The change of government in Japan: temporality and institutional constraints on alternation[1]

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Introduction

Japan's change of government initiated in 2009 by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is often noted as an historic turning point. For although the phenomenon of government change is not entirely new in postwar Japan—as seen during the 1940s and the 1950s, as well as in 1993—it is indeed the first time that a party has managed to produce a change in government through simultaneously securing an overall majority in National Diet elections. It can thus be said that this mode of alternation of party government is close to the 'Westminster' or 'Majoritarian' model of democracy[2].

Japan has been, and still is to a certain extent, considered as an 'uncommon democracy' among other advanced democracies. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) held power for nearly forty years, and contributed to the formation of a unique political system. Hence, this is the precise reason for why the alternation of political parties in government in 2009 is marked out as so significant, precipating what one political scientist has described as the beginning of the 'second democratization of Japan', following on from the demise of authoritarian governments in 1945.[3]

Is it fair to say that Japanese democracy, in the wake of the alternation of power in 2009, is on the way towards so-called 'normalization'? Is it also the case that the successive changes of DPJ cabinets since 2009 (three changes of prime minister from 2009 to 2011) have now blurred the vision of a clear political path in Japan? For despite the electorate's hopeful expectations accompanying the change of government, the DPJ has so far proved incapable of fulfilling its ambitious goals. Most strikingly, the Hatoyama cabinet, starting from a high approval rate of 60.6% saw a rapid decline in its support rates; and the successor Kan cabinet came to an end with a despairingly high disapproval rate of 71.2% (Jiji-Press Poll).

These developments in Japanese politics, the accompanying oft speculation in journalistic commentary, and the relation of the government change in 2009 to earlier historical trends, thus require deeper analysis. Most particularly, the very meaning and historical importance of the terms 'change of government' and 'alternation' have been under-explored to date in the field of political science.[4]

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1 This article is based on the paper submitted at the research workshop organized by UNICE '(Re) penser les alternations en science politique', at Nice University, 8 December 2011. The author wishes to thank the commentators and the participants for their valuable comments.
2 For these typologies, see especially Arendt Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms & Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, Yale University Press, 1999. According to Lijphart's evaluation, Japan resides between the Consensus and the Majoritarian models of democracy.
3 Shinohara Hajime, 'Minshutō seiken no seijiteki-na kadai' (The political challenge for the DPJ's government), *Sekai*, December 2009.

In many advanced democracies, changes of government have become a common political experience, albeit occurring with different frequencies, partly due to the growing consensus on policies and the erosion of political cleavages with regard to the polity and regime.[5] The pattern of contemporary alternation should be better understood when put in the context of 'Valence Politics', a term advanced most notably by Harold Clarke. Based on panel research conducted for each general election in the United Kingdom, Clarke demonstrated that constituencies have become less ideological and partisan; instead they support and vote for political parties that they perceive as most competent in providing and expanding favoured policies, such as more robust social security and the efficiency of public services.[6] If the policies of competing parties are distinct, then the electorate's voting choices will be made in accordance with the policy differences between parties, and this forms the usual 'theoretical' assumptions behind election behavior. However, when parties pronounce more or less similar policies on key issues, then the sole criteria for voting becomes a judgement on which of the parties or political leaders are the most competent to fulfill and realise these policies. This type of analysis, rejecting ideological and spatial theorem, fits well for the case of Japan's alternation of power in 2009.

The purposes of this article are threefold. First, we scrutinize the concept of the 'dominant party regime'. The LDP's long domination cannot be understood solely by its clientistic character, or by dismissing the competitive conditions within the party system. Second, we will focus on the instance of the change of government in 1993, which modified considerably the conditions for electoral competition in Japanese politics, and as a consequence give birth to the DPJ and the eventual conditions for its victory in 2009. This is in order to identify the origins of the alternation of 2009, and to gauge its temporality. In this context, we will put emphasis on the constraints imposed by institutions, especially those of the electoral system. Finally, we will briefly describe the consequences of the alternation of government and its limits, so demonstrating the path dependent character of the Japanese political regime.

The '1955 regime' and the 'uncommon democracies'

As is widely known, the term '1955 regime' (*55 nen Taisei*) was long used to describe Japanese postwar politics, after the creation of unified parties on both the left of the political spectrum in the shape of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), and on the conservative right in the shape of the LDP. The term was first used in the mid 1960s, connoting not only the sense of a regime reflecting the Cold War context, but also the sense of a political system formed by the two major

4 This was one of the reasons for the organization by Professor Susumu Takahashi of the study group 'Seiken Kōtai (Government Change)', chaired by Susumu Takahashi from 2003 to 2008. This led to the publication of Takahashi Susumu and Yasui Hiroki (eds.), *Seiken Kōtai to Minshushugi* (Government Change and Democracy), Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2008. Other analysis on alternation appeared later, for example: Yamaguchi Jiro, *Seiken-Kōtai-ron* (Essay on Alternation), Tokyo: Iwanami, 2009.

5 Peter Mair, 'Party system change', in Richard S. Katz and William J. Crotty (eds.), *Handbook of Party Politics*, London: Sage, 2006.

6 Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart, and Paul F. Whiteley, *Performance Politics and the British Voter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

parties.[7] This is why the term 'one (LDP) and a half (JPS) party system' is frequently used, as a synonym for the 1955 system.

