JAPAN’S QUIET REVOLUTION:
THE 2009 ELECTION & ITS AFTERMATH

By

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Introduction

Japan has undergone nothing less than a revolution. At one stroke, millions of Japan’s voters have quietly yet emphatically reversed 53 years of governance by dislodging the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from power and installing an untried and as yet inexperienced Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in office.

The voters did so because it was their overwhelming wish for change, manifested by new policies, new practices and new thinking. Voters were tired of the cosy and sometimes corrupt relationship between LDP politicians, large corporations and the bureaucracy. Voters were also tired of economic stagnation, extensive job losses, widening inequalities of wealth, inadequate social welfare measures, government ineptitude and political paralysis.

Given such widespread and fervently held public sentiments, a change of government was inevitable and the DPJ represented hope for a new beginning for Japan – one in which ordinary people, rather than privileged elites, would be the chief beneficiaries of government policy.

On 26 October 2009, in a speech to the Diet declaring his overall thinking, newly-installed Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama deliberately referred to a “bloodless Heisei restoration” (ishin) and signalled an osoji or “complete cleanup” of putative LDP profligacy. The Prime Minister set the key word of his administration as being yuai or “fraternity” – pledging to create a nation that cares about people’s needs and that displays friendliness toward others, both at home and overseas. ¹

In particular, concerning Japanese-American relations, Prime Minister Hatoyama announced that policy under his government will increasingly centre on the word taito (“equal”), using the phrase taitona nichibei domei (“an equal Japan-US alliance.”) He meant that, whilst close security links with the United States will be retained, Japan will no longer be content to passively ‘wait and respond.’ ²

Although flushed with electoral success, the new government, consisting of the DPJ and its Coalition partners the People’s New Party (PNP) and the Social Democrat Party (SDP), if it is to achieve its objectives, must strike a careful balance between innovation and continuity.

The new government needs to remember that it was elected primarily to bring about change, not to destroy. Now charged with conducting Japan’s complex national

¹ Pulvers, Roger 2009. ‘Reading between the lines of Hatoyama’s far-sighted vision thing’, THE JAPAN TIMES, 8 November.
² Pulvers, Ibid.
affairs, the DPJ knows that it must keep faith with its electors and that it is expected to govern wisely and competently – implementing change yet maintaining stability.

This means, amongst other matters, that promised fiscal initiatives must be affordable; that China and Southeast Asia must be reassured of Japan’s continuing peaceful intentions; that the US must be persuaded to listen more and to insist less; that jobs and small businesses must be safeguarded; and that the new governmental Coalition must maintain internal unity and coherence.

The DPJ has now realized its intended objective – the attainment of political power – and it must now exercise such power effectively and responsibly.

1. The Revolution Begins – Domestic Matters

On Sunday 30 August 2009, the reigning LDP lost government after more than half a century in power. It was defeated in a landslide victory to a Party just over a decade old, the DPJ, which was swept into office through widespread, overwhelming voter anger with the former government. In all, the DPJ won 196 extra seats, giving it 308 seats or 64% of the House of Representatives – an electoral rout of gargantuan proportions.

In terms of numbers, the DPJ won 29,784,743 ballots or 42.4% of the popular vote. In contrast, the LDP received 18,782,218 ballots or 26.7% of the vote. The DPJ thus received 11,002,525 more votes than the LDP, or a staggering 58.6% margin over the LDP total. 3

The DPJ’s policy platform on which it fought the Election included a restructuring of the civil service; a monthly allowance of 26,000 yen (US$300) per child to families with children; a cut in the fuel tax; income support for farmers; free tuition for public high schools; the banning of temporary work in manufacturing; the raising of the minimum wage; and the halting of any increase in sales tax for the next four years. 4

The Election swept away a large number of incumbents, including former Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, two former Ministers of Finance, four former Ministers of Agriculture and faction leader Taku Yamasaki. The LDP fared particularly badly in the urban and suburban Prefectures along the Pacific Coast, where, ironically, Junichiro Koizumi had done well in 2005. This time, the LDP won only 19 Single Member District (SMD) seats in the 17 Prefectures between Kinki and Kansai. In stark contrast, the DPJ gained 112 SMD seats in this region. It also picked up 31 SMD seats in Kyushu and Tohoku – both formerly LDP strongholds. The DPJ further swept


districts in Aichi, Nagano, Niigata, Iwate, Fukushima, Shiga, Yamanashi and Nagasaki – Prefectures that included both urban and rural districts.  

