Politicians Need to Present Hard-hitting Reforms
—We have had enough of unjustifiable, policy-free elections

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At the beginning of the extraordinary session of the Diet at the end of September, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo decided on a dissolution of the lower house, saying that it was a "dissolution to break through national difficulties"; giving as his reasons a change in the use of tax income, and the worsening North Korea situation. Mainly due to the Moritomo/Kake Gakuen issue, Abe's support rate has been in the doldrums since last spring, and in July the LDP suffered a heavy loss in the Tokyo Assembly elections. So, from the perspective of the opposition, this dissolution was a surprise attack.

The previous dissolution in 2014 was also a surprise attack, and the opposition lost heavily, being unable to react effectively. But this time was different. Interestingly, the opposition fought back with their own surprise attack. The Tokyo governor Koike Yuriko set up a new national political party, the Party of Hope, and announced that she would stand as a candidate herself.

As a result, the reconfiguration of the opposition suddenly accelerated. The then leader of the Democratic Party, Maehara Seiji, consulted with Koike and the party did not field any official election candidates, in effect joining forces with the Kibo no To (Party of Hope). Prime Minister Abe must have experienced a flash of terror at the time. Yet, due to a number of former Democratic Party members working hard to exclude some others, the Kibo no To lost momentum, at which point Edano Yukio launched a third surprise attack that no one had expected. Standing as a candidate himself, he set up the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan.

Rather interestingly, this dissolution was quite different in character to the previous one. Nevertheless, the result of the vote that took place on 22 October 2017 was an overwhelming victory for the LDP. The party gained 284 seats, virtually no change to those they held before the election, and together with their coalition partners Komeito they held 313 seats, more than two thirds of the house. To look at the number of Diet seats, there has not been any particular

change to the distribution of political power between government and opposition, so one is left wondering what the point of the general election actually was.

Should the right of dissolution really be a trump card?

On the eve of Diet dissolution, the Democratic Party was in disarray, including a meandering search for a new Secretary General, while it was obvious that Koike was unprepared. "If I dissolve the Diet now, I'll be able to preserve most of my power." It would be quite understandable if Abe had thought that way. But it is hard to understand why there was any further necessity; in other words, the meaning in spending approximately 60 billion yen of taxpayers' money and creating a three-week political vacuum in order to hold a general election. These suspicions are apparent in public polls. Sixty-nine percent of respondents to a Sankei-FNN joint public poll (conducted mid-October 2017) replied that they "did not approve" of the dissolution of the lower house. Also, in contrast to the overwhelming LDP victory, 46.3% of respondents to the same poll said they "did not support" the Abe cabinet, which was more than the 42.5% who responded that they "do support" it.

One thing that needs to be considered at this point is the Prime Minister's right to dissolve the Diet. It is described as a "trump card" that only the Prime Minister can use at will, but is that really a good thing? Properly speaking, the term of office for a member of the Lower House is four years. But during the four years and 10 months since Prime Minister Abe got a second chance at an administration at the end of 2012, he has already played his trump card twice. I have pointed out the problem lurking here before (*Bungeishunju*, January 2015), but recently my conviction has strengthened even further.

In the first place, overall Japan has too many elections. Lower House elections occur once every four years amid constant political fighting and with almost no chance of representatives seeing out their full terms. Every three years Upper House elections are held for half of that chamber. On top of that, the LDP has ruling party presidential elections once every three years, and there are nationwide local elections once every four years. The reality is that some kind of election is held every year.

So, what kind of effect do these frequent elections have on Japanese politics? The answer is a tendency to "short-termism." Politicians' thoughts are caught by the elections in front of them, and they become unable to debate policy with a long-term perspective of 10 or 20 years into the future. In this permanent battleground, politicians can't calmly settle down to discuss necessary policies that constituents might dislike, nor implement those policies. The inevitable end point is a party politics that is really about preserving power or taking it.

This is a style of politics that prioritizes the concerns of politicians themselves over voters' concerns about policy implementation. The balance between these two sets of concerns is a critical element in determining the quality of politics.

Bearing these harmful effects in mind, I believe that there is a very serious case for debating the third item under article seven of the Japanese constitution, which is the basis for the prime minister's right to dissolve the diet at will. It reads: "The Emperor, with the advice and approval of the Cabinet, shall perform the following acts in matters of state on behalf of the people…

Dissolution of the House of Representatives." Edano and other politicians frequently refer to this point, arguing that while a dissolution based on article 69 ("If the House of Representatives passes a non-confidence resolution, or rejects a confidence resolution, the Cabinet shall resign en-masse, unless the House of Representatives is dissolved within ten (10) days"), is acceptable, self-interested dissolutions based on article seven should be restricted. Although there is currently a vigorous debate taking place about revision of article seven, I actually believe that the debate needs to go deeper into the issue. In the first place, extremely few advanced nations give their prime ministers such freedom to dissolve their legislatures. In the UK, the 2011 Fixed-term Parliaments Act was passed, meaning that dissolution is forbidden except for when there is a two-thirds majority or a no-confidence vote in the government is passed. For example, like the UK we could institute restrictions that would effectively make dissolution impossible, or we could leave a certain amount of room for the right to dissolve the Diet to be exercised via debate.

