The Times Tokyo* correspondent reported.<sup>144</sup>

But it was not only slips of the tongue that caused problems for Asō. He certainly does not suffer from writer's cramp and has contributed to various journals over the years. In a contribution written before he was appointed prime minister but printed in the November issue of the high-brow monthly *Bungei shunjū* that hit the newsstands in the beginning of October, Asō unequivocally stated that he had made up his mind and would call an early election: "I have made a decision [...] At the beginning of the session of the Diet, I will not hesitate to present the policies of myself and the LDP to President Ozawa and ask him whether he will support them or not. Then I will ask the public whether they will trust me." Since Ozawa's rejection was a foregone conclusion, Asō added, to make his stand limpid: "I will not walk away. I will not give up in the middle of the game."<sup>145</sup>

Asō's interest in quickly calling a snap election, as described in this paper, became an embarrassment to him once it became known. His view as prime minister and what he had written in the magazine were contradictory, and he was harassed by reporters. Asked if he was thinking about dissolving the Lower House when the Diet session opened, he denied it flatly, and pointed out that the situation had changed since he wrote the article: "To be honest, we feel things have gone very differently from what we had expected. The economic situation has changed since September 22. The effect [of the international financial crisis] on [the Japanese] economy has become much bigger than I imagined. The current conditions mean economic measures must come before the political situation."<sup>146</sup> And he was

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<sup>144</sup> Leo Lewis, "Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso condemns 'hobbling malingerers'," *The Times Online*, November 28, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5248197.ece>.

<sup>145</sup> Asō Tarō, "Tsuyoi Nihon o! Watashi kokka saiken keikaku" [A strong Japan! My plan for rebuilding the country], *Bungei shunjū*, November 2008, pp. 95f.

<sup>146</sup> "Dissolution schedule hasn't followed 'plan'," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 11, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081011TDY03102.htm>.

right in this. The inauguration of his government coincided with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, which precipitated the rapid downward spiral of the world economy.<sup>147</sup>

Nevertheless, in commenting on the newspaper article, Asō demonstrated that what a prime ministerial hopeful says is of not much relevance to what he says and does once he is prime minister. It revealed that for the prime minister, his party came first, not the country. To the extent possible, he would drag on in the hope that events and developments would allow an opening for more encouraging electoral prospects for his party to be gleaned. And, as the leader of the LDP, why shouldn't he? Despite its landslide victory in the 2007 Upper House election, it was not inconceivable that the DPJ might get itself entangled in policies that would damage its standing among voters. The events of October 2007, when DPJ leader Ozawa had engaged in secret discussions with Prime Minister Fukuda and reached an agreement to discuss a grand coalition between the LDP and the DPJ, were still fresh in the memory. When the other DPJ leaders did not accept the agreement, Ozawa left his party in anger, only to be back after three days, when the other DPJ leaders pleaded with him to stay on.<sup>148</sup> Ozawa's antics demonstrated that a moment of thoughtlessness could leave a lasting mark. And it was not to be ruled out that some such event could occur again.

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<sup>147</sup> Saeki Keishi, "'Kōzō kaikaku' to no ketsubetsu" [Farewell to "structural reform"], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, October 13, 2008.

<sup>148</sup> Edström, *Struggle, Strife and Stalemate*, pp. 57ff.

## The Opposition Leader Appeals to the People

The LDP's lack of popularity did not improve when the unpopular Fukuda was replaced by the more popular Asō. The only encouraging sign for LDP strategists was that in spite of the party's unpopularity, its "election face" of Asō continued to be far more popular than his assumed contestant for the post of prime minister, Ozawa Ichirō. While Ozawa has a long career in top-flight politics behind him and has demonstrated his formidable skills as a political strategist in the past, his support among the electorate was only half that of Asō's. The DPJ trusted Ozawa's ability to be its election locomotive but he was not very much liked by party members because of his top-down, autocratic decision-making style. And despite all his eminence as a political strategist, sometimes he had acted in an ill-advised way such as in his aforementioned encounter with Fukuda at the end of 2007.

Still worse for the DPJ was that Ozawa's well-known health problems were graver than generally thought. On October 6, Ozawa was hospitalized for a week for "complications from a cold" according to his party.<sup>149</sup> This playing down of the problem apparently served to create the impression that his health was not a major issue.<sup>150</sup> Another move that probably had the same purpose was an interview in the November 2008 issue of a monthly in which Secretary-General Hatoyama Yukio of the DPJ stated that Ozawa would stake his life on becoming prime minister.<sup>151</sup> Since Hatoyama had been busy in the past to play down and paper over Ozawa's health problems, his rhetoric was likely to add to suspicions, especially since it is

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<sup>149</sup> "Minshu-Ozawa daihyō ga 'kaze' de nyūin" [DPJ President Ozawa hospitalized for "a cold"], *The Sankei shimbun*, October 7, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081007/stt0810071153002-n1.htm>.

<sup>150</sup> "DPJ leader Ozawa discharged from hospital," *Kyodo News*, October 13, 2008, [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D93PI7900&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D93PI7900&show_article=1).

<sup>151</sup> Hatoyama Yukio, "Ozawa wa inochi o toshite sōri ni naru" [Ozawa staking his life becoming prime minister], *Bungei shunjū*, November 2008, pp. 106–15.

known that Ozawa had once in the past turned down an opportunity to become prime minister for health reasons.

The health bulletins about Ozawa from his party were widely taken as a cover up for his real condition.<sup>152</sup> On occasions in the past, for instance after the election campaign in July 2007, he had been hospitalized for exhaustion, not unexpected since he had campaigned incessantly day in and day out for his party. After the election he disappeared for a time, and when he reappeared he explained 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 improved significantly as a result of the outcome of the Upper House election, pressure on him did not abate after the election, and he had worked strenuously to pave the way for early Lower House election, traveling all over the country to further the interests of the DPJ and support its candidates in the forthcoming election.

The gravity of Ozawa's health conditions was revealed when he told an extraordinary convention of the DPJ on September 21 that he was nearing his limits, physically and mentally, and ruled out the possibility of staying at the helm of the DPJ much longer, even if the party would win in the upcoming election.<sup>153</sup> Since polls indicated that he was much less popular as a would-be prime minister than his main contestant Asō Tarō, his statement could be interpreted as a way for him to increase the chances for his party to prevail rather than himself as such, since many who wanted to see the

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<sup>152</sup> Illness-related white lies had been seen before in the case of Ozawa. In 2006 he was absent for a period because he was hospitalized due to a cold, according to his party. Later, the party's secretary-general, Hatoyama Yukio, changed this explanation and explained that Ozawa had been hospitalized after experiencing slight signs of a relapse of a chronic heart problem. See "DPJ's Ozawa in hospital due to possible heart problem, not cold," *Japan Policy & Politics*, October 2, 2006. Some famous cases of white lies relating to Japanese prime ministers are presented in Miwa Kazuo, *Sōri no byōshitsu* [The prime minister's sickroom] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982).

