

Washington Japanwatch / Election will have far-reaching implications for Japan

Weston S. Konishi

It is unfortunate that the world is not paying closer attention to the current political developments in Japan. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's decision to dissolve the House of Representatives in the wake of the failed postal privatization bills has merited only passing mention in the Western media, despite the fact that the recent political events in Tokyo have profound implications for one of the world's advanced democracies.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the upcoming lower house elections that are set for Sept. 11. The Democratic Party of Japan seems optimistic about the prospect of gaining more seats in the election, yet it is far from certain whether the main opposition party will win enough confidence from Japanese voters to be placed in charge of the nation.

At this early stage it is nevertheless possible to outline at least four potential implications of Koizumi's actions that are likely to have a far-reaching impact on the future of Japanese politics. True to the prime minister's character, each of these factors is the result of a brash political style that is unsettling for a nation accustomed to more subtle forms of political leadership. Yet as heavy-handed as Koizumi has been, his actions are likely to be the bitter pill Japan needs to dispel the political inertia that has alienated voters and hampered progress on a range of economic reforms and foreign policy initiatives.

One immediate implication of the upcoming elections is the demise of the old-guard wing of the Liberal Democratic Party, including members of the Hashimoto faction, that has resisted the prime minister's reform proposals. Using his power as party president, Koizumi has cut off old-guard politicians who opposed his reforms and endorsed alternative candidates (so-called assassins) in the September elections. The demise of the old guard will forever change the face of the LDP--from a party of older generation politicians to a somewhat younger and more progressive party of reform-minded leaders. A corollary result of the old guard's demise is the final destruction of the faction-based political system in Japan. Koizumi had already undermined the influence of factionalism by ignoring conventional Japanese political practices in the makeup of his previous cabinets. However, the imminent demise of the Hashimoto faction in effect severs the political lineage that linked LDP powerbrokers to factional patriarchs like former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka. It is now reasonable to expect that the Diet's decision-making process will become more transparent as backroom deals between factions become obsolete.

A third implication of Koizumi's actions is his extraordinary ability to put the DPJ on the defensive. By refusing to compromise on the postal privatization measures, Koizumi has cast himself as a champion of reform while the DPJ looks increasingly like an obstructionist party. The DPJ seems even more fickle since its position on postal privatization has flip-flopped from supporting the reform to rejecting it in knee-jerk opposition to Koizumi. The results of the Sept. 11 elections will tell for sure, but for now it appears that Koizumi has managed to simultaneously banish the old guard in his party and marginalize the only viable opposition party running against him.

Perhaps most importantly, Koizumi has orchestrated the first election in Japan that is focused almost entirely on a single policy debate in the form of postal privatization. The upcoming elections are, in essence, a referendum on privatization, with enormous political stakes for all concerned. Again to his credit, the prime minister has kept on message that his fate and that of his party rest on the electorate's decision on postal reform. Although a convenient excuse for avoiding further controversy, Koizumi took the uncharacteristic step of canceling his visit to Yasukuni Shrine so as not to distract from his main campaign issue. A precedent has now been set for future Japanese elections to focus more squarely on clear policy choices rather than pro forma political campaigns.

It is easy to exaggerate how far these implications will carry or whether they will lead to a profoundly different Japan. At the very least, they represent the most dramatic domestic political developments since the LDP first lost power in 1993. The question is whether the Japanese public will embrace this rupture of the status quo or whether it will demand a return to a more familiar and cautious political process.

Most polls indicate that Koizumi's popularity has risen to approximately 45 percent (high by Japanese standards) since his decision to dissolve the lower house. Yet this support could vanish if voters on election day decide that Koizumi went too far to pursue his reforms at the cost of political stability.

However, should Koizumi survive the upcoming elections and subsequently pass the privatization bills, it will be a clear indication that Japanese voters are now willing to accept a more fluid and dynamic political system and all the uncertainties that that entails.

Konishi is program director at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation.

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