In the same vein, T. J. Pempel presents the Japanese case (included alongside Israel, Italy, Sweden and partly France under the Gaullist regime) as an example of country fully democratic, but where the alternation of power does not occur, so giving rise to the description of an 'uncommon democracy'.[8] The definition of this type of regime consists of four criteria: numbers of seats obtained by the dominant single party in the parliament; its dominant position in negotiations; its dominant position inside the government; and the duration of this mode of dominance. In this kind of political configuration, the dominant party succeeds in crystalising other political actors' interests, and this in turn stabilises power relations. Other factors, such the weakness of labor movements or the tight relationship with the US provide additional explanations for the durability of the dominant regime led by the LDP governments.

Pempel's typologies and analysis are convincing, although they do contain some tautological flaws in terms of presenting the essential conditions for the domination of political regimes. Moreover, Pempel's model exhibits some explanatory lacunae due to the fact that it does not take into account the strategies adopted by the opposition and the conditions for the operation of these. Indeed, the position taken by the opposition parties is the other essential side of the dominant party system. The opposition party, as the degree of the intensity of its activities differs according to time or country, is supposed to participate in competition with the party in power. It is, therefore, an important component to determine the mode of competition for the operation of the political system, and may determine whether it is consensual or antagonistic in nature.[9] Hence, Pempel's model of 'uncommon democracies' requires profound reconsideration because of the fact that electoral institutional reforms took place in Japan and say, in Italy during the 1990s, and because the status of the opposition parties within the political system needs further examination, with both of these factors accounting for the alternation of power in 2009.

There is a large consensus that the LDP's domination over and stability of the '1955 regime' was due to the system's clientilistic nature.[10] But as recent studies have shown, we should not dismiss the institutional dimensions of the system and focus solely on its cultural dimensions. Most especially, Japan was known for its unique electoral system found in the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) which

7 Insisting on its historical dimension, the author uses the term regime, all the more so because issues of the Constituion and security were dominant until the beginning of 1990s. For this definition, see, Junosuke Masumi, 'The 1955 System: Origin and transformation', in Tetsuya Kataoka (ed.), *Creating Single-Party Democracy*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1992.

8 T. J. Pempel, 'Introduction. uncommon democracies: The one-party dominant regimes', in T. J. Pempel (ed.), *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990. However, by using the term 'dominant party' the concept slightly differs from that of Maurice Duverger in *Les Partis Politiques* (1951). For Duverger, in reference to the Radical Party in France or the Liberal Party in the United Kingdom, the dominat party is based on the 'belief (*croyance*)' of the electorates and that it is in phase with 'his time (*époque*)'.

9 Stefano Bartolini, 'Collusion, competition and democracy (Part I)', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol.11, no.4, 2000.

lasted until the mid-1990s. In this voting system, three to five candidates would run in each constituency. Each of them often represented different factions of the LDP, and therefore being unable to compete on programmatic basis, they tended to make electoral appeals based on the advantages that could be delivered specifically to that constituency, and most notably through public works projects. Not only did the pluralistic and decentralized structure of the party permit this mode of campaigning, but it was further reinforced by the character of the electoral system. For example, in a five-seat constituency, 17% of vote would have been suffice for the candidate to secure the seat and to then be able to influence on a national level policy formation. The candidate's election was consequently organized around the personal support organizations (*Kōen-kai*) in the local constituency and usually financed by diverse interest groups. As a consequence, the National Diet members were often 'agents' of different sectors of society, mediating pressure groups and the ministries with competence in those sectors. This catch-all nature of the LDP, ideologically less constrained in comparison with other conservative parties in the West, managed to secure the adhesion of civil society and to mobilize it through the redistributional character of the regime.

The key point is that this redistributive system was also accepted by the JSP in its role as the largest opposition party. The JSP's strategy, to share the system with the LDP and not to replace or reform it, became obvious by the end of the 1960s, when it abandoned the fielding of candidates which might have attempted to overturn the majority position of the LDP. The rate of JSP candidatures continued to fall and reached only 12% of constituencies by 1986.[11] The average voting share obtained by the JSP in the national elections for the House of Representatives in the 1970s was 20.8%, just about half that of the LDP at 44.8%. The Socialists, enjoying firm support from the assertive national labor union *Sōhyō*, even rejected the reformist line at that time inspired by 'Eurocommunism', and instead chose to fully integrate themselves into the 1955 regime. The JSP did not try to counterbalance the system, but simply played an oppositional function within it, and as a consequence contributed to the general equilibrium. The JSP enjoyed comfortable hegemony in the oppositional camp, absorbing votes from the public sector and the labor class, and enabling to block all constitutional reform initiatives from the LDP.[12] The JSP only began to reconsider this strategy at the end of the 1980s, when competition intensified inside the oppositional camp, with new entrants such the *Komeitō* gaining shares in the national electoral arena.[13]

10 Kent E. Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan, 1949-1986,* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988; Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (eds.), *Patrons, Clients, and Politics: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Jun'ichi Kawata (ed.), *Comparing Political Corruption and Clientelism,* Ashgate, 2006.

11 On the strategy and the development of the JSP, see J.A.A. Stockwin, 'The Japan Socialist Party: Resurgence after long decline', in Ronald Hrebenar (ed.), *The Japanese Party System*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992; Scott C. Flanagan, 'Electoral change in Japan', in Russel J. Dalton et al. (eds.), *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Countries*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.

12 In its declaration in 1955, the LDP integrated the reform of the Constitution with its six key political orientations. Adopted in 2005, this reform plan is still mentioned in its new political program.