<sup>153</sup> "DPJ leadership after Ozawa," *The Japan Times*, October 28, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20081028a2.html>.

LDP unseated were reluctant to vote for the DPJ purely on account of Ozawa being the leader.

In that respect, the situation for the LDP improved with Asō. His election as the leader of the LDP and, by extension, prime minister reversed the relative position in the eyes of public opinion of the prime minister versus the opposition leader. Ozawa had been considered a stronger leader than Abe Shinzō, when the latter had been prime minister.<sup>154</sup> Relative to Fukuda, Ozawa also enjoyed greater popularity. With Asō as prime minister, however, the situation changed and Ozawa was no longer seen as more suitable than the incumbent premier. While Ozawa is respected as a strong and potent politician, his arrogant and autocratic style lures as it does repel. And somewhat naturally for having been one of Japan's top politicians over several decades, he has both friends and foes.

In a move to apply the lesson taught by the tenure of the telegenic former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, who was a genius when it came to handling the media, Ozawa intensified his efforts to improve on his image, targeting especially younger people. Koizumi demonstrated that a politician understanding the possibilities as well as the pitfalls that the modern media engendered would be handsomely rewarded at election day. As a politician, Ozawa is not telegenic but his forceful personality and thorough knowledge of the intricacies of the wheeling and dealing of Japanese politics have made him a formidable opponent to the ruling LDP ever since he left the party in 1993.

In an attempt to follow in Aso's footsteps and ingratiate himself to the Japanese public and thus appear more accessible, Ozawa made an effort to improve his image, which was aimed also at improving the DPJ's electoral prospects. One move was to approach a popular talk show on the internet and suggest that he appear on the show. Some months before he had been "training" for this kind of performance, when a book entitled "Prime Minister Ozawa Ichirō" was published in which he answered questions on

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<sup>154</sup> "Survey: 50% say Ozawa a better leader than Abe," *The Asahi shimbun*, July 23, 2007; as quoted in Edström, *Japan's Upper House Election*, July 29, p. 17.

personal and intimate matters as if he were a celebrity or pop star. Excited and nervous, the TV personality was a bit at a loss why she had been approached by the DPJ but accepted.<sup>155</sup>

Ozawa's appearance became an instant talking point. When he arrived at the studio in Harajuku, the center of youth culture in Japan, it was packed with representatives of the media. With a top political contender in front of the cameras, it was not only small talk about favorite foods, dogs, whisky, and first love as was usually the case with other celebrities. Politics was also brought up in the conversation. Ozawa stressed the possibility for disgruntled voters to bring about change by using their vote. Your vote makes a difference, was his message. On the question what would happen if he became prime minister, the opposition leader responded that Japan would change.<sup>156</sup>

Considering that Prime Minister Asō had been hounded in the media only a few days before for his habit of frequenting hotels and bars in the evenings, it is no exaggeration to say that Ozawa surprised many by saying he loves tofu and likes to go to ramen shops and *izakaya* bars. That he did so, and even made a point of it, made sense after the failed attempt by the media to expose the prime minister on account of his night life. Media criticism of the prime minister had subsided, and even backfired, when newspapers, among them the *Asahi shimbun* and the *Sankei shimbun*, sent reporters to the same hotels and bars that Asō had frequented and it turned out that the bills had not been that excessive. The stroke of being a populist in Asō is not found in Ozawa, but he seized the opportunity to show himself as an ordinary man with plain interests, playing the populist with Japan's youth and softening his political bulldozer image.

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<sup>155</sup> "Minshutō daihyō ga Uehara Sakura to Amesuta de goman'etsusei tōku" [DPJ president and Uehara Sakura hold great talk at the Ameba Studio], *Maikomi jōnaru*, October 20, 2008, <http://journal.mycom.co.jp/news/2008/10/20/027/>.

<sup>156</sup> "Ozawa daihyō, intānetto namabangumi de Uehara Sakura san to tōku 'Ichiban erai no wa kokumin. Jibun de kangaete, kichin to tōhyō o shite moritai'" [President Ozawa talking to Ms Uehara Sakura on live internet program: "The people is the most important. Think for yourself. Wants all to cast their votes."], DPJ homepage, October 19, 2008, <http://www.dpj.or.jp/news/?num=14332>.

## Vacillation Worsens

The bad news about the economy that had made the headlines on an almost daily basis was epitomized in an *Asahi shimbun* editorial on December 3. The automobile industry was badly affected by the global financial crisis. New vehicle sales in November had plunged 27 per cent compared to 2007 – the largest monthly drop since the first oil crisis in 1974. The industrial production index for November was reported to show the largest decline since this survey began in 1973, slipping by 6.4 per cent from October. Companies were downsizing, and with figures for unemployment rising steeply, consumer spending was also down. The contraction in the real economy was putting pressure on financial markets, which were already straining under the global financial crisis.<sup>157</sup>

The newspaper expressed skepticism concerning the ability of the Asō cabinet to steer the nation through turbulent waters. The prime minister chose to take a two-forked approach. On the one hand, he fraternized with ordinary Japanese, visiting work-places and shopping centers; on the other, he held meetings with business leaders. He made a widely reported visit to the LoFt store in Shibuya, one of Tokyo's most colorful and busy districts and a popular place for young people. In his e-mail magazine, Asō subsequently explained that his visit was not for shopping purposes but to visit the company which had abolished worker classifications such as contract employees and part-time employees, and those employees who so wished had been accepted as regular employees. His visit confirmed his belief in the strength of Japanese management.<sup>158</sup> This renewed insight was brought to the fore later in the day when the prime minister had a high-

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<sup>157</sup> “Keiki shissoku. Fuanshinri ga tomaranai” [Decelerating economy. Uncertain mood not ending], *The Asahi shimbun*, December 3, 2008 (editorial).