In any case, we need to bring back a proper rhythm and ability to plan-ahead to our politics. This would allow the first three years of the lower house term to be devoted to wholehearted efforts to fulfill campaign pledges, the final year to be taken up by forward-looking policy creation by government and opposition, and the Diet to be dissolved at the appropriate time in the fourth year. Currently, our leaders pervert that rhythm for their own benefit, inevitably wearing down the politicians that do have the ability to consider policy from a long-term perspective.

The deterioration in the opposition's ability to propose policies we saw during the recent election has the same cause at its root. When there's an election, political parties need at least a year or so to repeatedly discuss various policies within the party, then decide on key points. During the last election, however, two new parties suddenly appeared during the approximately two weeks between dissolution being announced on September 25, and the election date being announced on October 10. Without meetings to discuss policy, and without policy chiefs and staff to work out policies, parties fighting an election can only set up a temporary camp. During an election, politicians are supposed to appear before their constituents in the policy equivalent of formal dinner wear. Instead, they have no time to change, and turn up in jeans or pajamas.

Fundamentally, the concept of policy involves a careful consideration of the costs and risks related to implementation, and as much rational analysis as possible. The policies that emerge from these situations of confusion, however, end up as nothing more than a wish list. The policies adopted by the Kibo no To, such as "Zero Nuclear Generation," "Zero Rogue Companies," "Zero Hay Fever" and others of the "12 Zeros" were exactly that type.

Politics has a built-in element of populism, but even so, it is not the job of politicians to present their own hopes about how they'd like the country to be. Sometimes they need to forcibly present citizens with "harsh" policies such as cuts in social spending or higher taxes. In Japan, where arbitrary "surprise attack" dissolutions are common, and where there usually tends to be insufficient preparation time to work out policies, harsh or otherwise, we end up with wish lists that contain nothing more than expressions of future hopes.

Originally, manifestos are supposed to eliminate simple wish lists, instead specifying when an administration will implement policies, how it will fund them, and expressing a determination to make the policies happen. In 2009 the then Democratic Party fought an election with the slogan "From Concrete to People," and made issues such as child benefits the centerpiece of their manifesto. As a result, they gained 308 seats (considerably more than an absolute majority) and took power from the LDP. But once they had control of the ship of state, however, they ran aground on the rocks of policy funding, and their campaign promises sank one by one. In the end, they decided on raising the consumption tax, something that had been completely unmentioned in their manifesto, and destroyed themselves. When a party is in opposition for a long time it has fewer opportunities to interact with the bureaucrats who hold accurate information, and somehow it becomes difficult to have a realistic sense about the actual situation facing governments. So, even though it is possible to feel some sympathy, it was still a miserable conclusion.

I believe this was the point at which voters became disillusioned with manifestos. These days, even the word manifesto is not much used. Due to the tendency to short-termism that I mentioned before, it's common now to have a mounting succession of policies that aim for immediate gains, and that seek new government funds to implement them. Due to a bad experience with manifestos, we have gone back to a situation we had before manifestos.

Playing more drastic cards

Although the Kibo no To had impetus right at the beginning, it was only able to gain 50 seats from among the 235 candidates it backed in the election. Even in Koike's backyard of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, despite supporting candidates in 23 out of a total 25 single-seat constituencies, only one was elected: Nagashima Akihisa.

What was the reason for this defeat? During the first few days after the party was set up, probably like most people, I watched events with a feeling of hope. The second article of the party's platform document stated that "We will free ourselves from a politics of obligation that has roots extending deep into our national politics." One of Koike's most important roles should have been to shake up the base of established political parties. But the sort of cutting-edge policies that voters were hoping for did not appear.

She was basically in favor of constitutional revision, and approved of restarting nuclear reactors. Even though she was aiming to replace the ruling party, the only apparent difference from Abe and the LDP was a freeze on consumption tax increases. If Koike was against raising the consumption tax, then she needed to play more drastic cards and go a step further, such as by greatly increasing the pension age and aggressively cutting social welfare expenditure, or by presenting concrete figures relating to reductions in the number of Diet representatives and officials, and their salaries.

