



Japan: The Quest for Political Leadership

by Bert Edström

Six months have passed since the outcome of the general elections turned Japan's political life upside down. The LDP lost after having been in power, almost without interruption, since its foundation in 1955. Japan's new government under Yukio Hatoyama faces an uphill struggle.

The outcome of the general election in Japan on August 30, 2009 resulted in political upheaval. The seemingly eternally ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost. It became the end of an era, where LDP rule had become synonymous with Japanese politics. Despite the problems that Japan had struggled with since the beginning of the 1990s, the LDP continued to be in power due to its formidable vote-getting capacity. But the party's basis in the electorate has eroded rapidly in recent years. During the election campaign, Prime Minister Taro Aso asked voters to give the ruling party "another chance." The effect was the opposite of what he hoped for. It just reminded those who were going to vote, how the LDP had utterly failed to tackle Japan's economic problems and only boosted the will of voters to cast their votes for anything but the LDP. The election outcome showed the voters' distrust of the solutions offered by the LDP when tackling the problems facing the country.

Yukio Hatoyama new prime minister

On September 16 the leader of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Yukio Hatoyama, took over as prime minister. At the time of his elevation to prime minister, his role as leader was questioned. He is a political blue blood, as a member of a family involved in Japanese politics for five generations. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, many doubted that he had enough stamina to be the leader of the country. Commentators and analysts tirelessly pointed to the fact that he belonged to a political family, the so called "Kennedys of Japan," that included a grandfather who was one of the founding fathers of the LDP and a former prime minister, as well as a father who had been foreign minister.

Japan's new leader was no political rookie as he had a long political career behind him. Hatoyama has been a

member of the Diet (the Japanese parliament) since 1986. But it was true that he became the leader of the DPJ more or less by default in May 2009, when Ichiro Ozawa threw in the towel. Ozawa stepped down due to damage to his reputation caused by accusations of scandal. It threatened to derail the DPJ's onslaught on the LDP in the upcoming election. It must be noted that Ozawa showed considerable stamina and resigned only when he concluded that the financial irregularities, which he was accused of being involved in, would not cease to be a top item on Japan's political agenda.

It was an irony that Hatoyama Yukio, the man to take over after Ozawa, also turned out to be heavily involved in what had all the likings of a hefty political funding money scandal. As prime minister, he has been haunted by rumors of dirty deals, which, in the end, might force him to resign.

Change or not?

On September 16 Prime Minister Hatoyama presented the new government. After the change from an LDP-led coalition to a government formed by the DPJ and two smaller parties, discussion in Japan spread, considering if this change of government was a sign of change or not. Would the new coalition government under Hatoyama mean real change or would stasis continue to reign?

There is no doubt that change was long overdue. The LDP had ruled almost uninterruptedly since the party was founded in 1955. The problem for the party – and for Japan – was that the LDP's formidable party apparatus had continued to keep the country on tracks that prevented political attempts to come up with solutions to solve the increasingly severe problems that Japan was facing. From the burst of the "economic bubble" at the beginning of the 1990s, the LDP's policies that worked



well during the boom years of the past, no longer did so. Being a conservative party, the LDP stuck to its Standard Operating Procedure on how to manage the economy, even when it was painfully obvious that its ideas no longer worked.

If the political parties behind the new government were to be believed, changes were in the offing. As much in the United States, where Barack Obama secured his victory in the presidential election by promising change, the outcome in Japan was similar. The DPJ won a landslide on the strength of its commitment to changing a political system that had worked well for decades, but that was out of tune with realities.

Like in the United States, where Obama secured a landslide victory in the presidential election only to encounter increasing currents of disappointment a year into his period in office, the strong mandate given to the DPJ by voters can easily make disappointment and disillusion spread if the party fails to deliver on its promises.

Tandem leadership

When Hatoyama replaced Ozawa as leader of the DPJ, it was a castling. Ozawa became secretary-general of the party, while Hatoyama went from being secretary-general to being party chairman. When Hatoyama, as new party leader, asked Ozawa to assume the all-important post as the highest-ranking official of the party, a tandem leadership was created. There was an obvious reason for their division of labor. Ozawa has a proven capability as a master of election strategies. It would be a waste if he were carrying around a ministerial portfolio.

The contrast between Hatoyama and Ozawa as political leaders is quite noticeable. While Ozawa is well-known for his autocratic, top-down leadership style and is seen as a strong leader, Hatoyama has the reputation of being weak as a leader. The way Hatoyama looks at his leadership was disclosed in an interview, when he likened his leadership “to that of the conductor of an orchestra [...] the most important thing is that members of his Cabinet team play in harmony.”

As prime minister, Hatoyama has found out the hard way that being the conductor of the governmental orchestra is not easy. As members of the coalition government, the minor parties have had a say on governmental policies. The two junior partners into the

DPJ-led coalition government have turned the threat of leaving the coalition into an effective instrument ensuring that they are listened to and not bulldozed over by the much larger DPJ. In order to keep his coalition government in tact, the prime minister has given in to adamant demands of the minor parties, which has conveyed the impression that the prime minister’s leadership is weak and indecisive.

Will the Hatoyama government prevail?

When Yukio Hatoyama took over as prime minister, it was openly questioned how long he would remain in the post. Whether Japan’s new government will succeed or become a dismal failure depends to a large extent on the stamina, political skill and Fingerspitzengefühl of Hatoyama and his team. The political situation in Japan today is one of genuine uncertainty.

The mandate given by voters to the new government in the election is strong. Despite this, Hatoyama’s months in office have been an uphill battle, and it is an open question if Japan’s new government will prevail in its ambition to implement its political platform that was presented to voters during the election campaign. The rigidities and restrictions that the new government encounters have turned out to be formidable. The Hatoyama cabinet have postponed decisions on tricky issues and vacillated on others. There is an obvious possibility that the government will see it necessary to retreat from the promises and commitments given to voters. This is a dangerous path to follow for the DPJ. Japan’s modern political history should be a memento.

Back in 1993, Morihiro Hosokawa made a quick political career and became prime minister, after having founded a political party the year before. He rode to fame on the tailcoat of a quest for change in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. With the ascension of his cabinet, the LDP, which had ruled since 1955, had to hand over the reins of government to its political opponents. The party was counted out and for good, according to many. But only ten months later, the LDP returned to a place in the sun with a maneuver as unexpected as politically genial. It joined forces with its erstwhile political enemy, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), luring it into a coalition by offering it the post of prime minister and setting down to annihilate it. Takeshita Noboru, the former prime minister, mused that “we have swallowed



the Socialists and are now digesting them”, and he was right. In the political tumult that evolved, it was not the LDP that went out into the wilderness but the JSP. The party performed exceedingly bad in the coming elections and the former No. 2 party shrank to parliamentary insignificance.

In 2009, the DPJ won a landslide victory in the general election. What should not be forgotten is that as late as 2005, it was the LDP that won a landslide in the general election, crushing the leading opposition party at the time, the DPJ.

Thus, both the LDP and the DPJ have been a Phoenix in Japan’s recent political history. It is a fact that should caution too bold projections of the demise of the LDP or the future of the LDP or the DPJ. Admittedly, the political situation is different from the mid-1990s when the LDP succeeded in regaining its position as the No. 1 political party. The LDP has probably not the same stamina and ability to recuperate as it had at that time, but Japanese political history tells that at unexpected moments a Phoenix can suddenly rise from the ashes.

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