Nevertheless, even in a democratic polity, the role of the opposition cannot always be assumed to possess the ability to take power and concretize alternation. Opposition parties also contribute to the stabilization of the political system through their efforts to mobilize electorates via the democratic process,[14] even if the JSP's prime mission was to concentrate on obstructing the LDP's efforts for constitutional revision.[15] Overall, then, the 1955 regime witnessed general political stability, and as a consequence a lack of government alternation.

The 'quasi-alternation' of 1993 and the end of the 1955 regime

As was the case in Italy, although within a differing context, the Japanese postwar regime suddenly came to an end in 1993. Even more important, though, than the displacement of the LDP from power at this juncture was that the 1993 change of government created the conditions for a more competitive political environment to emerge over time. This is the reason why this 'quasi alternation' prior to 2009 requires more attention.

As a result of the series of the scandals and corruption affairs committed by several LDP leaders, and the encountering of growing political defiance, Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi engaged in reform of the electoral code. The public opinion considered SNTV system as one of the causes of political corruption, allowing cozy relationships to develop between the worlds of politics and business. Nonetheless, Miyazawa's promises for reform did not hold because of the obstructive behavior that he experienced not just from his own party but also from the Socialists.

It was at this point that the Diet group led by Ozawa Ichiro and Hata Tsutomu decided to split from the LDP and to form the Japan Renewal Party (JRP) (*Shinseitō*). The JRP's 34 members and several from the other opposition parties refused to support the vote of confidence, thus triggering the dissolution of the House of Representatives and opening the way for the formation for the first time in thirty eight years of a non-LDP government. Negotiations yielded the formation of a coalition government consisting of seven different parties, including two parties made up from LDP dissidents, the JSP, and other smaller centre parties. However, due to this coalition having only one common interest of bringing an end to the dominance of the LDP regime, it was no wonder that its component parties soon diverged in terms of core policy orientations. The coalition government led by Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro enjoyed a never-before-seen average popularity of 59% (Jiji Press) but was to last only eight months.

All the same, it is an often neglected fact that this 'quasi-alternation' marked an important turning point when considering the subsequent government alternation of 2009. First, it transformed the main political cleavages in Japan: setting up opposing camps of 'modernizers' and 'conservatives', so replacing the old left-right cleavage.[16] On an electoral level, it was clearly from this time onwards

13 Masaru Kohno, 'The electoral origin of socialists' stagnation', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol.30, no.1, 1997.
14 Peter Pulzer, 'Is there life after Dahl?' in Eva Kolinsky (ed.), in *Opposition in Western Europe*, London, Croom Helm, 1987.
15 Mamoru Sorai, 'Historia de una "democracia diferente": la posguerra en Japón', *Istor*, vol.6, no.21, 2005.

that constituencies began to exercise choice between reformist and anti-reformist preferences, partly explaining the high popularity of Koizumi government's reforms plans during his tenure (2001-2006).

Second, the Hosokawa government succeeding in long-awaited reforms of the electoral system, replacing the SNTV system with the mixed member majoritarian (MMM) system, attributing 300 seats for allocation under the first past the post system, and a further 200 to the party list by the proportional representation system.[17] It is fair to say that the 1955 Regime was sustained by the trinity of the Cold War, the SNTV system, and the competition among different factions inside the LDP.[18] But with this electoral reform, which in turn changed the internal structure of party organizations, the collapse of the regime was inevitable and irreversible. This explains why the electoral reform plan met strong obstruction involving both government and oppositional parties.

Third, from the time of the Hosokawa government onwards, coalitions became the constant form of government in Japan. From 1993 to the present, all governments have been of a coalitional nature. This certainly runs against the original motivations of electoral reform, since the aim was to produce a bi-partisan system similar to that of the United Kingdom. But the proportional character of the election system for the House of Councilors, where under the Constitution a strong veto power is attributed to this chamber, allows minor parties to survive and influence the political process, a point that we will be seen again in succeeding paragraphs. This is the very reason why the DPJ has had to choose coalition partners in 2009, and then encountered difficulties in the management of coalitions.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, these reforms after the 'quasi-alternation' in 1993 have certainly worked to reinforce the competitive tendencies *among* parties, thus attenuating competition *inside* the parties. At the very least, then, the competitive dimension of democracy can be expected to have positive functions in the post-1955 Regime.

The formation of the DPJ and electoral strategies in the new institutional setting

In order to analyse the opposition party, one could follow the criteria defined by Robert Dahl, namely its goals, cohesiveness, competitiveness, distinctiveness, strategies, and political configuration.[19] Taking into account these criteria, we can identify three phases in the evolution of the DPJ. The first was the foundation in 1996 of the DPJ, or what is often now referred to as the 'ex-DPJ'.

16 In this sense one could say that 'cultural politics' was always a dominant element in Japanese politics. For example, see Joji Watanuki, 'Patterns of politics in present-day Japan', in Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Party System and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, New York, Free Press, 1967; and Tanaka Motoaki, *Gendai Nihon no Tenki* (The Turning Point in Modern Japan), NHK, 2009.
17 The total seats of the House of the Representative was reduced to 480, the proportional segment was reduced to 180 in 2000.
18 Kitaoka Sin'ichi, *Jimintō: Seikentō no 38-nen* (LDP: 38 years of the Party in Power), Tokyo: Chuokoron-shinsha, 2008.
19 Robert A. Dahl, 'Patterns of opposition: some explanations', in Robert A. Dahl, *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*, Yale University Press, 1966.

