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The Failings and Potential of the DPJ Administration

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THE FAILINGS AND POTENTIAL OF THE DPJ ADMINISTRATION

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It would be impossible to overstate the momentous nature of the September 2009 change of government as a milestone in Japan's political history. The advent of an administration led by the Democratic Party of Japan made possible the disclosure of previously hidden information and a number of changes in existing policies. Some of the new developments would have been inconceivable under the Liberal Democratic Party, including the expansion of social welfare and the budget-screening review of existing programs, which cut into bureaucrats' established interests. I would reiterate that these policy changes are of tremendous significance.

Needless to say, there is also disappointment in the lost opportunities resulting from the weakness in leadership of the administration of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, including frailty among the politicians making it up and the lack of strategy in its actions. What is required now, however, is not the wringing of hands over the administration's failings and the poor quality of its leadership. We need to reflect once again on what the DPJ should have been aiming to accomplish by taking power and take a long hard look at the reasons why it has not been able to meet its proper objectives.

What Should the Change in Administration Have Been About?

The ideals that the DPJ should properly have been pursuing could be described as three "posts." The first of these is *post-Cold War*. This would include the reconsideration of Japan's subservience to America's unilateral military actions and the creation of peace in Asia. The Hatoyama administration did point its agenda in that direction, with an active stance on nuclear disarmament, support for the creation of an East Asian community, and efforts to get the US Marine base in Futenma moved overseas.

The second "post" is *post-materialism*. This consists of noting the limits to growth and shifting to an economic paradigm for which the key is sustainability. Prime Minister Hatoyama pledged to move in this direction, setting forth a commitment to cutting Japan's greenhouse gas emissions by 25%. In addition, Hatoyama championed the idea that the economy should be for the people.

The third “post” is *post-authoritarianism*. This consists of strengthening the role of citizens and building an open and multicultural society. In this connection, the DPJ has declared its support for married couples being allowed to keep their own names and for citizen activism.

As has been briefly shown here, the DPJ initially showed a proper sense of direction with respect to these ideals. Prime Minister Hatoyama set forth this sort of thinking in his policy speeches to the National Diet, delivering a message that was quite different from that of previous prime ministers. The fact that the people had such great expectations of the Hatoyama administration probably came from the fact that this new thinking resonated with them. At the same time, there was strong resistance from those who yearn for the days of the Cold War and authoritarianism, inasmuch as this vision broke with the patterns of the old era. It is in the face of this sort of resistance that the resolve of the head of the ruling party is tested.

In the world of political science, there is something called the “median voter theory.” Assuming that the horizontal axis is the normal distribution of public opinion, the theory is that the gap between political parties disappears as the parties and candidates in single-seat electoral districts draw closer to the preferences of the median voters who account for the largest number of voices. However, this hypothesis did not hold true for the 2009 change of government. This could be because the theory is based on the workings of the political world in Europe, where there are changes in government every decade. In Japan, bringing down the long-entrenched LDP amounted to a regime change and the DPJ, in calling for a change of government, was able to propose policies that would have been absolutely impossible for the LDP. Some of the policies stressed by the DPJ, including its positions on the base at Futenma and on environmental issues, were in acute contrast to those of the LDP.

It is easy to set forth new ideals when making speeches. The true value of politicians and an administration can be seen in whether, on receiving criticism and coming under attack from the opposition, they can they respond with appropriate rebuttals and push ahead with their own policies. Unfortunately, in this respect as well, the DPJ’s resolve has been inadequate, and when it has run into opposition, it has wavered noticeably. It has have also been lacking in the knowledge and strategies for turning its ideals into concrete policies. I would like to analyze these limitations.

Failings in Methods of Government

One can point to the twin factors of mistakes in the systems for operating the administration and the ruling party and weakness in political ideals as the reasons for the stalling of the DPJ administration.

I would like to start by examining the situation from the errors in the operating system of the administration and the ruling party. The first thing that needs to be pointed to is the lack of political leadership. The DPJ stressed that it would end domination by the bureaucracy and implement political leadership. But the Democrats had failed to think through the significance of what they were proposing, either in terms of bureaucratic domination or in terms of political leadership.

What exactly is “bureaucratic domination” supposed to mean? It cannot refer to a situation where bureaucrats stand up to the government and forcibly block the policies that politicians are trying to implement, since that is simply not possible under the Constitution of Japan. The Diet alone can pass laws and set the budget. If a majority of Diet members declare their will, bureaucrats cannot say no to them. If bureaucrats sometimes seem to take the upper hand, it is in areas like the decentralization of power and the reordering of spending priorities, where they take no action to change the status quo—and where politicians cannot form a consensus. In other words, if the politicians in the ruling party could pull their opinions together, they could immediately end bureaucratic domination and exert political leadership.