<sup>158</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Aso Cabinet E-mail Magazine*, No. 9 (December 4, 2008), <http://www.mmz.kantei.go.jp/foreign/m-magazine/backnumber/2008/1204.html>.

profile encounter with Mitarai Fujio, chairman of the Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) and Okamura Tadashi, chairman of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry. During their talk the prime minister spoke up for the need for Japanese business “to help bolster stable employment and raise wages.” He also requested companies not to withdraw offers of employment. The reason for his request was quite simple: “Employment and wages are the basic foundations of people’s livelihoods. Even if the economic situation becomes severe, we must safeguard them.”<sup>159</sup> It was a performance that seemingly killed two birds with one stone. He could present forward-looking ideas aimed at handling the worsening economic crisis and the numbing paralysis that spread over the labor market, and increase his media exposure and impress voters that he as prime minister was concerned about the harsh realities of unstable employment that they experienced.<sup>160</sup> To convey the image that he had a sound grasp of the economic situation was needed, because Asō had recently revealed just how economically out of touch with the reality of ordinary Japanese he was by not knowing the price of basic foodstuffs such as noodles. It had been embarrassing for Asō, and his ignorance was surely noted by Japanese housewives, a very important group at election time.<sup>161</sup> His comments in his meeting with the business leaders, however, backfired and could not but strengthen the impression that the prime minister was out of touch with economic realities. Asking companies not to sack people and to raise wages in a situation where the world and Japan was engulfed in what Asō himself had described repeatedly as a “once in a century crisis” risked being seen as naïve.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> “Aso visits Loft, asks about temps,” *The Japan Times*, December 1, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20081202a8.html>.

<sup>161</sup> This incident resembles the often-quoted embarrassing event for the then Swedish prime minister Tage Erlander, who was asked about the housing problem of youths in the 1966 election campaign and had no good answer. It was an incident that his party had to pay for in the election. See, e.g., Stig Hadenius, *Kampen om monopolet: Sveriges radio och TV under 1900-talet* [Fight about the monopoly: Swedish radio and television in the twentieth century] (Stockholm: Prisma, 1998), pp. 205ff.

## Uneasiness in the LDP

With Asō's popularity beginning to wane, uneasiness spread in the LDP on having him as the party's figurehead in the upcoming Lower House election. Polls showed that the situation was precisely the opposite of what the LDP had thought upon Asō's appointment – the party was now far more popular than its leader. Competition between the leading parties in the ruling and the opposition blocs did not subside but intensified. On December 2 the DPJ announced that the party would open its regular party convention on January 18 – the same day as the LDP's regular party convention was scheduled to take place.<sup>162</sup> The plan of the DPJ to rob the LDP of attention was obvious. Reports from the conventions could be expected to focus on the LDP–DPJ clash, which suited the DPJ and its claims that the prime minister and his cabinet were unable to govern the country.

With polls revealing the sinking popularity of the prime minister and his party, support within his own party began to show cracks in the façade. Rumors of MPs defecting and forming splinter groups hit the front pages. That this should occur was of no great surprise. Many LDP MPs saw how the prospects not only for their party but, above all, themselves dipped as the wrath of voters turned against Asō. That the political opposition would triumph seemed to go from being a possibility to a certainty. Younger LDP members of the Diet, who had been waiting for older generations to hand over the reins of power, could see the opportunity slipping away from them and instead towards the DPJ. Some of the up-and-coming, more youthful members of the ruling party, such as former Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki Yoshihisa, former Minister for Financial Services and Administrative Reforms Motegi Toshimitsu, and former Minister of State for Financial Policy and Administrative Reform Watanabe Yoshimi, were among those who were rumored to be considering taking action. As former

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<sup>162</sup> “Minshu, 1 gatsu 18 nichi ni tōtaikai hiraku hōshin Jimin to dōnichi kaisai ni” [DPJ policy to have party convention on Jan 1, same day as LDP], *The Asahi shimbun*, December 2, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/1202/TKY200812020154.html>.

ministers, they had been given a stint in the government but had subsequently been relegated to the ranks of ordinary MPs, and with Asō Tarō as prime minister, the likelihood increased that it would be a one-time experience.

Watanabe was one of the leading younger LDP politicians who criticized the prime minister on prime time television, hinting at the possibility that a new party could be formed.<sup>163</sup> Later, he denied the rumor that he would leave the party after one of LDP's heavy-weights, Machimura Nobutaka, had suggested that Watanabe should leave the party.<sup>164</sup> It is a sure bet, however, that the prime minister and the leaders of the large LDP factions did not take lightly Watanabe's rebelling. It had not been long since he and other influential young LDP leaders like Shiozaki and Motegi had united with over 20 other LDP MPs to pressure the cabinet to submit a second supplementary budget.<sup>165</sup> For the LDP leadership the situation worsened when Ishihara Nobuteru, a rising star who had been one of the candidates in the recent LDP presidential election, added his voice to Asō sceptics. In a talk that was widely discussed he claimed that "70 to 80 per cent of LDP Diet member have doubts if they can remain a ruling party after going through an election under the Asō government. We are looking into an abyss politically and economically."<sup>166</sup> Provided the LDP will stay in power,

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<sup>163</sup> "Watanabe Yoshimi motogyōkakushō Jimin ritō ni fukumi" [Former Administrative Reforms Minister Watanabe Yoshimi: Implying leaving LDP], *The Sankei shimbun*, December 2, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081202/stt0812022035007-n1.htm>.

<sup>164</sup> "Watanabe motogyōkakushō, Minshutōhairi o hitei" [Former Administrative Reforms Minister Watanabe denies he's entering DPJ], *The Sankei shimbun*, December 7, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081207/stt0812071742000-n1.htm>.

<sup>165</sup> "Jimin chūkenra, niji hosei yosan'an no konkokkai teishutsu o yōkyū kambōchōkan e" [Demand of 2nd supplementary budget proposal: LDP centrists to chief cabinet secretary], *The Sankei shimbun*, November 21, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081121/stt0811211339004-n1.htm>.

<sup>166</sup> "'Asō seiken gakeppuchi' Ishihara kanjichōdairi ga tsuyoi kikikan" [Deputy Party Secretary-General Ishihara's strong crisis awareness: "Asō cabinet stands on

Ishihara is a likely future prime minister and criticism from him carried some weight. No wonder that Asō tried to belittle Ishihara's criticism when he was asked about his comment.<sup>167</sup> Another of the LDP's aces, Koike Yuriko, who had also been one of the five candidates in the race to replace Fukuda, was rumored to be planning to form a "study group" together with Shiozaki and former LDP Secretary-General Nakagawa Hidenao.<sup>168</sup> It was generally taken as a sign that she was displeased with the politics that her party under Asō was pursuing, which, if true, made sense since she had portrayed herself in the LDP presidential campaign as the candidate who was going to march under the banner of Koizumi reforms. With the party under Asō hastily moving away from the reform path, these rumors did not seem far-fetched. It thus stood to reason that, if Koike saw no prospects for the LDP returning to the path of reform that Koizumi had instigated, she would revert to what was not unusual for her – move to another party – or, even, contribute to the creation of a new one. Indeed, she had already been a prolific representative of the Japan New Party, the New Frontier Party, the Liberal Party, and the New Conservative Party before she had joined the LDP, and it would not have been the first time that she was a founding figure of a political party.