The DPJ at that time was a small group of fifty Diet members who left the *Sakigake* (composed of former LDP members) and the Social Democratic Party of Japan (formerly known as the JSP). The second phase, following the DPJ's mediocre results in 1998 elections, was for the party to welcome the entry of the factions on the left-wing of the JRP (the ex-*Shinseitō*, at the time called the *Shinshintō*), giving rise to the party formation often called today the 'original-DPJ'. The last phase was the merger in 2003 of the DPJ with the Liberal Party, the old right wing of the JRP, led by Ozawa Ichirō. In this scheme of organizational evolution, it is worth noting that the DPJ has constantly absorbed the micro-parties and fractions that once constituted the Hosokawa coalitional government, with the exception of the SDPJ which opted for a coalition with the LDP from 1994 to 1998 (partly supporting the government outside the cabinet).

This evolutional path of the DPJ was in fact a reaction to the changing institutional environment. Again, as was also the case in Italy, the new electoral system favored the bipolarization of the party system; with the task of opposition party being to ensure its functioning as a coherent and credible entity and to avoid internal divisions. This strategy for the DPJ increasingly met with success, as confirmed by the party's gaining of 177 seats in the 2003 general election, the largest share ever attained by a single opposition party.

Consequently, it should be stressed that during the DPJ's evolution it underwent considerable change in its organizational principles and programs. The 'ex-DPJ' was clearly anchored on the left of the political spectrum, claiming in its platform that it was not a party in the traditional sense, but rather self-defined as a 'network'. Following the party's transformation into the 'original DPJ' in 1998, and becoming the largest opposition party, the DPJ claimed itself to be the 'democratic centre' (*minshu-chūdo*) of the anti-LDP forces. The DPJ's avowed aim was to represent those 'excluded from vested interests' and to 'fight against the *ancien regime*' by realizing the alternation of party government. Even more evident was the anti-1955 regime character of the DPJ. This DPJ's 'Basic Philosophy' which is still valid today, gained more resonance after the Liberal Party joined forces with it. Ozawa, given his history as a former LDP Secretary General, understood the electoral terrain extremely well, and helped to shape the DPJ to pursue a more flexible and sometimes evasive electoral strategy designed above all to unseat the LDP.[20]

For example, it was in 2005 under the leadership of Maehara Seiji that the DPJ appealed for more ambitious 'structural reforms' in order to counter the Koizumi government's enjoyment of unprecedented approval rates on this issue.[21] The LDP also mutated into a more urban and popular class-based party under Koizumi, and tried to cut traditional ties with regional supporters and clientelism. In turn, it was in 2007 that the DPJ introduced an agrarian subsidies policy called the 'individual household income compensation system' aiming to establish new voting bases in rural areas.[22]

20 On the evolution of the DPJ, see Sarah Hyde, *The Transformation of the Japanese Left: From Old Socialists to New Democrats*, London: Routledge, 2009.
21 The average opinion-poll support for Koizumi governent was 50%, coming second to that of Hosokawa. The 2005 general election allowed the LDP to gain 296 seats, a record since 1986.

Again, we have to estimate the impact of electoral system change on this context. Following Duverger's law, the MMM has turned Japan towards the majoritarian system, enforcing bipolar competition between the two major parties.[23] This institutional change has determinably changed the competitive structure *between* parties, and the organizational function *inside* parties, and provided two factors which have favoured the DPJ.

From 1996 onwards, the year when the first election under the new electoral system took place, the effective number of political parties decreased continually. Aside from the Japan Communist Party and the weakened SDPJ, almost all the small parties and factions have been absorbed by the DPJ. The Laakso-Taagepera index, indicating the effective number of political parties, starting at 2.93 in 1996, showed a constant decline to 2.75 in 2000, to 2.40 in 2003, and finally to 2.03 in 2005.[24] In the same manner, the number of constituency candidates fielded was reduced from 1,261 in 1996, to 1,199 in 2000, and to 1,026 in 2003. At the general election of 2009 the number of direct DPJ-LDP contested constituencies was five times higher compared to 2005. The share of seats obtained by the two major parties in the House of Representatives lower chamber touched 86.3% in 2003, and 89.0% in 2009; a rate for the two major parties higher than the traditionally majoritarian parliament of the United Kingdom.

This bipolar structuration of political competition encouraged the small factions that had formed the Hosokawa government to join the DPJ in order to survive in the new environment. As mentioned above, this has obliged the DPJ to blur its political orientations, but has compensated it in gaining voting share, starting from 31.7% in 2000, to 42.9% and 44.5% in 2003 and 2005, and then finally to 60.9% in 2009.

In addition, institutional change allowed for the managing of conflicts inside the party, caused by the inevitable diversity and plurality of the organization. The majoritarian electoral system has strengthened the power and authority of party executives via the nominational competencies of candidates in each constituency. Elected as party president in 2006, Ozawa took advantage of the role, and following the example of Koizumi in the LDP, imposed a strong electoral strategy of designating novice and fresh candidates capable of challenging LDP regional magnates.