The DPJ has a powerful mandate to initiate its programme of domestic reform. It stresses that the key to the effective implementation of its agenda is the reform of the government policymaking process which has been dominated by a bureaucracy that was resistant to change and pandered to the vested interests of various LDP factions. Hatoyama has established a National Strategy Bureau, led by former DPJ head Naoto Kan, which will conduct the formulation and direction of national policy and fiscal budgets. The DPJ will also increase the number of Diet Members assigned as Parliamentary Vice-Ministers and boost the number of special advisers to Ministers from outside government. Such enhanced political oversight is intended to smooth the way for expanded pension, health care and aged persons services. The DPJ also plans to carry out large scale decentralization by enhancing local government control of many essential services through block grants to local authorities for them to use at their discretion. The DPJ further plans to remodel the economy so that growth is less dependent on exports or governmental stimulus measures in commercial sectors, and, instead, relies more on social welfare spending and household consumption.  

2. The Revolution Continues – Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is yet another area where the DPJ intends to make a decisive break with the past. The DPJ has consistently accused the LDP of giving priority to the US-Japan relationship over Japan’s role in East Asian regionalism and international institutions. Hatoyama, along with both newly appointed Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada and Defence Minister Kitazawa Toshimi, and other DPJ leaders have stressed that they intend to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy, while maintaining, and indeed strengthening, the bilateral alliance with the US as the bedrock of Japan’s security. The DPJ argues that the alliance should be based on a more mature or equal relationship, with more transparent burden-sharing.

Initial US reaction to this changing diplomatic posture by Japan’s new government was measured and calm. The Obama administration emphasized respect and patience through Japan’s transition to a non-LDP government. Senior US officials visited Tokyo for consultations soon after the Election and prepared for the first meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Hatoyama in New York on 23 September 2009. The leaders reaffirmed the importance of the US-Japan alliance and set the stage for a visit to Japan by Obama later in the year. The ‘atmospherics’ were comparatively good though some matters, such as renegotiating the realignment plan for US forces on Okinawa, had the potential to strain bilateral ties.

The new government in Tokyo and the relatively new government in Washington need to proceed on alliance related issues with care. Foreign Minister Okada has

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6 ‘Japan’s Regime Change’ 2009. STRATEGIC COMMENTS, 15 (7), September.
7 STRATEGIC COMMENTS, Ibid.
emphasized to US Ambassador John Roos that the DPJ wants to strengthen relations for the long term and step up cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation and the environment. However, the handling of four issues – the Indian Ocean refuelling mission, troop and base relocation, historical accounting of a tacit nuclear agreement and the legal status of US forces in Japan – will determine whether the DPJ government manages to “build trust” with the Obama administration as promised, or whether the new Japanese government – from a US viewpoint – weakens the alliance.

In seeking to redress Japan’s perceived over-dependency on the US, the DPJ has further pledged a more ‘Asia-centred’ diplomatic strategy. It has criticized what it sees as LDP mismanagement of relations with China under the Koizumi administration and argued that, despite some improvement, Sino-Japanese relations lack serious substance. Hatoyama has promised not to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine and expects similar behaviour from his entire Cabinet. Moreover, the DPJ will engage China in expanded initiatives on food security, energy cooperation, the environment and military transparency. Hatoyama has also pledged to continue to improve relations with South Korea, including pressuring for the conclusion of a free-trade agreement; and to be more proactive in efforts to establish a common currency in Asia and in the formation of an East Asian Community.