The Kibo no To called itself a party of "conservative reform." In the first place, right up to the eve of the party's formation, its leader Koike belonged to the LDP. She served as a Special Adviser to the Prime Minister for National Security Affairs, and as Minister of Defense in the Abe administration. She was also a stalwart advocate for constitutional change. By creating a realistic conservative political party with the potential to replace the LDP, she may have aimed to realize a two conservative party system.

But when we look at the results from the recent election, we see that the proposal was not accepted by the people. Voters may have decided that since there wasn't a significant distinction to the LDP, that they might as well give their vote to the LDP, a party that conducts pragmatic politics without major disruption.

Perhaps if she had taken her conservative political party in a slightly different direction, there would have been a different result. To give one example: the "drastic cards" I referred to earlier might provide some clues. If we look at the political set-up in various different countries, something that other countries have that Japan does not, is a conservative party to the right of the LDP. They are based on low tax-burden and low welfare, as well as non-interventionist market-economics. In other words, they promote small government. The administration led by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro from 2001 to 2006 was exactly that type. Postal privatization and a large reduction in social welfare expenditure were implemented in the name of structural reform. He aimed to shift to a society based on self-responsibility and survival of the fittest market principles. No party like that exists in Japanese politics right now.

During the lower house election in the Netherlands last March for example, although the center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy of Prime Minister Mark Rutte remained the largest party, the Party of Freedom rose to become second largest: a party that advocates anti-immigrant, anti-Islam and anti-Euro policies, and led by Geert Wilders, who was once

convicted of hate speech. In France last May, even though Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front, was defeated in the presidential election, she managed to reach the final run-off ballot. During Bundestag elections in Germany last September, the far-right Alternative for Germany party gained 94 seats, suddenly making it the third largest party. Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany party led by Chancellor Angela Merkel lost a large number of seats. One factor behind the stability of LDP administrations is the absence of that kind of conservative party in Japan. In other words, although this time the votes of those said to be left-wing of liberal converged on the Constitutional Democratic Party, it seems that the LDP receives votes from across the political spectrum: from center-left to center-right to far-right.

Of course, we do not know how much support a near far-right conservative party that advocates market principles would get in today's Japan. Nevertheless, when we look back at how the Kibo no To stumbled after being regarded as virtually identical to the LDP, surely there's a possibility that a Koizumi administration like radical approach could have gained a reasonable number of supporters.

How Koike misjudged a political shift

Before taking a look at future prospects, I'd first like to look back at recent history from a longer-term perspective.

More than a quarter of a century has already passed since the start of the Heisei era in 1989. The first year of Heisei was a turbulent one: featuring the fall of the Berlin Wall and the approaching end of the Cold War. It truly was the start of a symbolic juncture in world history.

During the first half of the 1990s in Japan, the bubble burst. The end of Japan's high-growth period was declared, and three so-called lost decades of low-growth began. That tide of change reached Japan's politics and criticism of the LDP bubbled to the surface. Meanwhile, in 1992 Hosokawa Morihiro formed the Japan New Party, pledging "reform with responsibility." At that time, Koike was by Hosokawa's side. Although an eight-party coalition centered on the Japan New Party took over power from the LDP, following a series of dramatic splits in the ruling party, the LDP returned just two years and a half later. Then in 1996 the Hashimoto reform cabinet appeared on the stage. Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro worked to restructure central government, and to strengthen the function of the prime minister's office.

During the first half of the 1990s the whole of Japan was overflowing with energy for reform. This enthusiasm was based on a realization that the age of soaring growth and inevitable success was over. It was an enthusiasm to make a new Japan and a new politics. It was a time of judicial reform, administrative reform and decentralization of power. The tide of reform continued up until the Koizumi administration at the start of the 2000s.

But a quarter of a century has now passed since the sudden rise of "reform" and the change of government in 2009 ended in failure. Meanwhile, enthusiasm for and interest in politics across Japan continues to decline. Apparently in conjunction with this, the international competitiveness of Japan's economy and its ability to produce innovation is clearly in decline. The fact that Sharp, a company that has given the world many different electronic goods, is now under the control of foreign capital, and the predicament that Toshiba finds itself in, make us keenly aware of the decline of Japan's manufacturing industry. Both the data-falsification scandal at Kobe Steel that mysteriously surfaced just before the election, and the inspection scandal at Nissan have fundamentally shaken international trust in Japanese manufacturing. What's more, to take another example from the education sector, the University of Tokyo (where I served as president until 2005) fell to an all-time worst placing of 46 in the 2017 world university rankings.

In this situation, when Japanese people want to believe Japan is a "wonderful country," it starts to feel like wishful thinking. They are living in the safety of old dreams, relying on the legacy of the high-growth period and picturing the future as an extension of the past.

