



Think Again: Japan's Revolutionary Election

Don't believe the hype about Japan's new ruling party and the supposed revolution it is launching. As the new government completes its first month in office, all signs point to more of the same old stagnation in Tokyo.

BY PAUL J. SCALISE, DEVIN T. STEWART | OCTOBER 1, 2009



Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama with reporters.

"The Recent Elections Are Revolutionary for Japan."

Hardly. A "revolution" implies a sudden, pervasive, and marked change in society or political economy. But the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ's) politicians are not revolutionaries. Like those of the long-reigning Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), they are political opportunists without any long-standing ideological position or dominant constituency. Their only common desire is to be elected.

Nor is the leadership of the new ruling party all that different from the old. Many members of the DPJ leadership were at one point members of the LDP: Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, DPJ Secretary-General Ichiro Ozawa, Finance Minister Hirohisa Fujii, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa, and State Minister for Financial Services Shizuka Kamei, to name a few. Around half of the cabinet attended the University of Tokyo, the traditional feeder for government elites.

The Japanese people don't seem to think they've elected revolutionaries either. In polls, Japanese voters said they weren't electing radical change as much as expressing dissatisfaction with the LDP. Poll after poll indicates that constituents do not think Hatoyama is a great leader. And only a quarter of voters think the DPJ will lead Japan in the "right direction."

"The DPJ Is the Party of Economic Reform."

If only. In Japan, reform has become such an empty buzzword that one wonders why the media bothers to repeat it. Past prime ministers have cast themselves -- and, by extension, their parties -- as reformist. The DPJ has done the same. But looking closely, the chances for systemic economic reform under Hatoyama seem slim.

The reason is structural. Like the LDP, the DPJ accepts into its party a wide range of ideological, corporate, and political interests. Local support groups (known as *koenkai*) provide some funding to the party but primarily sponsor individual candidates. At a national level, the result is political indecisiveness, interparty bickering, and gridlock.

Were the DPJ to change this system, it would need to bolster party unity, appeal to progressive constituencies with a transformative economic plan, and then gin up grass-roots support. It hasn't done this -- nor does it show any sign that it's planning to do so. The DPJ's principle fundraising organ, the People's Reform Council, taps into the same export-led, old-economy industry groups that the LDP does, suggesting that its reform proposals will not fundamentally upset the cozy status quo.

The DPJ's indebtedness to many masters shows in its economic platform, a hodgepodge of conflicting proposals. The new ruling party claims it will reduce the LDP's "wasteful spending," but it also advocates increased spending on households -- without explaining why or how it plans to fund that priority. It wants to "strongly promote" measures to prevent global warming, but it also wants to eliminate highway tolls, placating some businesses but increasing carbon dioxide emissions. And it wants to allow local governments to control national funds, but it also somehow advocates a smaller national budget.

Since the election, Hatoyama's government has come to see the difficulties of governing a fragmented coalition with no clear mandate in such a dour economic climate. The government faces depressed tax revenue, increased debt-service costs, and ballooning indirect obligations. Plans to privatize the postal system have been delayed. Moreover, news of heated internal bickering over the terms of business-loan repayments and currency-market interventions has undercut the DPJ's credibility on economic reform. The party that promised change looks like it is delivering more of the same.

"The DPJ Will Shift Power from the Bureaucracy to the Political Process."

Don't count on it. There is a reason why around three-quarters of bills presented to the Diet come through Japan's notorious, entrenched bureaucracy.

In Japan, laws are usually vetted by ministerial advisory councils, drafted by the bureaucracy, reviewed by the relevant minister, reviewed again by the relevant Diet committee, and finally rubber-stamped in a plenary Diet session. This is not because the bureaucracy has a chokehold on the legislative process, but because politicians lack the time, energy, staff, and expertise necessary to write bills.

Anywhere between 15 and 100 bills are made into law with each Diet session, to say nothing of hundreds of regulations, international accords, and ordinances. Almost every one is the product of a diffuse and lengthy decision-making process. The system is structured to devote resources for that process to the bureaucratic ministries, not the Diet.

Indeed, each Diet member has just three legal aides, while every ministry has hundreds of experienced workers, often with decades of expertise devoted to creating laws. The Diet (including the cabinet) receives just 7 percent of the governance budget, whereas some of the most influential ministries, such as the Finance Ministry, receive more than three times that amount.

To make law-writing a function of elected officials rather than bureaucrats, Hatoyama would need to increase cabinet ministers and vice ministers' terms. They currently serve for just a year -- not long enough to exert the day-to-day supervision needed to make bills. But such a move would require a radical reorganization of Japan's postwar parliamentary electoral institutions. That's something no one is even considering.

