



# Return of the Liberal Democrats?

## Internal Divisions within the Democratic Party of Japan

Nick Bishop

*The so-called 'Shadow Shogun' of Japanese politics, Ozawa Ichiro has thrown his hat into the ring again, this time declaring his intention to run for the top post of the Democratic Party of Japan a move that would make him Prime Minister in the upcoming September 14 election against current leader Kan Naoto. Ozawa's decision to run would not only be politically divisive but could continue the revolving door-like trend of Japanese Prime Ministers, making him the sixth PM since the end of the Koizumi administration only four short years ago in 2006.*

Since the rapid erosion of support for the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) last September when the party under then Prime Minister Aso Taro, lost the August general election to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) after only one year in power, there have already been two DPJ Prime Ministers with a third, Ozawa Ichiro, possible as soon as next Tuesday. As of September 1, Mr. Ozawa decided to run for the party's top spot, a position he held from 2006-2009 when he resigned after a scandal involving political donations. He was later appointed as DPJ Secretary-General by then Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio. However, both of them resigned in June of this year after a failure on the Prime Minister's part to keep a major election promise and move the U.S. Airbase at Futenma to a new, less-populated location.

In June, Kan Naoto, formerly finance minister under Hatoyama, took over the helm. Yet his days might be numbered as the Ozawa faction controls the single largest number of seats within the DPJ and former PM Hatoyama has come out in support of Ozawa making his election, however divisive, seem largely a foregone conclusion. After years of backroom jockeying and playing kingmaker for both the LDP (Ozawa crossed party lines in yet another calculated political maneuver in 1993) and the DPJ, Ozawa may finally occupy the prime minister's office. What does this mean for Japanese politics and foreign perceptions of Japan's government? Apart from satisfying the personal interests of a man, who may regard the September 14 runoff as his last shot at the top job (Ozawa is currently 68 years

old and is known to have had health problems which he has disclosed), it risks further depleting any remaining political capital the DPJ has left. After a year of failing to realize any major policy goals the tank is nearly empty. Furthermore both the LDP and the DPJ have failed to inspire any confidence in the voting public and many Japanese are turning their backs on the oft scandal ridden, haphazard antics of their elected officials. Post-Koizumi administrations have usually followed a pattern of embattled politics and upon reaching single digit support figures they capitulate and turn over the reins of power to the next 'reformer', yet none of these challengers have had the stamina to persevere and draw Japan out of what has become nearly two decades of economic decline since the bubble burst in the early 1990s.

Ozawa himself is part of another trend in Japanese politics, that of being the child of a politician. These second generation parliamentarians characterize Japan's government and it is often difficult for newcomers to buck this hereditary passing on of political backing and influence from one generation to the next. A law major at Keio University, Ozawa was first elected to the Japanese Diet in 1969 after his father's death. As a member of the Tanaka Kakuei faction (former PM of Japan from 1972-74, his daughter, Tanaka Makiko also followed him into politics) with Hashimoto Ryutaro and Hata Tsutomu (both later became PM) he was one of the LDP's most popular young leaders in the 1980's. After achieving a ministerial appointment in 1985 in the Nakasone Cabinet he became LDP Secretary-General



four years later in 1989. Ozawa's meteoric rise seemed to herald his own time as the top man was just a matter of patience, yet it was not to be. Resented by senior LDP faction leaders and judged to be an upstart, when members of his own faction became embroiled in a major corruption scandal in 1992 Ozawa deemed it time for a change and caused a sensation by splitting with the LDP. In 2003, after many years in the political wilderness he joined with the DPJ and seems poised to take on the prime ministership. However, Ozawa remains unpopular with large numbers of Japanese voters for his autocratic leadership style and his recent involvement in a number of highly publicized scandals. So the question remains, how will Japanese view his election and how long can he hold on to power before it becomes necessary to once again go to the ballot box?

While Japan has a long history of short lived prime ministers, in the post-war period there have only been four who have served terms of five years or more (Yoshida Shigeru 1946-47, 1948-54, Sato Eisaku 1964-72, Nakasone Yasuhiro 1982-87, and most recently Koizumi Junichiro 2001-06), Japanese politics differ in many respects from other Western constitutional democracies. Factions are created within political parties under a faction leader, who is usually a senior politician such as Ozawa or Hatoyama or Kan in the DPJ- all of whom possess their own faction. The faction acts as a support base, the larger the faction the greater your chances are of gaining political office should your party be elected to form the government or high office should you be in an opposition party. Thus seniority rather than merit frequently plays a more important role in Japanese politics. This is evident in the rather colorful, eccentric figures, like former PM's Mori Yoshiro or Hatoyama Yukio, who are more renowned for their scandals and gaffes than for their political skills. Coupled with this, bureaucrats, rather than the PM and the Cabinet Ministers, have historically been responsible for governing Japan and creating policy and thus go unaffected by rapid substitutions in elected positions which might seem to Western observers more akin to a game of musical chairs than to business as usual.

Yet, attempting to develop a close working relationship along the lines of 'Ron and Yasu' in the 1980's (President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone) or of late with President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi, who were well known for the frequency and enthusiasm of their meetings, is something that is only possible over time when top lead-

ers are in control of a stable administration. While these relationships can be the source of significant improvements to bilateral ties, in the case of Japan, constant changes of prime minister incur the need to reintroduce and restart relations, which hamper and seriously inhibit the building of a strong and familiar working environment.

In the run up to the DPJ leadership election on September 14, Mr. Ozawa clearly has the audacity and the political prowess to put his stamp on the prime minister's office. However, will he be able to overcome the internal divisions of the DPJ that are his own creation and then hold the party together while building consensus moving towards a general election? Can he avoid the scandal ridden governance of past leaders to finally deliver on DPJ election reform promises such as moving Futenma Air Station or will we see a quick defeat followed by a return to an LDP coalition government as in 1993? While Ozawa is renowned for his political maneuvering how long he lasts as PM may be something that is finally out of his control. One thing is for sure, if he is elected on September 14 all eyes will be on Ozawa Ichiro.

*Nick Bishop is a Project Associate with the Institute for Security and Development Policy.*

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## The Institute for Security & Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka

E-mail: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu) / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953

Website: [www.isdpeu](http://www.isdpeu)

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