Koike called loudly for reform of established politics, and the lack of support she received is probably partly down to factors such as personal weakness and a politics of exclusion. But as well as that, over this last quarter-century the public mood may have shifted from enthusiasm for reform to a lapse into cosy old dreams. Koike entered the political arena during the early-nineties craze for reform. I believe that she may have misjudged this shift.

A quarter century ago, it wasn't unusual to find politicians who believed that the Japanese people should bear current difficulties for the sake of Japan's future. It is easy to rationalize this by saying that multi-seat constituencies, in which several people are elected for each constituency, made positions such as that possible, but that doesn't get to the core of the matter.

The landslide in the lower house election means that for now the Abe Administration will continue. What we should look for from tomorrow's politics is a break from old dreams and talk of future wishes; a politics that forges ahead with realistic policies that consider the long term. Politicians need to talk to the people about painful topics without putting off addressing national crises that we face right now, such as fiscal crisis, the low birthrate and aging of society. They need to use a long-term perspective to persuade the people to accept difficult reform.

The difficult road ahead, post-Abe

In an interview after being elected, the Diet member Koizumi Shinjiro said that "our work for the next four years is to think about policies based on an image of Japan after the Tokyo Olympics." He is 36 years old, but I'd like that young generation to look well past the point in time that is the 2020 Olympics and take an even longer perspective to 2040 or 2050.

The first issue we must deal with is fiscal reconstruction. But when I saw the policies put forward by parties, including the LDP, in the recent election I couldn't help being shocked. I wondered what nation's election the policies were from. It is hard to believe that they were from a general election in a country that has a more than 1,000 trillion yen debt; a debt that gets bigger almost every year.

You would never know that reducing the country's debt was the most pressing issue in Japanese politics. But looking at the display of policies from the various parties, promising to do this and that and not showing the slightest concern for public finances, one feels that the political parties themselves are in danger of losing their sense of balance. Skipping through the special election coverage on TV, I only noticed one person who properly addressed the issue of fiscal reconstruction, and that was the former prime minister and independent candidate Noda Yoshihiko. There was some symbolic meaning to the fact that this person didn't belong to any of the political parties offering so-called wish lists.

The words "post-Abe" were heard frequently during media coverage after the election. But whoever is in power, they will have to travel a difficult road strewn with buried landmines. At some stage someone will have to deal with the aftermath of fiscal issues that have grown and grown over time. And it won't be that far in the future.

It is harder and harder to see how the Bank of Japan should exit its ongoing unprecedented monetary easing. If the Abe administration had beaten a retreat after the last election, this policy issue might have suddenly entered a different stage. But that didn't happen. Governor Kuroda Haruhiko's term will end this spring, but there's a high probability that he will continue in the job. And when it comes to the convergence of future fiscal policy, the situation is increasingly dysfunctional.

The recent lower house election proved again how internal pressure cannot easily change the nature of this country. As in the past as well as now, the energy for change will probably come from outside. The relationship between China and the United States, which encompasses the tense North Korea situation, is becoming more complex. At the same time, the power map in Europe continues to change.

During the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, Japan's place in the world has become increasingly vague, but this vagueness has reached its sell-by date. Prime Minister Abe is making clear his desire for Japan to have a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. But should Japan push itself forwards to become a main player on the international diplomatic stage, or should Japan have a strong awareness of a more regional role? That will be a turning point not just for the future of Japan's diplomacy, but for its internal politics too.

It is now four years and ten months since the start of the second Abe administration. Thanks to the recent election, Japan's direction will be determined by this administration at least until the autumn LDP leadership election. If we include the first administration, the Abe

administration jumbo jet has been flying for six years now. But how long the plane's fuel lasts will all depend on Abe's precious constitutional reform plans.

The LDP and Komeito already have the two thirds of seats that they need for a constitutional reform proposal. Prime Minister Abe will now push on with constitutional reform discussions centered on the contentious issue of specifying the Self Defense Forces in clause nine. Then, at the end of the process, approval by a majority in a national vote will be needed. This political "device," however, has never before been used in Japan. Can we make proper use of a highly uncertain device that operates to a different dynamic to the Diet? As is clear from a look at the UK EU exit referendum debate in 2016, it is extremely difficult to make efficient use of this system. A "disconnect" between the referendum and the Diet would cause considerable domestic confusion.

We need to watch carefully to see if Abe's LDP has the resolve, preparation, and leeway to play the referendum card. Once again, a large ruling administration has appeared in Japan. I earnestly hope that it will look at things from a long-term perspective, remain level-headed, and devote itself to implementing policy.

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