In line with these conditions fulfilled, the DPJ could counterbalance its lack of policy coherence and internal diversity. This strategy was then to be legitimized

22 Compared to other major parties, the DPJ has changed constantly its political orientation. For instance, see Kato Junko and Kannon Yuto, 'Nihon no seitō no kyōsō-kūkan no henka: seitō saihenki no senmon chōsa (1996–2005-nen)'(Change in party competition in Japan: survey during the time of party reorganization 1996-2005), in Shiroyama Hideaki et al. (eds.), *Seiji-kūkan no Henyō to Seisaku-kakushin* (Political Transformation and Political Innovation), Tokyo: University Tokyo Press, 2007.

23 Steven Reed, 'Duverger's law is working in Japan', *Senkyo Kenkyū*, vol.22, 2007.

24 Tanaka Aiji et al. *2009-nen, Naze Seiken-Kōtai Dattanoka: Yomiuri-Waseda no Chōsa de Yomitoku Nihon Seiji no Tenkan* (Why Did Japan's Change of Government Occur in 2009?: An Analysis of Yomiuri Shimbun and Waseda University Survey Data and Japan's Change of Political Direction), Tokyo: Keiso, 2009.

by the term 'alternation', and subsequent democratic outcomes that Japan has not experienced to date. The majoritarian electoral rule, following the median voter theorem, obliges both main party sides to fight on the centre of the political ground, contesting a narrow range of issues on the policy spectrum to the extent that they may lack any real substantive policy differences all.[25] From this perspective, the policy divisions between the DPJ and LDP were not as clear as it seemed. On the eve of alternation, 69% of the electorate answered that 'there is no big difference in terms of policies between the two parties', an opinion also shared by the 41% of DPJ supporters.[26]

In general, alternation of party government is not a political cleavage or issue framing electoral competition in its own right. However, historical context and the strategies adopted by the DPJ enabled alternation itself to become a central electoral issue, and even became a political symbol endorsing the democratic legitimacy of Japanese politics.[27] As a consequence, the 'valence politics' character of modern politics was witnessed also in Japan.

The DPJ's acquisition of power: the negation of the *ancien regime*

The accession to power by the DPJ was spectacular. In the September 2009 election the party won 308 seats, a result that no party had ever attained, and even greater than Koizumi's landslide victory in 2005. The Hatoyama cabinet, appointed on 16 September 2009, enjoyed an extremely high popularity rate of 71%, behind the record scores of Koizumi at 85%, but equivalent to those of the Hosokawa government at 71%.[28] A quick review of the electoral analysis is sufficient to explain the reasons for the DPJ's victory.[29]

First, as with any other election, but even more clearly affirmed in this election, alternation was the result of the governing party's defeat. The share of votes polled by the LDP did not witness a drastic change: 22.9% in 2009 compared to 22.8% in 2003. But the low abstention rate at 30.7% advantaged the DPJ. This was because the segment of unaffiliated voters (*mutōha-sō*), which had been in the majority since the mid-1990s and had voted massively for Koizumi in 2005, now turned instead to the DPJ in 2009. 41% of LDP supporters, critical towards the

25 Anthony Dawns, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper, 1957.

26 Opinion poll made by Yomiuri Shimbun-Waseda University, 27-28 June 2009.

27 It was reported that during the election, the Democrats leader Yukio Hatoyama, democrat leader, said that "it is easy to fight the election, since we have no mere to say that Alternation is in need". (*Asahi Shimbun*, 26th January 2010).

28 Opinion-poll of *Asahi Shimbun*, 18th Septembre 2009. On the contrary, before the election, only 56% answered that "the politics will not change in a better direction". *Asahi Shimbun*, 21th August 2009.

29 Takeshi Iida, 'Disappointment, hope, and voting behavior in the 2009 Japanese general election', Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Association for Electoral Studies, Tokyo, 2010; Jun Iio, 'What will the change of government bring to Japanese politics', *Social Science Japan*, March 2010; Taniguchi Masaki et al., '2009-nen sōsenkyo: Darega Jimintō seiken o owarasetanoka' (The election of 2009: Who ended the LDP government?), *Sekai*, December 2009; Tanaka Aiji et al. *2009-nen, Naze Seiken-Kōtai Dattanoka* (Why Did Japan's Change of Government Occur in 2009?: An Analysis of Yomiuri Shimbun and Waseda University Survey Data and Japan's Change of Political Direction), Keiso, 2009 ; Imai Ryosuke, 'Kokusei senkyo no saikuru to seiken kōtai' (National election and alternation cycle), *Leviathan*, vol.47, 2010.

government, also voted against their normal political affiliation.[30]

Second, the DPJ succeeded in overcoming previous suspicions of its weaknesses and came to be considered by voters as a credible governing party. From the beginning of 1990s, and especially after the governing party alternation in 1993, the majority of the Japanese electorate no longer situated their preferences in the Left-Right political spectrum.[31] In order to conform to the predictions of the 'valence politics' argument, it was imperative for the DPJ to assure voters of its competency to govern.[32]

One of the tools contributing to the DPJ's success in this area was the electoral platform termed as the 'manifesto' which the party prepared for each election. This form of party platform, in contrast to the image of the traditional 'kōyaku' produced by parties during the 1955 Regime as something akin to a 'wish list', was presented under strict budgetary conditions and was seen a test of the party's capacity to govern. The importance of the manifesto was demonstrated by the fact that it was not written simply to satisfy interest groups. On the contrary, at least as far as the industrial and the agricultural interest groups were concerned (representing a total of 31% of all interests groups), they still gave priority to the relationship with the LDP before the alternation of government.[33]