### **Asō, A Lame Duck?**

A week into December, Prime Minister Asō and his party found themselves in a precarious situation. Polls published by the large circulation newspapers showed that they were both in dire straits. First out was the

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the brink"], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, December 5, 2008,

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20081205-OYT1T00914.htm>.

<sup>167</sup> "Asō shushō burasagari yōhō: Ishihara Nobuteru shi hatsugen 'Naiyō kite nai kara wakaran'" [Prime Minister Asō's *burasagari*: Mr. Ishihara Nobuteru's statement "Haven't heard the contents so I don't know"], *The Sankei shimbun*, December 5, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/policy/081205/plc081205126012-n2.htm>.

<sup>168</sup> Toru Fujioka, "LDP Plans for Study Group May Show Opposition to Aso, Jiji Says," *Bloomberg*, November 30, 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601101&sid=aHjZg2MmK5AQ&refer=japan>.

*Nihon keizai shimbun*, Japan's leading economic daily, which on December 1 reported a support rate for the LDP of 39 per cent, two points down from two weeks earlier.<sup>169</sup> Polls presented shortly afterwards by the *Asahi shimbun* and by the *Yomiuri shimbun* showed that support for the government and the prime minister had nose-dived. The *Asahi shimbun* reported a support rate of only 22 per cent for the government, down 15 percentage points from 37 per cent in a similar survey in early November. Disapproval figures showed an equally impressive shift, increasing to 64 per cent from 41 per cent in the previous survey.<sup>170</sup> In its poll, the *Yomiuri shimbun* recorded even worse figures for the government – the approval rating had almost halved to 20.9 per cent from the 40.5 per cent recorded in the beginning of November, and disapproval had jumped from 25 percentage points to 66.7 per cent.<sup>171</sup> These results were seconded by a *Kyodo News* poll, which showed support down 15.4 points to 25.5 per cent and that the disapproval rating was up 19.1 percentage points to 61.3.<sup>172</sup> Support for the Asō cabinet was much lower and non-support rates much higher than had even been the case for the unpopular Fukuda cabinet. The *Yomiuri shimbun* reported that voters had “lost faith” in Asō's suitability for the post of prime minister, and the *Asahi shimbun* commented that voters did not have any expectations of him. The strategy drawn up by the LDP, and which had made the party pick Asō as its head, was in shambles. The shaky situation that Asō was facing is graphically illustrated in a diagram

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<sup>169</sup> “Senkyōgo no shushō ni fusawashii hito ‘Asō-Ozawa shi de nai’ 6 wari Nikkei chōsa” [Nikkei poll: 60% thinks “neither Mr. Asō nor Mr. Ozawa” suitable prime minister after election], *Nikkei.net*, December 1, 2008, <http://www.nikkei.co.jp/news/seiji/20081201AT3S3000S30112008.html>.

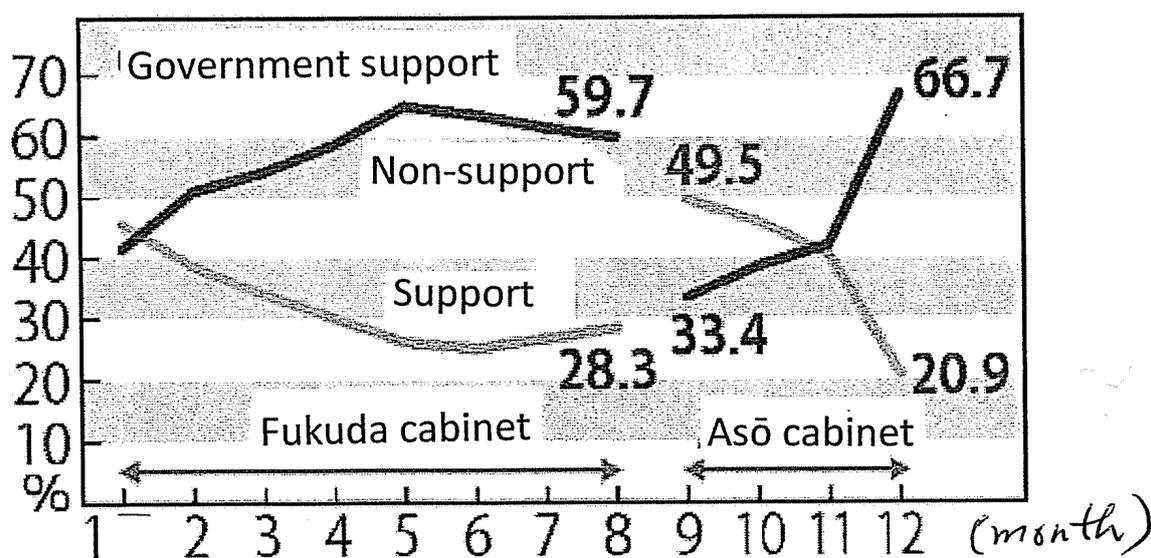
<sup>170</sup> “Naikaku shiji 22%, Asō seiken 2kagetsu de kyūrakuge” [Gov't support 22%, sharp decline after two months for the Asō cabinet], *The Asahi shimbun*, December 8, 2008.

<sup>171</sup> “Shijiritsu kyūroku, shushō ‘hijō ni kibishii sūji’” [Drastic fall in support rating, prime minister: “Very severe figures”], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, December 8, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20081208-OYT1T00374.htm>.

<sup>172</sup> *Kyodo News*, “Support rate for Cabinet falls to 25.5%: Approval sinks 15 percentage points in only one month,” *The Japan Times*, December 8, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20081208a1.html>.

published by the *Asahi shimbun*, which shows the support and non-support ratings of the government during 2008 (Diagram 1)

Diagram 1. Support and Non-support of the Government, 2008



Source: Adapted from the *Asahi shimbun*, December 7, 2008.