The DPJ offers no real countermeasure to shift power back to the cabinet. Rather, the ruling party has called for the creation of a few smaller cabinet-focused committees to replace a few older party-centric and ministry-centric committees. It has also restricted the media's access to the bureaucracy -- hardly signaling its commitment to a more democratic and transparent legislative process.

"The DPJ Will Dramatically Alter the U.S.-Japan Relationship."

Nonsense. Numerous vital factors weigh against a U.S.-Japan split. First, any change in the DPJ's policy position is likely just rhetorical. Despite Hatoyama's recent remarks that Japan should pursue a more independent path from the United States, the two countries have declared their intentions to "deepen the alliance." It's a case of national interest trumping political rhetoric: Most Japanese, including DPJ ministers, see close ties with the United States as critical to security in what remains a dangerous region.

If anything, the DPJ will try to *diversify* the relationship with the United States -- changing the emphasis and being honest about Japan's capabilities -- not *weaken* it. The party has long advocated tighter U.S.-Japan economic ties and collaboration on nonmilitary areas such as energy and the environment. "Japan's relations with the U.S. have been heavily biased toward defense," Hatoyama **recently said**. "Now it's time to shift our focus to economic ties."

But above all, the Japanese want to feel secure while countries like North Korea are so close. Therefore, Japan will continue to have strong ties with the U.S. military superpower, upholding the relationship that has helped keep Japan safe for decades.

"The DPJ Will Turn Japan into an Anti-American, Anti-Capitalist Society."

Not in your lifetime. In a now-famous essay in the September issue of the Japanese magazine *Voice*, Hatoyama mused about the coming retreat of American pre-eminence and U.S.-style capitalism. In its place, he favored a more European version of economic management. Alarm bells rang in the United States after parts of the essay were translated and **published in the *New York Times***. Japan watchers, who have known consistency in the U.S.-Japan relationship for decades, scrambled to interpret the remarks.

But **according to *Yomiuri Shinbun***, Japan's **largest-selling** newspaper, Hatoyama's office had not given the *New York Times* permission to publish the truncated, translated essay and thought it took his points out of context. Plus, one doubts that Hatoyama would have quoted the French phrase "liberté, égalité, fraternité" if he meant it for an American audience. And Hatoyama quickly backtracked from the essay, saying it represented his personal views, not those of his party.

This whole episode simply represents a new party getting its sea legs. Japan is not going to suddenly "turn socialist." To be sure, Japan's economy has some socialist elements -- particularly in the cozy relationship between the government, manufacturing, and the financial sectors, something Tokyo-based economist Jesper Koll has called "financial socialism." Fixing holes in the Japanese social safety net, such as those in unemployment and welfare benefits, are obvious policy priorities (just as health care is in the United States).

But Japan remains a free-market, export-driven economy, and policymakers fully appreciate that liberal markets and entrepreneurship are necessary for job creation.

"As Japan Shifts Away from the United States, It Will Shift Toward Asia."

Not true. For Japan, fostering good relations with the West is no longer incompatible with fostering good relations with its Asian neighbors.

In the past, there were two schools of thought on Japan's foreign policy: the look-East school and the look-West school. Fifty years ago or more, these two sides debated fiercely whether Japan needed to align itself with countries like China or with countries like the United States. But circumstances were different then. Japan today can forge new levels of trust with China, South Korea, and Southeast Asia, all without estranging itself from its Western allies.

Hatoyama's desire for a more "independent" Japan means he wants his country to operate on a more equal footing with the United States, something that policymakers in Washington have been cajoling Japan to do for decades. Japan can shed its "American lap dog" image, giving its political leadership role in Asia more credibility.

Finally, the foreign policy of Japanese Democrats is quite similar to that of U.S. Democrats: an emphasis on multilateralism and consultation, strengthening international organizations and treaties, and setting a priority on nonmilitary foreign-policy tools, such as climate-change mitigation, regional cooperation, and trade policy. Tokyo might decline to refuel U.S. Navy ships in the Indian Ocean or make other gestures to mute opposition at home, but it is already considering sending economic aid to Afghanistan.

Japanese executives and political advisors at a recent U.S.-Japan panel held at the Carnegie Council opined that the DPJ's ambitious policy platform might fail but its victory has opened the door to a new conversation in Japan. The Japanese can now ask themselves a fundamental question: What do we want? The answer may be: a return to some traditional values, such as fairness, but also a fiercer competition of ideas. The realm of the possible has been slightly expanded in Japan. For that, observers of Japan should celebrate.

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