The DPJ's orientation was clearly focused on defeating the *ancien regime* of the 1955 system. The 'governmental project' (*seiken kōsō*) of the DPJ advocated five principles and policies: 1) consolidating policy orientations based on the initiatives of the elected politicians, and not merely by bureaucrats; 2) ending 'double circuit' decision-making process involving both political party and governmental tracks, and instead concentrating decisions in the ministerial cabinets; 3) managing 'sectionalised' ministerial interests by placing them under the authority of the Prime Minister's Cabinet; 4) transforming society away from the domination of vested interests, and founding a society based on 'horizontal ties'; and 5) ending the over-centralization and consolidating 'regional sovereignty'.[34] Specific policies in line with these principles were also referred to in the 'manifesto', such as the nomination of more Diet members to posts within ministries in order to exercise greater control over bureaucratic decision-making, and the creation of a 'National Policy Unit' to define major strategic policies for the country.

In sum, the main objectives of DPJ policy were to reform the interest mediation and policy-making processes established under the 1955 regime, and to replace

30 Taniguchi Masaki et al., op.cit.
31 Taniguchi Naoko, '2009-nen senkyo oyobi seiken-kōtai no chōkiteki haikei' (2009 Election and the longitudinales tendencies of alternation), Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Association for Electoral Studies, Tokyo, 2010.
32 Reminding that the PDJ was already in majority in the upper house since 2007; an opportunity to prove their capacity to govern.
33 See, Yutaka Tsujinaka and Robert Pekkanen, 'Civil society and interest groups in contemporary Japan', *Pacific Affairs* vol.80, 2007; Robert Pekkanen, 'Molding Japanese civil society: State-structured incentives and the patterning of civil society', in Frank J. Schwartz et al. (eds.), *The State of Civil Society in Japan*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
34 www.dpj.or.jp/english/manifesto/manifesto2009.pdf (14th October 2011).

these with a 'politician-led government' (*seiji-shudō*). Other detailed policies were presented in seven sections of the manifesto, such as the reform of the social security system, the protection of dispatched workers, and measures to raise the birthrate.[35]

In his general policy speech on 26 October 2009, Prime Minister Hatoyama proclaimed that his mission was to 'change history' and to revise profoundly political decision-making processes and the bureaucratic structure. Hatoyama's design through these measures was to cut all the wasteful spending, and to construct a society based not on hierarchy but on the bonds between people (*kizuna*).[36] Finally, Hatoyama claimed that a 'new public commons', as a type of citizen-led public orientation, would be established in Japan, to end the smothering of society by the state structure and bureaucracy.

In order to fulfill this governmental platform, considerable political resources have been devoted to administrative reform. Both symbolic of and substantive for this reform drive by the DPJ was the abolition of the meeting of Administrative Vice-Ministers. This meeting chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary and involving all the administrative vice-ministers was a symbol of how under the 1955 regime ministerial interests were privileged over general national interests.[37] The meeting was substituted for by a meeting known as the *seimu sanyaku* (literally the three top politically appointed ministerial posts), composed of the minister, vice-minister, and parliamentary secretary.[38] Moreover, a minister responsible for administrative reform and another for National Policy were appointed separately.

There was another important reform undertaken which deserves our attention. That is the suppression of the Policy Research Council (*seisaku chōsakai*) of the party, which conformed to the DPJ's intent to end the 'double circuit' decision-making process. This sort of institution existed in almost all political parties in Japan and was tasked with defining and establishing party policies. The Political Affairs Research Committee of the LDP (*seimu chōsakai*) was considered as a quasi-government that controlled much of government policy. An informal arrangement, termed *yotō jizen shinsa seido* (literally, preliminary review system of the governmental party), established that as a general rule only bills adopted unanimously by this council should be submitted to the National Diet. Different sub-committees (*bukai*) corresponded to each of the ministries and professional association groups, and the council was seen, as in Pierre

35 These seven sections were: 1) End of wasteful spending, 2) Childrearing and education, 3) Pensions and medical care, 4) Regional sovereignty, 5) Employment and economy, 6) Japan's economic strategy and 7) Contribute to the world through proactive diplomacy.

36 His idea of '*Yūai*' (fraternity) came from that of Von Coudenhove-Kalergi, in his book *Totaler Staat, totaler Mensch* (1937), translated in Japanese by his grand father Ichiro Hatoyama, first president of the LDP and ex-prime minister.

37 The Conference ended in 17th September 2009 after its 123 years existence, but following the tsunami and nuclear disaster in 11th March, this has been restored aiming to coordinate relief activities.

38 For the all the detailed reforms initially taken by the DPJ government, see Asahi Shimbun, *Minshutō Seiken 100-nichi no Shinsō* (The first 100 days of DPJ government), Asahi Shimbun Shuppan, 2010.