If one thinks about it, “political leadership” is a strange expression. The idea is that politicians lead, but there is no indication of *what* they lead. Even if politicians cry out that they make the decisions, there is no actual political leadership unless there is agreement among the politicians of the ruling party about what is to be decided.

The second problem is the illusion that surrounds the unification of the government and ruling party. After it took power last year, the DPJ abolished its Policy Research Committee in the name of government-party unity. At the root of this was criticism of the fact that when the LDP was in power, Diet members in special interest groups used that party’s Policy Research Council to advance their own arguments, at times in opposition to the government, throwing policy decisions into a deadlock. However, abolition of the DPJ’s PRC resulted in major problems for the administration. Because the Democrats

had not analyzed the reasons why the LDP policy study groups had brought about the compartmentalization and decay of the policy-making process, the organizational changes that were implemented were irrelevant. The fact that the LDP's council became a hotbed of special-interest politics and bureaucratic domination was because all the division-level discussions were in the hands of bureaucrats. If the DPJ had been able to turn its PRC into a forum for politicians to have policy discussions on their own initiative, it would have enhanced the ability of ruling-party legislators to form policies, and this could have become an organ promoting the political leadership that the DPJ was seeking to implement.

However, with the abolition of the Policy Research Committee, the vast majority of DPJ lawmakers—all but the few with cabinet-level or other senior posts within the government—lost the opportunity to play a role. In addition, it became impossible for elected politicians to receive information feedback and grasp the needs of regions and various organizations and groups.

In terms of actually formulating policies, it is vital both to receive input on outside needs and to make adjustments that involve the ruling party as a whole. In its belated realization of this, the DPJ moved towards unified feedback and adjustment through the secretary general's office. However, this resulted in something of a dictatorial system under Secretary General Ozawa Ichirô.

In addition, even after the change in government, the fact that it was still business-as-usual in terms of deliberations in the Diet was one of the reasons for the wilting of expectations with regard to the DPJ. When the Democrats were in opposition, they criticized the fact that the LDP at the time did not respond to legitimate debate and would simply use its numerical strength to enact bills. However, on coming into power themselves, the Democrats did nothing more than continue like the LDP, operating the Diet in a way they had formerly criticized. The negative effects of this became noticeable when suspicions about money in politics into a political controversy. When public criticism grew concerning doubts about the political funding of both Prime Minister Hatoyama and Secretary General Ozawa, the DPJ ignored the demands of the opposition and did not respond to questions or follow-ups at the Diet. If the DPJ truly wants to bring about a renewal in Japan's democratic politics, it should not cover up its own scandals, and should accept criticism while promoting information disclosure.

Also, when the schedule for deliberations became clogged up due to poor management of Diet affairs, the passing of bills by railroading at the end of the session emerged as a technique. This too was widely criticized by the DPJ when in opposition. The voters who had been expecting a change ended up with a sense of *déjà vu*. They could only conclude that despite the change in government, there had been no progress at all in parliamentary politics.

Not a Manifesto But a Manifest

I would next like to look at the causes for the new administration's failures on the policy side.

The biggest problem is the defective nature of the DPJ's 2009 electoral manifesto. The DPJ repeatedly emphasized that it would develop the policies of the new administration based on its manifesto. But, there were serious flaws with this document. It was not really a "manifesto"—a political statement to inspire people based on ideals and ideology, such as the Communist Manifesto—but rather a "manifest," a list of items in a ship's cargo. The DPJ's manifesto lists all kinds of topics, but there is no unifying thread to them. It includes conflicting measures, such as the large-scale pursuit of global warming countermeasures on the one hand and the reduction in gasoline taxes and the abolition of expressway tolls on the other. If one tracks back the causes for such contradictions, one comes up against the reality of the lack of a philosophy that would inform a coherent set of policies and provide a basis for setting priorities among them.

There are many mid-level DPJ politicians who see themselves as policy experts. They were broken up into teams and drafted policies in a variety of fields. The manifesto is nothing more than these individual policies stapled together. If you look at these policies, each is probably meaningful in its own way, but they do not convey the aims and philosophies that would indicate overall what kind of society the DPJ is looking to build.