Asō's performance did not fare well even when compared with his lackluster predecessors Abe Shinzō and Fukuda Yasuo. Three months after the formation of the Fukuda cabinet, the latter's support rating had stood at 35.3 per cent and the corresponding figure for the Abe cabinet was 48.6 per cent. At the time, the low support ratings were seen as seriously undermining the cabinet's ability to survive, and the scenarios drawn up by newspapers were invariably such that the final stage of the Asō cabinet was foreseen. In a lengthy comment to the results of its poll, the *Asahi shimbun* claimed that one now saw the rapidly evolving final stage of the government.<sup>173</sup> The newspaper was not a lone voice. Surprise over the rapid decline of Asō's support was expressed by other commentators.

<sup>173</sup> "Ikki ni seiken makki jōtai" [Suddenly the last stage of the government], *The Asahi shimbun*, December 8, 2008.

The poll results at the beginning of December effectively erased Asō's campaign claims that he had been the most suitable candidate to succeed Fukuda and to take on the head of the opposition party, Ozawa. All polls yielded the same result when respondents were asked who was the most suitable as prime minister. Previous polls had invariably resulted in a sizeable lead for Asō over Ozawa but the December polls gave the opposite result: respondents preferred Ozawa by a considerable margin. In an *Asahi shimbun* poll immediately after Asō had been appointed, 54 per cent saw him as capable of getting things done; only 28 per cent thought otherwise. In the December poll, only 21 per cent found Asō capable and a huge 68 per cent answered in the negative; Ozawa was now seen as a more suitable prime minister by 35 per cent versus 30 per cent for Asō.<sup>174</sup>

Commentators agreed that the almost unparalleled swiftness and gravity of the fall in support for the government had to be attributed to the prime minister. It seemed a reasonable conclusion. In the *Asahi shimbun* poll, for instance, the support for the LDP had reduced from 30 to 28 percent compared to the previous poll, while the support for the DPJ had increased, albeit only slightly, from 33 to 36 per cent. The changes were thus fairly minor. The drastic shift in voter stance seemed to be linked to the hefty change in figures for support or non-support of the prime minister. Asked about why they supported or did not support Asō, the reasons were his much publicized gaffes and his vacillation on vital policies which did not promote confidence in him as a decision-maker.

The increasing lack of confidence in Asō was seen by some as a question of the premier's personality.<sup>175</sup> This reflected on his party and the way it selects its leaders, especially the top man. Both Abe and Asō were picked because of their popularity but developments evidenced that popularity alone did not suffice as a qualification. The fortune of another politician who had become prime minister on the basis of his popularity, Koizumi Jun'ichirō, showed that voters continued to support him because they

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<sup>174</sup> "Aso support rate dives to 22%," *The Asahi shimbun*, December 9, 2008, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200812090049.html>.

<sup>175</sup> "Ikki ni seiken maki jōtai."

appreciated his sense of having a mission to reform his party and his country. This was underpinned by the massive support he received when he unhesitatingly put his status at risk by calling a general election when his key reform proposal had been rejected by Diet. The subsequent landslide victory and his relatively high popularity throughout his time in office showed the importance of a premier having a vision as his lodestar. Asō has an engaging disposition but cannot be said to possess any overarching vision for Japan. It is symptomatic that when an interview with him was published in the February 2008 issue of a journal entitled “Leave the ‘conservative rebirth’ to me!,” it started with what he is well-known for – his passion for Japanese cartoons, *manga* – and then dealt with various issues, all of which were fairly ordinary and far from what can be called a vision.<sup>176</sup> In this, he resembled his predecessor Abe Shinzō, who gave a rather lackluster performance when he was asked to present his “vision” to a U.S. audience.<sup>177</sup>

With his family pedigree and being the grandson to the “father” of Japan’s postwar foreign policy – if not Japanese politics as is sometimes claimed – it would have been wise for Asō to play what might have been his trump card, foreign policy. Whatever Asō’s interest or his intentions were at the outset, the room for him to pursue his own foreign policy ideas was limited. First, as prime minister he could not speak up freely as he had done as an ordinary politician or as a minister or official in his party. However prolific the ideas and reflections he had presented in his books, they were meant for building up support in his bid to be appointed prime minister and – as Asō himself was to state as newly elected prime minister – what he said before he became prime minister was one thing; speaking as a premier

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<sup>176</sup> Asō Tarō, “‘Hoshu saisei’ wa ore ni makasero!” [Leave the “conservative rebirth” to me!], *Shokun!*, February 2008, pp. 24–43.

<sup>177</sup> In an earlier report, I characterized Abe’s endeavor as a “visionless vision,” see Bert Edström, *The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan’s Foreign Policy*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper (May 2007), pp. 26–31. In a way, it was a bit unfair to Abe, whose idea of “beautiful Japan” was a vision, albeit a bit vague. Abe’s book *Utsukushii kuni e* [Towards a beautiful country] (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2006) became a best seller.

was a totally different story. Secondly, the room for maneuver in foreign policy afforded him was limited from his first day in office, with a raging economic crisis and rapidly worsening economic conditions at home. Thus, Asō's opportunity to make a personal difference was nullified by mounting economic problems, and he has not had much time to engage in foreign policy.

For Asō, foreign policy became useful in one respect, however. He could use it as an excuse for not calling a general election. His attendance at a host of important international events like the ASEM 7 meeting in Beijing on October 24–25, the emergency financial summit on November 15, the APEC meeting in Lima on November 22–23, and other important international meetings could not be combined with an election campaign.

### **Moves Within the LDP**

With the failure of the LDP's strategy to pick a popular new prime minister and, in thus doing, also dissolve the Lower House in one sweep, the present prime minister can do no more than try to muddle through to the best of his ability and hope that some unforeseen event or development will occur that saves the fate of the party. With popularity figures approaching 20 per cent and, thus, far below the 30 per cent level that is considered the critical level for a prime minister to stay in power, the question is if his party can and will tolerate Asō staying on and so risk a repetition in the upcoming Lower House election of the disastrous outcome of the 2007 Upper House election. For Asō, there is no alternative other than to wait for a benign turn of events and meanwhile continue to work on producing tangible achievements. But since the parliamentary situation is precarious both for Asō and the coalition government, he is at the mercy of the Diet to produce those tangible results that are needed to restore his credibility. On the other hand, it is also a risky strategy for the DPJ to steadfastly hinder the government in its efforts to improve the situation wherein action is badly needed, since this could cause voters to turn against the political opposition and return to supporting the LDP.