Bourdieu's term, as a *champs*, where political exchanges took place, so maintaining the redistributive system, and, in turn, contributing to the stability of the 1955 regime. The DPJ (and to a certain extent Koizumi, despite the fact that he could not abolish it institutionally) considered this system as contradicting the principle of politician-led leadership, and thus permitting collusion between parliamentarians and ministries. The DPJ thus abolished its research council, and all petitions brought by lobbying groups had to be presented to the party's General Secretary.[39]

The Japanese political system, at least in its institutional configuration, is designed as a replica of the Westminster model of a political regime, characterised by the fusion of the executive and legislature.[40] However, alongside the differences in the electoral system, it was the norms of political conduct which acted against the majoritarian nature of the polity. Hence, a particular characteristic of the DPJ government was its desire to implement reforms of the governing body structure in order to strengthen its majoritarian character.[41] The DPJ even went so far as to prohibit in principle Diet members from submitting bills so as to assure the primacy of the executive.[42]

As already mentioned, it is worth noting that few of these reform proposals were entirely original. The concept of 'politician-led government' had been embraced and exercised during Koizumi's administration. Indeed, the increasingly competitive character in the party system, initiated after the alternation of party government in 1993, structured around 'modernizers' and 'conservatives' favored Koizumi's reforms and his claimed ambition to 'destroy the LDP'. Straight after the start of his administration Koizumi declared the three principles of his government, which were: to provide more authority to the Prime Minister's Cabinet; to exclude bureaucrats from decision-making, and to distance politicians from sectoral interests.[43] For Koizumi's governing style, as well for its substantive content, the key to success was confrontation with the 1955 regime, and this approach was to be adapted by the DPJ for its own electoral strategy.

It is certainly true that the DPJ party platform contained some progressive policies, such as deliberations on death penalty, the eligibility of foreigners to vote in local elections, and the prohibition on private companies financing political parties. Nevertheless, it is also the case that these progressive policies, whilst popular have had a limited public appeal. For instance, the DPJ's pledges for toll-free highway and for an increase in child care allowance have received

39 Post offered to Ozawa until June 2010.

40 J.A.A. Stockwin, *Governing Japan,* 4th ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

41 Naoto Kan, Deputy President of the party, just before the election carried out a research trip to the UK to be informed about its institutional practice. Kan Naoto, 'Minshutō no mezasu kuni no katachi' (The polity that the DPJ aims for), *Chūōkōron*, July 2009.

42 Still, we have to take into account that the party's committee as well the preliminary review system have been reintroduced in DPJ following discord on party leadership in 2011. This could mean that, contrary to the initial intentions, the DPJ has inclined towards a more LDP-style of governance.

43 On Koizumi's reforms, see Aurelia George Mulgan, *Japan's Failed Revolutions: Koizumi and the Politics of Economic Reform*, Asia Pacific Press, 2002; Takenaka Harukata, *Shushō Shihai* (Domination of the Prime Minister), Chuokoron-shinsha, 2006.

support rates of only 20% to 30%. Instead, compared to these problems, it is probably the budget deficit which has been felt as most important.[44] For instance, the implementation of the process of *jigyō shiwake*, or budget screening, aiming to reduce 'wasteful expenditure' and organized by the Government Revitalization Unit, was one of the policies most appreciated by the electorate (up to 80%) two months after the launch of the DPJ government[45]. We can safely assume that it was policies aspiring towards institutional change that the public opinion welcomed, and not the DPJ's ideological perspective.

DPJ implementation of political objectives: institutional constraints to change

The fall of Hatoyama government was as fast as its rise—Hatoyama resigned in June 2010 with his opinion poll ratings below 20%, having declined more than 50% in nine months. Three incidents were the cause of his resignation, one accidental, and two other more structural in nature.

The first cause was a financial scandal, implicating both himself and the former party leader Ozawa. Hatoyama was suspected of having received unreported political donations from his wealthy mother, who had supported her two sons' political careers.[46] Ozawa had already been under investigation by the Tokyo Prosecutors Office since 2009 for accusations of money laundering. Whether the accusations were unfounded or not, they seriously damaged the new government's image since the DPJ had always blamed the LDP for this kind of practice as symbolizing the *ancien regime* and had argued for cleaner politics. Moreover, Hatoyama and Ozawa personified the fact that new factions had emerged within the DPJ, with 80% of its Diet members originating from the LDP and thus replicating its factional structures, and so demonstrating the non-sociological and non-ideological character of the party.[47]

The second more structural reason for Hatoyama's downfall was the result of two incidents. Hatoyama announced in July 2009 that he favoured relocating the US Marine Corps Futenma air station in Okinawa, which was then to become an issue of contention in US-Japan relations. The relocation plans would have required careful coordination between the US and Japanese administrations, as well as between the central and local governments in Japan, whilst also taking into consideration US planning for military force projection in East Asia. However, the Hatoyama government with its emphasis on reforming the administration felt unable to rely on bureaucratic advice and lacked the necessary coordinating capacity for these negotiations. The number of Diet members appointed to the ministries totaled only seventy, which was roughly half the

44 Opinion-poll, *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 August 2009.

45 Opinion-poll *Asahi Shimbun*, 16 November 2009. Note that the Government Revitalization Unit had no legal authority, with the fact that the result of the entreprise has been limited.

46 His mother Yasuko, married to Iichiro Hatoyama, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1976-77), is heiress of the Ishibashi family, the founder of the Bridgestone tire company.

47 We could typologize the elected DPJ member's careers as: 1. government officials; 2. civil society activists; and 3. trade union officials. In addition, we may count twenty give DPJ Diet members who graduated from the Matsushita political training school, founded by the originator of Panasonic.

number found in the UK. Nevertheless, Hatoyama pushed ahead with his proposals, but was soon to find no way forward, abandoned as he was by his own party and ministers. The Futemma controversy continued for ten months, paralyzing the government, and therefore obstructing the pursuit of fundamental reforms.