This point became evident in the budget-drafting and tax-reform processes under the DPJ administration and was a source of political confusion. Many citizens were impressed when Prime Minister Hatoyama announced the target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions 25% by 2020, but there was a backlash from the business community, which is immersed in the existing economic framework. In terms of opening up a post-materialistic paradigm, the DPJ administration should have leveraged the Hatoyama

initiative for a systematic modification of policy in the areas of transportation, energy, industry, and agriculture. Had it done so, there would have been no room for the emergence of measures that promote consumption of fossil fuels, such as a reduction in gasoline taxes. There was also a need for the administration's leaders to come up with a resounding rebuttal based on their own ideals in the face of naysaying from the business world. Additionally, when measures like the child allowance and tuition-free senior high school education were heavily criticized as handouts, the DPJ leaders should have clearly laid out their philosophy, and they should have been able to convince the people by setting forth the values they were aiming for through such policies.

The 2009 DPJ manifesto was lacking in both philosophy and values, and turning into a kind of gospel resulted in incoherent politics. Since the leaders of the government and ruling party did not have a shared set of convictions with respect to values, the debates over policy seemed to show inconstancy.

This is in stark contrast with the administration of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirô (2001–6). In the case of the Koizumi administration, whether one agrees or disagrees with the content of its policies, there was a strong commitment to the line of privatization and neoliberalism, and a powerful central mechanism was established in the form of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy to promote this, along with thorough information management and media measures by the prime minister's office. Takenaka Heizô, who directed the CEFPP, and Iijima Isao, who served as private secretary to the prime minister, received clear guidance and support from Koizumi and were pivotal in policy making and implementation. However popular the prime minister was, he could not have done anything on his own. It is because staff and inner circle members who share the prime minister's convictions put the systems in place that policies can be implemented. In the April 2001 election for the LDP presidency, the impression and expectation of a change from the old-fashioned LDP faction-led politics to a new "Koizumi" politics caught the imagination of the public, even though it was not quite genuine. Koizumi made full use of the momentum that derived from the change of administration to create a system for promoting policy change. In terms of the privatization of the postal system, which was the Koizumi administration's biggest project, public opinion, which initially did not fully grasp the meaning of the initiative, gradually came to support it strongly.

In September 2009, it seemed that the DPJ could have obtained a similar mandate. But the DPJ was unable to transform the people's support into a mandate concerning its

policies. The only conclusion, therefore, is that the DPJ was crippled by its obsession with ousting the LDP and taking power—what we may call its “change-of-government-first approach.”

The change-of-government-first approach also ties in directly to the “elections-first” approach promoted by Secretary General Ozawa. The impression is that from the moment the government was formed, Ozawa made suffocating the LDP his supreme mission. With this in mind, he made full use of the power of the ruling party to orchestrate the overthrow of the support base of the LDP in preparation for the elections to the House of Councillors scheduled for July 2010. In drafting the budget for fiscal 2010 (April 2010–March 2011), information concerning the allocation of public works subsidies was circulated nationwide via the DPJ’s regional organizations; this was a way of showing off the authority of the DPJ administration, and it could be seen as a message that, in the future, proper deference should be shown to the DPJ. In addition, starting with the Japan Dental Association, Ozawa put pressure on the various professional organizations that had in the past supported the LDP, looking to have them change their allegiance.

In the face of such scheming, the public simply grew disenchanted. “Change of government” revealed two distinct aspects. The first was the takeover by the DPJ of the power structure that the LDP had built and maintained over half a century. That was the change that Ozawa was after. The second aspect was the fundamental shake-up of the political system. There were glimpses of this in the disclosure of information and the budget-screening review of government programs. Naturally, that is the kind of change that the people were expecting. The Hatoyama administration was drawn into the inconsistency of these two aspects and found itself gridlocked. When the DPJ, under Ozawa’s management, began to be seen as just another LDP, it was natural for approval rates for the prime minister and the party to plummet.

The Lack of Political Power of the Hatoyama Administration

One could also say that the change-of-government-first approach held together the DPJ, which is a hodgepodge of a party, and was necessary to carry it into power. I personally have continued to suggest that the DPJ should aim for the path of the center-left or liberal party as a functional equivalent to the Labour Party in Britain and the Democratic Party in the United States. Under Ozawa Ichirô, the DPJ opted for a moderate left-wing line.

However, the DPJ is of a much broader nature than the corresponding parties in Britain and the United States, and its leaders have had a hard time holding the party together.

