



Friday, July 6, 2007

Two trends clearer after election

Yone Sugita

The 20th Upper House election was held on Sunday. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) with a gain of 12 new seats won 50 of the 121 seats contested, while the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), losing only one seat, won 49 seats, and the New Komeito, gaining one seat, won 11 seats.

The DPJ's gains primarily came from a great loss (11 seats) by the Japan Communist Party, not from the LDP's losses. In the new Upper House, the LDP still holds the largest number of seats (115 seats) and along with the New Komeito's seats (24 seats), the ruling coalition parties maintain a majority.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said, "If the ruling parties can secure a majority, then it won't be a problem." The LDP's Secretary General Shinzo Abe added, "We did well considering the winds were against us. It's still possible to run a stable government."

It is true that the LDP did not do as well as it had wished, but, overall, the LDP did a good job. At least it maintained a status quo by which, in cooperation with the New Komeito, it can keep control of all the Upper House activities.

This election has made two trends much sharper than before: A two-party system is shaping up in Japanese politics while three-pronged political forces greatly influence Japanese politics.

DPJ leader Katsuya Okada said, "I think we've entered an era of two major parties, where voters have two choices." Because the DPJ is not locked in a severe ideological conflict with the LDP as the Japanese Socialist Party was under the "System of 1955," the DPJ is flexible enough to draw broad support and attract those who have no particular party affiliation.

Moreover, because the LDP and the DPJ do not differ radically on many policies, voters feel a sense of security about giving the DPJ a try after the long LDP governance in the post-World War II era.

The rise of the DPJ represents the inherently "conservative" attitude of the Japanese people, conservative in the sense that they prefer to maintain the status quo rather than shifting Japanese policies into either a radical or a hawkish direction.

Many Japanese people understand the critical importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance for Japanese security and prosperity; however, when Koizumi seems to have totally submitted himself to the will and wishes of U.S. President George Bush, with no sign of independent minded diplomatic decision making, the Japanese have become fed up with Koizumi's passive obedience to the United States.

When Koizumi promised Bush that the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) would participate in the multinational forces in Iraq without thorough debate in the Diet, the Japanese people came to the end of their patience with his behavior.

On the other hand, Yoshito Sengoku, chairman of the DPJ's Policy Research Council, said, "As a law-abiding country, we cannot approve of the Self Defense Forces' participation in the multilateral forces."

However, the DPJ is realistic enough to make a full commitment to reconstructing an international cooperation system in order to bring stability to Iraq and the Middle East without dispatching military organizations.

Moreover, the DPJ is flexible enough to demand only the orderly disposition, integration, and contraction of the U.S. forces stationed in Japan rather than seeking to abolish the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty system.

A second trend is that a third party, the New Komeito, plays an important role in influencing Japanese politics. In this sense, three-pronged political forces rather than a firm two-party system shape Japanese politics. Because the New Komeito is firmly based on Soka Gakkai, a religious organization, it can always acquire a certain number of bloc votes. However, because of the nature of the party depending on a specific religious organization, it can never expand itself to become a major party with a wide-ranging base of political support.

Consequently, the New Komeito can hold a crucial casting vote only when no single party holds a majority of seats. As Japan moves toward establishing a two-party system, the New Komeito's role is getting more and more important. If the DPJ gains some more seats at the expense of the LDP, the New Komeito could switch its coalition partner from the LDP to the DPJ.

Moreover, since the LDP had to depend on the New Komeito's organized votes at the end of this election, the New Komeito carries a lot of political weight within the ruling coalition parties. When Koizumi tilts toward a more nationalistic orientation on such issues as constitutional amendment, reform of the Basic Education Law, his visit to Yasukuni Shrine, etc, the New Komeito gradually pushes Koizumi back to the moderate center of the political spectrum.

As for the Iraq issue, if more voices surface to criticize Koizumi's self-indulgent decision that the SDF should participate in the multilateral forces in Iraq, the New Komeito may become sensitive enough to influence the LDP to take a more moderate orientation, which might be closer to the DPJ's position.

In this sense, both the DPJ and the New Komeito play a role in containing the LDP's impulse to adopt more nationalistic policies.

July 13, 2004

Copying or using text, photographs, illustrations, video or images appearing on this site without permission is prohibited.

All rights reserved.