3. Gathering Clouds On The Horizon

Despite its monumental success in the August 2009 Lower House Election, the DPJ faces a growing number of contentious issues that are taxing both its capacity as well as its status, domestically and abroad.

Three matters in particular stand out, each of which has the possibility of destabilizing the new government. These are first, relations with China; second, linkages with the United States; and third, donation of funds to the Prime Minister by his own mother.

China’s re-emergence as the pre-eminent power in East Asia poses a profound challenge to Japan. In addressing this challenge, Tokyo has adopted two complementary strategies: binding – enmeshing Beijing in international institutions – and hedging – consolidating alliance ties with the US and developing new internal military capabilities.

Although desiring even more friendly and cooperative relations with China, the DPJ, nonetheless, is unlikely to totally jettison the approach to China pioneered under LDP rule – binding and hedging. DPJ lawmakers are wary of and troubled by what they see as China’s unpredictability; they mistrust China’s intentions and they are doubtful of their influence in Beijing. Although the DPJ adopts softer rhetoric, the reality of its China policy will probably be much the same as that of its predecessors. Japan will only move away from binding and hedging if China’s regime becomes more transparent and rule based.

9 Easley, Leif-Eric, Tetsuo Kotani, Aki Mori 2009. ‘Japan’s Foreign Policy and the Alliance: Transcending Change with Trust’, PAC NET 64, PACIFIC FORUM CSIS, 22 September.


To illustrate Japan’s concerns regarding its giant neighbour, it should be noted that DPJ Secretary General Ichiro Ozawa, in a meeting with Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie in Beijing on Friday 11 December 2009, expressed concern over China’s military build up. “There is sentiment in Japan that sees China’s military modernization as a threat”, Ozawa told reporters, quoting himself as telling Liang. “If Japan were to strengthen armaments, it would not bring good results for the future of Japan and China,” Ozawa said. 12

The United States appears increasingly concerned about the new course of Japan’s foreign and security policy. At the centre of a widening gap between the allies is the fate of a 2006 bilateral agreement to reconfigure US forces stationed in Japan, especially the relocation of the US Marine Corps’ Futenma Air Station in Okinawa Prefecture. Differences among Japan’s Cabinet members are compounding the issue. Foreign Minister Okada said he does not “think it’s an option” to move the facility out of Okinawa, while SDP leader and Minister for Consumer Affairs and Falling Birthrate Issues, Mizuho Fukushima, insisted that the base be transferred outside the Prefecture. 13

Tokyo is under strong US pressure to implement a 2006 plan to move Futenma Air Base to a less crowded part of the island of Okinawa as part of an overhaul of the 47,000 strong US force in Japan. Prime Minister Hatoyama is now caught between the hopes of Okinawa residents that were fanned by his Election comments to move the Base off Okinawa and a tough stance by his Coalition partner the SDP on one hand, and an increasingly frustrated Washington on the other. 14

In recent commentary, Carolyn Leddy, a former National Security Council director for counterproliferation strategy, sharply criticized what she described as the Hatoyama government’s “increasing security-policy schizophrenia”, including its pursuit of an East Asian Community that might shut the United States out. “Tokyo’s position threatens to undermine the cornerstone of East Asian security: the US-Japan alliance … The DPJ’s ideas just don’t make sense,” she said. 15

The Futenma Base issue has thus been the cause of severe friction between Japan and the United States. Either one or the other of the parties will have to concede ground or else face a damaging major rift in the long-standing alliance. It remains to be seen whether the Hatoyama government holds its resolve or whether the Obama administration imposes its will upon the angry and disaffected people of Okinawa. As Columnist Roger Cohen has observed, President Obama “has a Japan problem … there are troubles. Reliable Japan is now restive Japan. It’s talking about a more ‘equal partnership’ – read less subservient. Acquiescence has given way to argument.” 16

12 BREITBART.COM 2009. ‘Ozawa expresses concern over China’s military buildup’, 11 December.
14 Sieg, Linda 2009. ‘Analysis – Japan PM out of the frying pan, now into the fire’, REUTERS NEWS, 8 December.
The probity and integrity of the Prime Minister himself has been called into question by a deepening imbroglio over the donation of political campaigning funds by none other than his own mother.

