

Upper House Elections in Japan : An Observation

Khadga K.C.

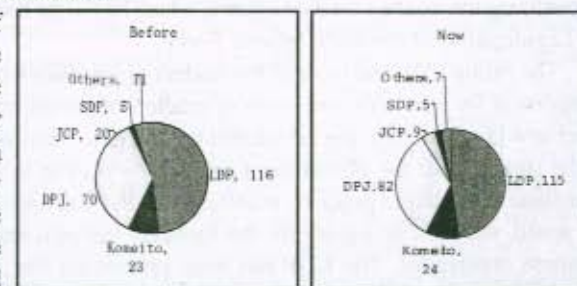
1. Introduction

Japan is a parliamentary democracy with bicameral legislatures. The Article 42 of The Constitution of Japan devised two houses of parliament; The House of Representatives and the House of Councilors. The total numbers of members in the Lower House are 480 and in the Upper House 242, both members are directly elected through universal suffrage. The term of the office of Upper House member is six years and election for half of the members takes place in every three years. The minimum age to stand as a candidate for lower house election is 25 and 30 for upper house (The Constitution of Japan, 1946 : Article 42).

The election for 121 members of the House of Councilors has been accomplished on July 11, 2004, where total 320 candidates contested, 192 were running for electoral districts and 128 on the parties' representation list. Out of them 81 were from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party(LDP), 74 were from main oppositional the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), 20 from New Komeito, a coalition partner of the present government, 71 were from the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and 15 from Social Democratic Party(SDP). The rest were independent. There were total 66 women candidates contesting, which was less than half of the 137 number in the last Upper House race in 2001.

House of Councilors 2001 and 2004

After the election, of the 121 seats at stake, the ruling LDP won 49, while the DPJ increased the number into 50 from 38 (The Japan Times, 2004). The New Komeito increased one more seat in comparison with the previous election and



secured 11 seats; however, the JCP won only four seats deteriorated from its 20 erstwhile seats in the upper house. The Social Democratic Party got 2 seats, which was similar to its previous strength. Despite these, five other independent candidates also got elected in the House of Councilors. The voters turn out was 56.57 % in the constituency section of the election, up 0.13% point from the 2001 upper house election. This paper attempts to observe the electoral issues and its implications of the upcoming political development of Japan.

2. Issues

(a) Structural Reform (Neo-liberal policies)

The ruling coalition tried to woo voters, stressing the progress made by the Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's structural reform initiatives during these three years since he took office in 2001. The main electoral issue was to back pension reform bill, which has recently been passed by the upper house of parliament. The proposed program will increase the premium rate by every year and be fixed at 18.3% by September 2017, however, reduce the benefits to the premium payers. Other structural reform (neo-liberal policies) are: reducing welfare expenditures, privatization of postal services and highway, cutting off the construction projects in rural areas, de-regulation of governmental control in almost all fields of national life, etc.

The Democratic Party of Japan vehemently criticized the policies and programs made by the LDP-led coalition government and asked the voters to cast their votes for seeking alternative government until next lower house election. The DPJ rallied pension reform programs should be returned to the drawing board, reconsidering with the inclusion of low premium and high benefit provision. The DPJ bolstered integrating the pension program for salaried workers and self-employed people by introducing a new 3 percent consumption tax which would exclusively be used to finance as a basic support for those who have low income. As for pension reform policy, the LDP and DPJ do not much differ in principle however, they simply have procedural conflict. In other neo-liberal policies, both parties are almost the same.

The Japanese Communist Party and Social Democratic Party canvassed for voters against the government's neo-liberal policies. They wanted to sustain the existing welfare state attributes of Japanese state. In pension reform program JCP and SDP wanted to make new provision as per which, national budget should shoulder more premium amount instead by the employees. They also advocated that the defense and construction budgets to mobilize the revenues for pension premium. Both parties presumed that the proposed pension reform program would bring a huge social instability and insecurity, jeopardizing the existing welfare system, which has so far been maintained in Japan.