Worse for Asō are the political machinations within the LDP. The party (read the bosses) has never hesitated in the past to oust a prime minister proven unfit of to hold high office. With their goal of keeping the LDP in power, factions will make their moves and members of the party will also act in a way to improve their chances for re-election. The exceedingly low popularity figures that the prime minister and his party are currently garnering make it evident that many MPs and even influential faction leaders have reasons to be worried over their prospects with Asō as leader. Realignments and defections will take place and further intensify the longer he remains incumbent. It is not unlikely that if Asō is able to stay on, he will endure what happened to one of his predecessors, Miyazawa Kiichi (prime minister 1991–93), who could only watch on as a group of LDP MPs supported a vote of no confidence in the Lower House proposed by the political opposition; which forced him to dissolve the Lower House, announce a general election, the result of which was that he had to leave office.<sup>178</sup> The LDP's charm lady Koike Yuriko went on record in early December with a understated warning to her party that the LDP is in danger of falling apart because the prime minister is losing his grip on LDP lawmakers, claiming that in 2009 "a number of new parties may pop up one after another,"<sup>179</sup> adding that some lawmakers may leave the LDP to look out for their own survival in the upcoming Lower House election. Given her past, with several party affiliations, her remark could be taken as a hidden threat that she was considering transferring her allegiance somewhere else. But, at least on the surface, she dismissed this on account of being "tired of creating new parties."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Okushima Sadao, *Jimintō sōsaisen: Kenryoku ni tsukareta mōjatachi* [The election of LDP chairmen: Power haunting dead people] (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 2006), p. 163.

<sup>179</sup> "Aso losing grip on power as LDP faces crisis over budget problems," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, December 8, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20081208a2.html>.

<sup>180</sup> "Aso under fire: What next for the floundering Aso, LDP?" *The Yomiuri shimbun*, December 10, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081210TDY01301.htm>.

With Prime Minister Asō's plummeting support and his inability to improve the grim situation for his party, its rank and file and political hopefuls are expecting a repetition in the upcoming Lower House election of the outcome of the 2007 Upper House election. When the prime minister's support rating fell below what used to be seen as the "danger line" of 30 per cent and continued to decline, reaching a previously inconceivable 20 per cent, uneasiness and nervousness spread in the party. No less than 65 per cent of respondents thought it a good idea that the leading opposition party took over.<sup>181</sup>

With the increasingly precarious situation that the LDP finds itself in, dissatisfaction has increased. The contours of a real threat to the present leadership of the LDP and to the party's position as a governing party were seen at the end of the year, when one of the LDP's young leaders, the outspoken and prolific former cabinet minister Watanabe Yoshimi voted on December 24 for a DPJ backed resolution calling for an immediate dissolution of the Lower House followed by a general election. At a press conference, he clarified that his action was based on his view that the situation was such that it was critical that the Lower House election took place so that the problems that plagued Japan could be solved. Rather than as a member of a faction or a party, he saw himself as a representative of the people. In solemn words, he stated his credo as a politician: "Party before faction, and state and people before party. This is the starting point for the work of a member of the Diet." Based on this conviction he declared himself ready to face the consequences of deviating from the party line, be it expulsion or suchlike. When asked by journalists about his future with the party, he told them he had no intention of leaving the LDP. Since Watanabe had been involved in some previous activities directed against Asō, he was careful to deny that he had had contact with any member of

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<sup>181</sup> "Minshu ni ichidō, seiken makasetemo yoi' 65% zōka...Yomiuri chōsa"  
[Yomiuri poll: "OK to hand over gov't once to DPJ" increases to 65%], *The Yomiuri shimbun*, December 12, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080116-907457/news/20081210-OYT1T00032.htm>.

the opposition DPJ - and also that had he had contact with anyone within his own party.<sup>182</sup>

The reaction from the LDP to Watanabe's revolt was a clear indication of the decay that has set in in the party. For the party leadership to take lightly Watanabe's rebellion was a highly risky move in a situation when the government's support was at a nadir and LDP's electoral prospects bleaker than perhaps at any time since the party was founded over five decades ago. The reaction showed that the LDP leadership did not underestimate the risk that an expulsion of Watanabe entails. When one of the key officials of the party, Chairman Nikai Toshihiro of LDP's General Affairs Council, proposed that Watanabe should be expelled, he failed to get his way. Despite Watanabe's support of the DPJ sponsored anti-government motion, which was reason enough to expel him, the party decided to "admonish" him, the second lightest of the punishments for disobedient party members available to the LDP.<sup>183</sup> The reason was quite simple. With anti-Koizumi followers increasingly marginalized in the party and the anti-Asō mood predominant in public opinion, an expulsion of Watanabe risked inducing other MPs to join him and leave the party.

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<sup>182</sup> "Otogame wa nandemo ukeru. Jomei demo nan demo" [I'll take the blame. Expulsion or whatever], *The Sankei shimbun*, December 24, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/081224/stt0812241641007-n1.htm>.

<sup>183</sup> "Watanabe motogyōkakushō 'zōhan' kaisan yōkyū ketsugian ni sansei" [Former reform minister Watanabe "rebels" accepts decision regarding demand for dissolution], *The Asahi shimbun*, December 24, 2008.

## Concluding Remarks

A month after his appointment on September 24, a pilgrimage to Yoshida Shigeru's tomb was made by Prime Minister Asō Tarō to seek inspiration and pay his respects.<sup>184</sup> It made sense since Asō reveres his grandfather. Problems were piling up for him as Japan's new prime minister and sage advice was needed. His two immediate predecessors had been unable to handle the political and economic problems that troubled Japan and had had to quit their posts after only a brief tenure. Asō risked becoming yet another victim of the ingrained pattern of Japanese politics – that premiers tend to be short-lived.

When Asō Tarō was appointed prime minister, his party had pinned their hopes on him. By appointing a popular politician after the hapless Fukuda Takeo, the party hoped to be able to take advantage of the new premier's high approval ratings in a quickly organized Lower House election. Since the LDP's defeat in the Upper House election in 2007, the upcoming election has been hanging as a veritable Sword of Damocles above the party's head. Appointing Asō and calling for elections was a plan that the LDP strategists hoped would enable the long-ruling party to fend off the threat that the political opposition would oust it from power.

Japanese politics during 2008 has evolved with parties and politicians jockeying for positions in anticipation of the Lower House election. It will be a crucial moment for the LDP but also for other political parties and political hopefuls. In the realization that the election is an event that cannot be avoided, gloom spread among the LDP's rank and file and leadership when it dawned, almost immediately after Asō's elevation, that the optimistic plans drawn up by the party's strategists looked very much a

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<sup>184</sup> "Asō shushō, sofu no hakamairi juningo hajimete" [Prime Minister Asō's first visit to his grandfather's tomb after his appointment], *The Sankei shimbun*, October 20, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/policy/081020/plc0810201206004-n1.htm>.

failure. To make Asō the front figure in the belief that his popularity would save the party from a humiliating defeat in the upcoming election was a failed strategy. The expected jump upwards of popularity figures for the party and its man at the helm did not materialize. Instead, he has become a liability that threatens to bring to an end the LDP's over five decade-long political dominance.