The Prime Minister’s mother began providing political funds to him in 2002 or thereabouts and has given him a total of more than 1.1 billion yen (US$12.5 million) over approximately six years. Sources say that the flow of money began after Hatoyama was elected President of the DPJ for his third term in September 2002, making it necessary for him to raise a large sum of money to carry out his political activities. Prosecutors suspect the provision of funds constituted cash gifts. It is therefore possible that Hatoyama will be obliged to declare the funds in question as taxable cash gifts. The funds were handled by Hatoyama’s first state-funded secretary, who has since resigned. The secretary, who kept the accounts of Hatoyama’s fund management organization, Yuai Seikei Konwa-kai, consulted an official of the Tokyo-based foundation, Yuai Youth Association, about monetary shortages within Hatoyama’s political fund. The official then reportedly passed on this information to Hatoyama’s mother (herself then honorary chairman of the foundation) who subsequently decided to provide money to her son, reportedly paying 15 million yen (US$170,000) a month. 17

The matter has had an impact upon the public standing of the Prime Minister and of the government he leads. A reliable public opinion poll held in early December 2009 found that 85% of respondents did not think Hatoyama has fulfilled his responsibility to explain his involvement in questionable funding issues. Should the Prime Minister’s former secretary be indicted over the funding case, 54% of respondents said he need not resign, though 37% said he should. The approval rating of the Cabinet has dipped below 60% for the first time, falling from 63% in November 2009 to 59%. Although these figures are still quite favourable to the government, it is clear that public patience with the Prime Minister is wearing thin over the donations issue and the Futenma Air Station matter. 18

Should the worst come to the worst and the Prime Minister be forced to resign, it is possible that he could be succeeded by either Deputy Prime Minister Naoto Kan or Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada. For the present, there is no powerful groundswell calling for Hatoyama’s removal from office. As the donations matter drags on, however, this situation may change. It needs to be remembered that DPJ powerbroker Ichiro Ozawa was himself forced to resign as Party Leader prior to the August 2009 Election over another political funding scandal. Having lifted up the standard of political integrity, Hatoyama may yet have to apply such standards to his own actions and step down after leading his Party to a resounding electoral victory that, at the time of writing, occurred just a few short months previously.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps the most pressing challenge facing the Hatoyama government is unity within the tripartite Coalition consisting of the DPJ, the PNP and the SDP. Such a Coalition is presently necessary for the DPJ to steer its legislation through the Upper House of

17 THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN 2009a. ‘PM’s mom gave 1.1 bil. yen in 6 yrs’, 2 December.
18 THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN 2009b. ‘Cabinet approval rate falls to 59%’, 7 December.
the Diet, where it lacks an absolute majority in its own right. The junior partners in this Coalition, however, have pushed the DPJ into adopting measures it would not ordinarily have chosen to do.

Two such matters stand out, these being the Futenma US Marine Corps Base on Okinawa and the raising of an economic stimulus package by an extra 100 billion yen (US$1.1 billion) to 7,200 billion yen (US$81 billion). The handling of the Futenma Base issue has been disrupted by the SDP which insists upon the removal of US forces from Okinawa entirely. The economic stimulus package was increased at the behest of PNP Leader Shizuka Kamei who wanted more generous spending. 19

The DPJ, in July 2010, hopes to win an outright majority in the House of Councillors, thus enabling it to do away with its present, increasingly fractious, Coalition with the two smaller Parties. For the present, though, the DPJ, whilst holding 109 of the 242 seats in the Upper House, still needs the PNP and the SDP to secure passage of its legislation. Unfortunately, there are tensions within the Coalition which do not bode well for coherent, integrated governance and policy. The DPJ will, therefore, need to step warily and carefully.

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