Upon assuming the DPJ presidency in April 2006, Ozawa shelved the issue of amending the Constitution in order to preserve party cohesion. Also, in order to make clear the contrast between the DPJ and the LDP, he adopted a center-left path and wrapped this up in a symbol that nobody would oppose, under the slogan “Putting People’s Lives First.” Up to that point, this was a judicious political decision. However, once the DPJ came into power, such an opaque tactic proved unsustainable. If the Democrats hoped to keep the administration going at cruising speed on this track, they should have put in place a policy-making organ on a par with the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy and deployed social democratic brains standing at the polar opposite from Takenaka Heizô, who headed the CEFPP under Koizumi, along with staff to take charge of political and media affairs. It would also have been necessary to hand over concrete topics like social security and employment to the main politicians of the ruling party, creating a space for policy debate in which the political leadership would strive for policy change. If the DPJ lawmakers had been asked to set aside their individual opinions and to demonstrate their capabilities by tackling issues assigned to them by the prime minister, they would probably have exerted themselves in this direction as politicians in power for the first time.

However, the tactic that was actually adopted by the DPJ was to truss up the party by turning the manifesto into a kind of gospel. But, as mentioned before, when the Democrats tried to implement at face value a manifesto that gave short shrift to philosophy, inconsistencies between the policies became obvious and inevitably led to political conflict. In order to resolve such conflict and adopt a single steady direction in managing the government, it would have been necessary to hold a debate on basic philosophy and direction and achieve minimal agreement concerning the administration’s mission.

In coming into power, the DPJ was faced for the first time with the issue of dealing, as the ruling party, with partisan opposition to its value axis. As mentioned previously, the agenda presented by the DPJ included items that were certain to provoke severe opposition from a partisan perspective. In actual fact, right-wing media organs like the monthly *Seiron* made attacks concerning the reconsideration of the US-Japan security arrangements and the expansion of social welfare, pinning the “socialist” label on the

Hatoyama administration. This was similar to the criticism directed at President Barack Obama by the Republicans in the United States. The big difference between Obama and Hatoyama lay in their possession or lack of the courage and political ability to make direct rebuttals against such partisan attacks on their agenda and to set forth their own ideals.

Issues Facing the Kan Administration

Having proved unable to exert leadership, Hatoyama announced his resignation on June 2, and Kan Naoto was chosen to succeed him. Upon this, the DPJ and the government saw a sudden surge in support, pulling the DPJ out of the danger zone. The reason for this sharp recovery in support is that, despite the disillusionment with Hatoyama himself, the same directions and expectations remained in place concerning the change in government.

The two issues facing the DPJ under Kan are the clarification of philosophy regarding policies and the establishment of proper governance for the administration and ruling party. I have discussed the specifics above and will not repeat them here. But on both these issues there is a need for a proper summing up of the Hatoyama administration's shortcomings and an analysis of the reasons for its failure.

What is most notable in terms of policy is the mention by Prime Minister Kan of the need to increase the public financial burden in the near future. The coolness of the public reaction to the DPJ's headline policies, such as the child allowance, can be seen as coming from serious concerns about the fiscal sustainability of such largesse. Even in terms of setting up a certain level of welfare state in the future, discussions on a framework for the public financial burden need to start now. From that perspective, the Kan administration's path towards restoring fiscal health is in tune with the imperatives of the time. Instead of implementing policies simply because they were in the party manifesto and sticking to the earlier promise not to hike the consumption tax, this administration needs to move forward by first drawing up a philosophy and social vision and discussing how to put together policies for fiscal income and outgo to achieve this.

There are also major changes afoot regarding the operational systems for the government and ruling party, such as the revival of the DPJ's Policy Research Committee. The media tend to explain this type of change with the simple term *datsu-Ozawa*, meaning "getting away from [the legacy of former Secretary General] Ozawa." With apologies to the

media, which loves to view the course of developments in terms of clashes, I believe that Ozawa's authority will weaken henceforth. This is because it derived from his position as secretary general. The secretary general is the person who makes decisions on distributing funds and endorsing candidates. That is why so many politicians deferred to Ozawa. Now that he is no longer secretary general, he does not have these sources of power. In addition, under the single-seat constituency system, rather than maintaining allegiance to an unpopular power broker, it makes more sense for politicians looking ahead to the next election to go with the popular leader of the moment. This is fundamentally different from the golden age of the LDP factions, when politicians who won in multiple-seat constituencies had personal connections to faction leaders.

The DPJ needs to organize the vast majority of its lawmakers who do not serve in the government and put in place a framework for policy debate. In particular, with regard to topics that must be tackled on a medium-term basis, such as tax reform, the ruling party should spark debate and work toward building a popular consensus. The DPJ paid a hefty penalty with the collapse of the Hatoyama administration. Now it must start delivering results from the change of government.

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BIO

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