To pick a new leader is probably not an option for the LDP. A fourth LDP president without fighting an election for the Lower House would lower its legitimacy. The last election for the Lower House was in 2005 – the historic “postal election” with the charismatic Koizumi in the lead – and a new party president cum prime minister would only prove to the electorate that the LDP has no fresh policies to offer but only a new face, and with the problems that the country is experiencing, this is no longer sufficient. The elections of both Abe and Asō have laid bare the futility of the approach taken by the party to let the wind of prevailing opinion decide whom to lead the party. Back in 2001 Koizumi Jun'ichirō won due to his popularity but he was a man with a mission and a vision. This was not the case with Abe or Asō. To the extent that they have been carried by visions, their visions were aimed at redressing or restoring the past – in the case of Abe a departure from “the post-war regime” that Yoshida helped establish; in the case of Asō a return to the country and society that his grandfather Yoshida Shigeru helped create.

There is a dearth of constructive ideas in the LDP, which was touched upon when the *Japan Times* in an editorial after Fukuda's policy speech in January 2008 questioned – in earnest – whether Fukuda could “distinguish his policy line from that of the Democratic Party of Japan.”<sup>185</sup> Appointing Asō did not save the situation for the country, much less for the LDP. To pick him because he was seen as able to defeat Ozawa in the upcoming Lower House election was instead a risky move in that the party offered voters a

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<sup>185</sup> “Some good ideas, but can he do it?” *The Japan Times*, January 20, 2008 (editorial), <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ed20080120a1.html>.

“cheerful” politician, not a politician carried by a vision or mission as had been the case with Koizumi. Instead it was a case of style over substance.

What the LDP has to come up with is a political program offering solutions to urgent problems and a vision for the future as its sales points – not merely a new face. The problem for the LDP and its politics writ large – that is, Japanese politics – is that Asō has turned out to be just yet another representative of the many other politicians who have occupied the Prime Minister’s Office and about whom Ofer Feldman wrote in 2002: “Rarely expressing original ideas and personal opinions, they have been perceived as lacking vision, clear policy goals, and agendas. Rather than being strong, visible, articulate, and assertive, Japanese prime ministers, in particular, were remarkably weak, reactive, and seldom advocated reform.”<sup>186</sup> And equally pertinent today is Kenji Hayao’s conclusion based on his study of postwar Japanese prime ministers: “The typical Japanese prime minister is, by the standards of most other countries, a remarkably weak and passive figure.”<sup>187</sup> What has evolved since would not make Hayao see any need to change his assessment since he published his standard text in 1993.

One of Japan’s political dons, Takeshita Noboru (prime minister 1987–89), had once made a joke before he ascended the political throne that “a singer lasts one year, a premier is thrown away after two.”<sup>188</sup> Japanese cabinets are notoriously short-lived and also premiers do not last very long; their tenure, moreover, has shortened even further compared to the period when Takeshita made his comment. It was thought for a while during the Koizumi era that this had changed, but his departure seems to have meant a revival of the old habit of short-lived premiers. His successor Abe Shinzō left after ten months, Abe’s successor Fukuda Yasuo lasted twelve, and at

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<sup>186</sup> Ofer Feldman, “Personality and Leadership,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, *Asia Program Special Report*, No. 101 (February 2002), p. 30.

<sup>187</sup> Kenji Hayao, *The Japanese Prime Minister and Public Policy* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Jin Ikkō, *Sōridaijin to iu na no shokugyō* [A job called prime minister] (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1994), p. 230.

the time of writing, it's highly doubtful whether Fukuda's successor Asō Tarō will endure very long.

### **Regained Strength of Factions**

When Asō won the LDP presidential election, it was the first time in eight years that the president had not been chosen from the largest faction.<sup>189</sup> The election of Koizumi as prime minister demonstrated the role that the media have come to play in political fortunes, showing that a politician can reach the top in spite of the vehement resistance of faction leaders. He prevailed on the basis of his strong standing in public opinion and – far more worrying for faction leaders – his commitment to crush the LDP if the party resisted change, a commitment that was met with enthusiasm among ordinary Japanese. Koizumi contributed, it seemed at the time, to a weakening of the power and influence of the factions, but soon after he left, factions made a comeback as was graphically illustrated when Abe Shinzō reshuffled his cabinet in 2007 and presented a ministerial lineup heavily tinged by factional considerations. The reshuffle demonstrated that the LDP factions had regained their position as the centers of power in the party and, thus, in Japanese politics. Fukuda Yasuo was made prime minister by the faction big shots, who placed their man in the prime minister's chair, not the popular Asō Tarō. Fukuda took over his predecessor's cabinet more or less unchanged, but when he picked a team himself, it was easy to see that the factions were back in grand style: his ministerial lineup resembled a veritable *Who's Who?* of influential faction people. With Asō, the

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<sup>189</sup> Sometimes, faction leaders find reasons to pick someone outside of the powerful factions. Asō is not the first case. When Miki Takeo and Kaifu Toshiki became premiers (in 1974 and 1989, respectively) despite the fact that they represented only small factions (Kaifu was not even a faction leader), their elevation was made possible because they were seen by party elders as “clean” politicians who could help restore public confidence in the LDP whose image was badly tarnished because of political scandals. Important was also that their factional base made them pose no threat to the power position of the leaderships of the large LDP factions, and they could be sacked when the storm around the party had subsided.

regained influence of faction leaders continues. Despite the fact that he is prime minister and chairman of the LDP, he has to rely on the support of other faction leaders. Moreover, Asō's political base is weak since his factional base is one of LDP's smallest factions.

### **Generational Change in the Offing?**

While Asō is seen as belonging to a younger generation of LDP leaders, the fact is that he was 66 when he became premier and had already been re-elected as an MP nine times. His ascension can hardly be seen as a symbol of generational change. But nonetheless one is in the offing in Japanese politics; albeit probably not with a younger generation of LDP politicians taking over from the seniors in the party in the way that is generally expected. The generation shift in Japanese politics will come because Asō's time in office is likely to have brought the LDP to a point of no return with a devastating defeat in this year's Lower House election looming, and the DPJ instead is likely to come into power.

