



Japan Opts for Change: Beginning of a New Era

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On August 30, 2009, the Japanese voters exercised their franchise for the 45th House of Representatives elections for charting the long-term future of Japan. The main opposition the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) romped home with a landslide victory reflecting an overwhelming support for the DPJ campaign to bring about a change in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led administration. The DPJ is a relatively new and untested political party and has been in the fray for the past 11 years. The DPJ is comprised of many small parties from conservatives and leftists. According to Yomiuri Shimbun of 31 August 2009 online edition, the DPJ not only secured an absolute majority of 269 seats, but also garnered a combined 308 seats in single-seat constituencies and proportional representation constituencies. The LDP could win barely 119 seats while the New Komeito, held onto 21 seats. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) won nine seats, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) seven seats, the People's New Party (PNP) three seats, the Your Party five seats and the New Party Nippon (NPN) one seat including independents having won seven seats. The LDP faces its most shocking defeat after ruling Japan for almost half a century. The rejection of the LDP as a ruling party came from its domestic policy failures rather than foreign policy issues; one important, among many other reasons is its neglect of keeping the pension records of Japanese senior citizens. The Japanese public had been frustrated with the way the LDP was running the society and economy. The victorious DPJ has raised hopes of the Japanese national for a bright future.

The DPJ took over the control of the Upper House of the Japanese Diet (Parliament) in July 2007 election. Subsequently it engaged itself in an aggressive strategy to win a majority in the Lower House. The pre-poll survey conducted by leading Japanese newspapers did suggest a pendulum shift in favor of the DPJ that it would come into power; that means putting an end to the single-party rule by the LDP since 1955 except for a brief period of 11 month in 1993-94. In 2005, the LDP under the leadership of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi achieved an overwhelming victory in the Lower House election. Koizumi enjoyed continuous trust of the Japanese public until he remained the Prime Minister of Japan. The last four-year rule by the LDP-New Kometo witnessed four premierships: Koizumi, Shinzo Abe, Yasuo Fukuda and, Taro Aso. The party remained a subject of continued criticism for more than one reasons. Among the last three Premiers Taro Aso's approval rating plunged below 20 percent.

The DPJ is led by stalwarts like Yukio Hatoyama, Ichiro Ozawa, Naoto Kan and Katsuya Okada. Ozawa is a powerful and influential figure in the DPJ, who would definitely be playing a decisive role in forming and functioning of the new DPJ government. To ensure smooth functioning of the Diet proceedings, the DPJ may form a tripartite coalition government with the SDP and PNP. The DPJ does not have majority in the Upper House. By forming a coalition with these parties, it would be in position to secure the majority in the House. The message of the DPJ to the Japanese voters is to bring change in Japan's governance through cutting down the budget deficit and public debt, reforming the social welfare system by providing tax relief as in the U.S. and, investing money into productive schemes. The goal of the DPJ is to end the post-WWII nexus between bureaucracy, the business community and the politicians thus weakening the hold of bureaucracy on governance. Its victory has come from issues, which the LDP was unable to resolve. The DPJ wants to reform a bureaucrat-led political system and believes that a change is must in the government for doing so. Social welfare issues such as pensions and health care for elderly population in the context of dwindling taxes, child-care and education are of critical importance for Japanese citizens.

With regard to bailing out from the current economic crises, the DPJ has planned to shelve projects that are wasteful, financially non-productive and reduce the

dependence of the government on public debt. The DPJ's focus is on issues of social welfare by eliminating part-time jobs because corporate sector draws huge benefits from these part-time workers. The Japanese voters seek a change in the system of governance as the Japanese economy has witnessed a "lost decade," in the 1990s and this decade also seem proving to be a lost decade. In essence, the Japanese economy is stagnant. Besides, there have been a number of scandals in the agricultural ministry, and the defense ministry. A rapidly aging demography with a very low birthrate also poses to be a serious challenge to the long-term future of Japan.

Change in Foreign Policy

The election manifesto of the DPJ emphasizes on equal partnership in the Japan-US Security Alliance management. Japan's U.S. policy seeks a change in terms of reviewing the Japan-US security alliance related issues such as review of the "host nation support" the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and the nuclear umbrella of the United States. The DPJ seeks to end Japanese navy's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean, which has been in operation since October 2001 barring a short period. The DPJ seeks a balanced relationship between Japan and the U.S. There is a possibility that the DPJ President Hatoyama may change his stance on the Japan-U.S. security arrangements including views on Asia after forming his administration. He may adopt a cautious approach towards the U.S.; otherwise, the U.S. may create challenges for Japan by adopting an attitude of "Japan passing."

In the context of foreign policy challenges, the election debate remained Asia-centric. Yukio Hatoyama, the DPJ president, has emphasized on Asia-centric Policy for Japan. The DPJ believes that China's rapid military build-up is of concern for East Asia. The threat of North Korea's nuclear and missile development program is another issue of immediate attention. The DPJ favors strong and severe economic sanctions on North Korea and supports U.N. announced actions against Pyongyang. In its manifesto, the DPJ promises to push for an idea of creating an East Asia Community, which it believes is important for countering China's increasing influence in the region, and seeks to balance Japan's relations with China. The LDP with its coalition partner Komeito sought to promote Asian economic integration and

it aimed to link Japan to the regional economic prosperity.

Japan's Russia policy may remain focused on energy and economic cooperation, as it faces ever-growing energy demands. The LDP had adopted 'resource diplomacy' in the Central Asian states and it is hoped that the DPJ would continue similar agenda. The northern territory issue may remain secondary.

There are serious challenges for Japan such as North Korea's nuclear proliferation. For reviving the global economy, Japan's economic recession has to end. Relations with Northeast Asian countries require a great deal of caution and efforts. To meet these challenges, the DPJ requires developing global and regional approaches. There is no doubt that Japan seeks to pursue a multilateral diplomacy on issues of common good. There are several challenges before the DPJ and since it is an untested party, it would require sometime before it stabilizes itself and meet the aspirations of the Japanese public.

The DPJ and India

The relations between India and Japan will remain unaffected under the DPJ administration. The DPJ's policy towards India is evident in the views of DPJ on East Asia Community building. To achieve this goal, first step is to sign an economic partnership agreement with India at the earliest. In fact, it is in harmony with India's Look East Policy. Building on this hypothesis, both India and Japan may very likely sign the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement soon, resulting in expanding and deepening of the business and political interactions between the two states.

India needs to be patient about DPJ's Asia policy, how it unfolds, and how it shapes its policy towards India. India's emerging economic profile has demonstrated a strong will for building deep and close economic relation with Japan, which is mutually beneficial for both countries and the region. South Korea has taken a lead in signing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India and has access to privileges in the Indian market while Japan is lagging behind. The DPJ government would have to act faster in this direction.

It would be challenging for the DPJ to deviate from the previous LDP foreign and security policies and it may continue the LDP agenda. The DPJ has to run the government with the cooperation of the bureaucracy, and certainly it would be a major challenge for the DPJ to weaken the control of the bureaucratic system over implementation of public policy. In essence, the LDP lost elections because of domestic challenges, not due to foreign policy failure; so the DPJ must fulfill those promises, which it made to the Japanese public on domestic issues. It can be said that the DPJ may have to walk a tightrope.

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