The Futenma issue had another side-effect: the secession of the SDPJ from the governement, with the DPJ's coalition partner objecting to Hatoyama's eventual concessions to the US on the base relocation. This governmental break up invited a second institutional constraint: the loss of the governing majority in the House of Councilors upper chamber. The outlook for the upper chamber elections planned for June 2010 were not favorable at all for the DPJ in the aftermath of scandals and policy logjams, but attempting to preserve the governing majority with a coalition consisting of the SDPJ and People's New Party (PNP) was crucial. The House of Councilors acts as one of the strong veto points in the constitutional setup compared to other bicameral legislatures.[48] This is because political concessions and exchanges are required when the opposition holds the majority in the upper chamber; the DPJ having benefitted from this situation from 2007 onwards when it held the majority and succeeded in obstructing LDP legislation and consequently bringing down two cabinets. Hence, the DPJ now took its turn to face the prospect of deadlock in its reform plans, and the situation was made most serious since the government lacked the two-thirds majority for a second vote in the House of Representatives lower chamber. Hatoyama's strategic decision was to abdicate in favour of Kan Naoto, the finance minister, enjoying stable public opinion poll support. Since the trend from the mid-2000s was that election results mirrored prime ministerial popularity rates, the DPJ felt that the change of leader was the only choice to help fight the election, a tactic very similar to those employed by the LDP.[49]

However, Hatoyama's bid turned out to be a failure: the DPJ lost ten seats, so falling fifteen seats short of the number necessary for a majority. As a result and for the fourth time in its history, Japan experienced the so-called 'twisted Diet', where the majorities in two chambers diverge. Although the lower chamber can be dissolved for new elections, this will not immediately improve the DPJ's situation since the electoral cycle of upper chamber differs from that of the lower chamber.

The Kan government began with a moderate popularity rate of 41% (Jiji Press), meaning that the DPJ found it hard to pursue it reform plans. Even reforms slated for immediate implementation, such as the introduction of the National Policy Unit or the child-care allowance, were obliged to be reconsidered since they required compromises with the opposition parties.[50] Kan was subsequently to resign, mainly due to clumsy crisis management of the effects of the March

48 George Tsebelis and Jeanette Money, *Bicameralism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Takenaka Harukata, *Sangi-in to wa Nanika* (What is the House of Counsillors?), Tokyo: Chuokoron-sha, 2010. The upper chamber, planned to be abolished in 1945 by GHQ, has survived by the demands of the Japanese authority.
49 See *Asahi Shimbun*, 14, October 2009.
50 However, the DPJ confirmed in August 2011, of the 180 governmental platforms, 56% have been considered as 'executed or partly executed'. See, *Sankei Shimbun*, 27 August 2011.

2011 earthquake and tsunami. The outcome has been that under his successor Noda Yoshihiko the DPJ's style of governing and policies seems to be moving closer to those of LDP governments. The DPJ's Policy Research Council has been restored, and the 'preliminary review system', the core of LDP domination during the 1955 regime, has been also reinstituted. Most serious political analysts now talk of the 'LDP-isation of DPJ'.[51]

Bingham Powell points out the 'flaw' of the majoritarian system due to the fact that when it faces a situation of deadlock this can only be overcome by the arbitrary creation of majorities or by negotiation between stakeholders, but that these options would be taken to the extent how much the actual status quo is distasteful[52]. The choice that the governing elites take is not confident enough to make, for the time being.

Conclusion

The absence of government party alternation, a key characteristic of Japan's post-war history, created a situation whereby it was termed as an 'uncommon democracy'. But this characteristic of the 1955 Regime appeared to become obsolete after the change of government in 2009.

In this article, we have first tried to determine the origin, especially in its temporal and institutional dimensions, of that change. The role played by the 'quasi-alternation' of 1993, which has been often neglected to date, needs to be emphasised since it allowed the introduction of more competitive conditions between the political parties. This impacted on the LDP, changing political power relations, and on the formation in the end of a credible opposition party. The strategy chosen by the DPJ was something new, adapting well to this changed environment, especially when set against the rather stable equilibrium of competition under the 1955 regime.

The DPJ's policy implementation, however, has met significant resistance, most notably not from a change-averse bureaucracy as might be expected, but rather from the remaining structural elements of the 1955 regime. These attenuate the forces of change and assure the continuity of the 1955 regime. As nature abhors a vacuum, the DPJ's alternation of the governing party could only be achieved through an intra-institutional dimension. In this sense, the strategy formulated by the DPJ, with most of its resources invested in the negation of *ancien regime* was doomed to fail.

Moving beyond the analysis presented here, it is striking to observe a renewed consensual dimension persisting into this post-1955 regime, caused by and engendering 'valence politics'. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that, even in a bipolar environment, a minimum consensus is needed to manage politics, as Maurice Duverger pointed out several decades ago facing the divided government

51 Komiya Hitoshi, 'Kyōshū o sutete mirai o katare' (Out of nostalgia, speak of the future), *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 November 2011.
52 Bingham Powel G. Jr., 'The contingent flaws of majoritarian systems', in Gary King et al. (eds.), *The Future of Political Science,* London, Routledge, 2009.
53 See Maurice Duverger, *La nostalgie de l'impuissance*, Albin Michel, 1988. This was an observation made in Fukuzawa Yukichi *Minjō-Isshin* (Renewing People's Condition), which appeared in 1879.

in his own country.[53] This is the fallacy of the premise that competition in a democracy should contribute to its better functioning, and in turn, perhaps still makes Japanese politics 'uncommon'.