It was not only in the LDP that the top post was up for grabs in 2008. In the space of three days in September three of Japan's political parties had selected their top representatives. The DPJ went first, on September 21, and re-elected its party head Ozawa Ichirō, who went unchallenged. The following day, Asō was elected successor to Fukuda Yasuo, followed the next day by the re-election of New Komeitō's incumbent Ōta Akihiro.

With the re-election of Ozawa and Ōta, it was only the LDP that picked a new front figure. As this paper has illustrated, a new front figure was perceived as a way for the party to meet the difficult times to be faced with the deteriorating economy and popular support dwindling. Asō's ascension to power was also a move that marginalized Koizumi and his followers who – despite not representing the *hoshu honryū* – had for some years occupied the center-stage of the party and Japanese politics against the will and interest of the faction bosses. During the LDP presidential campaign, the shift in the LDP away from the policies pursued during the Koizumi years surfaced. It became clear that the party intended to seal the fate of the reform policy à la Koizumi that had been the rallying cry of the party as late

as when Abe Shinzō had fought to become his successor. From having been seen as a part of the solution to Japan's woes, reforms were now treated as part of the problem.

In a statement, the new chief cabinet secretary, Kawamura Takeo, explained rather bluntly that social disparities grew in the wake of Koizumi's structural reforms, including deregulation, and that the "future challenge is to remedy the situation."<sup>190</sup> His comment came after the surprise news that former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō was retiring from politics. Given the fact that he was the man behind his party's landslide victory in the 2005 Lower House election by making privatization of the postal service the central theme of the election campaign and had dominated Japanese politics during his five and a half years as premier, many saw his departure as premature. He was still one of Japan's most popular politicians and had come second in a recent poll about whom the Japanese found most suitable for the post of prime minister.<sup>191</sup> His departure was unexpected, and was tinged with bitterness, as the negative side of his reforms was stressed by his party rather than the merits.

The way Koizumi chose to leave politics gave food for thought, however. After having fought an uncompromising battle to introduce reforms, the way he retired as the former banner bearer for reforms let down his supporters. On announcing his retirement, he named his son as his successor. Not only that, in the manner of a typical LDP political boss, he had visited his constituency to ask for support for his son and handed over his support organization, *kōenkai*, to him. A departure in this way, behaving as a traditional political boss, made mockery of much of Koizumi's image of

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<sup>190</sup> "Word of Koizumi's plan to retire catches current ministers off guard," *The Japan Times*, September 27, 2008.

<sup>191</sup> "Aimai naikaku no insho" [Impression of the cabinet – vague], *Sankei shimbun*, August 5, 2008.

being a reformer through and through and having been regarded, for a while at least, as the prototype of the Japanese leader of the 21st century.<sup>192</sup>

The feeling that a generational change is in the offing was further strengthened when two prominent politicians announced their retirement. Kōnō Yōhei did so soon after his political junior and ally Asō had been appointed prime minister. The retirement of the dovish and liberal Kōno served to highlight the nationalistic and right-wing swing underway in the party. Another prominent politician retiring from national politics was Doi Takako, the former chairperson of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and also a former speaker of the Lower House, whose political credentials were first and foremost based on the fact that she led the JSP to a large defeat over the LDP in the 1989 Upper House election.

### **Koike Yuriko, the New Leader?**

One interesting aspect of Asō's cabinet formation was that sources close to him spread the news during his campaign for the presidency of the LDP that he was thinking of giving his competitors key posts in his administration. The idea was to encourage party unity, *the Yomiuri shimbun* reported.<sup>193</sup> When the lineup of new ministers was presented it became clear that this idea had not materialized fully. One reason was probably that one of Asō's competitors for the post of LDP president, the high-profile Koike Yuriko, clarified a week before the party picked Fukuda's successor that she saw problems with Asō's idea for the simple reason that the differences in policies proposed by her and Asō were so big that it would be "very difficult" for the government to pursue both at the same time.<sup>194</sup> Another

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<sup>192</sup> See, e.g., Mikuriya Takashi, "Koizumi Jun'ichirō," in Mikuriya Takashi, ed., *Rekidai shushō monogatari* [The story of Japanese prime ministers] (Tokyo: Shinshokan, 2006), p. 274.

<sup>193</sup> "Aso would offer Koike key ministerial post," *The Yomiuri shimbun*, September 14, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20080914TDY02311.htm>. Equally reasonable is that it would be easier for Asō to have his competitors in his cabinet so as to neutralize their threat to take over.

<sup>194</sup> "Moshi Asō shi kara nyūkaku dashin saretara...Koike shi 'jitai' no kangae" [If entering the cabinet is sounded out by Mr. Asō...Ms Koike's thought on 'refusal'],

reason for her could be that the work that Asō took on was not easy. To regain popular support and confidence verged on being a Herculean task at a time when the popularity of the party was at a nadir, and where the country was experiencing an economic slump and parliamentary work had stalled. The task awaiting the new premier verged on political suicide as the likelihood for his cabinet to falter seemed greater than the prospects for success. The troubling fact for whoever came after Fukuda was that the stage was set for a severe defeat of the LDP in the upcoming Lower House election. Everyone knows that Koizumi's pyramidal success in the 2005 "postal election" cannot be repeated. A defeat in the upcoming election is seen as something that cannot be avoided. What the new leader and his party can hope for is, at the most, that defeat is minimized so that the party will be able to continue in government. If the margin of defeat would prove large, it is a foregone conclusion that Asō will be replaced. In such a situation, Koike could offer her services. After all, as a former journalist, she knows how to handle the media and is seen as a representative for those within the LDP who not long ago had dominated its policy-making: reform policy à la Koizumi. This, however, goes against the grain of the wishes of the party bigwigs and with her generally weak position in the party, the party elders are much more likely to prefer another of the candidates in the LDP presidential election, Ishiba Shigeru, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in the Asō cabinet, who strengthened his reputation as a key man for the future during the campaign, as noted by the conservative *Sankei shimbun*, which the same day Asō was elected president of the LDP initiated the debate on who would come after him.<sup>195</sup> But even if Koike reaches the top spot, party elders will adjust to that situation and see it that they can continue to have it their way when it comes to deciding policies. Her lack of footing in the party and consequent need to form

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*The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 19, 2008, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/20080901-4146106/news/20080919-OYT1T00504.htm>.

<sup>195</sup> "Posuto Asō' rēsu ni meian waketa haishatachi" [Upped and downed losers in the "post Asō" race], *The Sankei shimbun*, September 22, 2008, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/situation/080922/stt0809222326026-n1.htm>.

alliances within the party would give the party bosses ample room for maneuvering.