(b) Legalization of the Self-Defense Force

The ruling LDP and most of the leaders of oppositional DPJ desired to make an amendment for amend the provision of article 9 of present constitution and wanted to enact new law for legalizing the current self-defense force as a genuine military force of the state so that the government can deploy it even to the foreign soil either to contribute to the world peace by resolving the disputes appearing in different parts of the world, which is necessary for the Japanese national interests on multinational's Japanese companies. The LDP has been presuming that there needs to revise or repeal the provision of the Article 9 of The Constitution of Japan 1946, which states, "Japan will forever renounce war as a sovereign right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes" (The Constitution of Japan, 1946, Article 9).

The Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to allow the Japanese self-defense forces to join a U.S. led multinational force in Iraq was a part of policy mentioned above. Regarding participation of Japanese self-defense forces in Iraq the DPJ does not

differ in principle with the LDP, however, insisted firmly that the government must introduce a new separate law before allowing the self-defense force troops deployed to Iraq to take part in a multinational force.

The JCP and SDP criticized the participation of self-defense forces in Iraq, saying such step violates the letter and spirit of the article 9 of the Constitution. Both parties cited that the nations' constitution, which bans the use of force to settle international disputes, when they said that Japan should give up sending SDF to Iraq. They asserted that after the world war second Japan has sent no youth to any field of war, which has long been a national stance, however, Prime Minister Koizumi is sending Japanese youth to a field of war promised to work together with the U. S.

Thus, recent upper house election has become a kind of strife between two ideological forces; those who aspired to remodel the current political equation through constitutional revision and the others, which promised to safeguard constitutional status quo for maintaining peace within and beyond Japan.

3. Implications

The final results of the House of Councilors' election proved the LDP's score as the third lowest for the party in an upper house election since the party was formed in 1955. It was sharply down from the 64 seats captured in the last upper house race in 2001. The Party also fared poorly among urban unaffiliated voters. The conservative leaders within the LDP put the finger on the policies of Prime Minister Koizumi administration ;deregulation, cutting off public fund to the local governments and construction works led to weakening support in the party's traditional vote-gathering machine, such as construction industry and farm lobbies. "The LD's disappointing result can largely be attributed to voter's angry frustration with seemingly inadequate pension reform bills, which the ruling coalition pushed through the last Diet session" (The Daily Yomiuri, 2004). Here, Prime Minister Koizumi himself acknowledged, "Many voters had been critical of his approach to pension reform and Japan's involvement in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Iraq" (Koizumi, 2004).

The DPJ amply increased its numbers of members in the upper house either possibly by its pragmatic neo-liberal political agendas or due to the adverse impact of globalization and the neo-liberalization policy of LDP government. The rural population has gradually become wretched with the ruling forces, while the middle-sized entrepreneurs, software and information technologists realized their own representative political outlet, which they seemingly anticipate from the Democratic Party of Japan. With all these agendas the major oppositional party sought more support from the young and female voters who are not directly affiliated with any particular political parties. Nonetheless, it has petty distinct standpoint on pension reform programs and technical procedure of the involvement of self-defense forces in Iraq, the DPJ seems simply not to have theoretical incongruities with the ruling LDP. However, policies and programs of the DPJ have shown that it is consistently more liberal on most major issues than the LDP, it has vigorously promoted itself as a bastion of idealistic and relatively ethical politicians, playing up the LDP's vested interests clubby atmosphere and scandal prove reputation whenever possible.

Scholars who keep close eyes on Japanese party politics appraise the DPJ and its current leadership, "The DPJ is building a secure foundation to become an effective opposition force" (Jun Lio, 2004). "The DPJ leader Okada is reliable, mature and substantive-a guy you can trust not to screw things up" (Gerald Curtis, 2004). Thus, relatively liberal standpoints, young and ethically clean leadership, the huge presence of swing voters have been potent factors to win more seats by the DPJ. A large number of unaffiliated voters, middle-sized entrepreneurs, IT technologists as well as the critics of the ruling LDP apparently opted for the DPJ.

The JCP and SDP vowed to keep up the pacifist constitution intact, favored the rights of working class in pension reform program and antagonized the neo-liberal policies of the ruling and main oppositional bloc lost further ground in the House of Councilors' election. The Japanese Communist Party suffered a major setback and the Social Democratic Party hardly hung on its previous position. In the proportional representation system, the JCP won only 4 seats out of the 15 it contested while SDP held on its 2 seats. Both JCP and SDP seem to have failed to attract the voters to their cause. It may be partly caused by the role of media, which has been lobbying for the establishment of two-party system for a long while. Political apathy among the young voters to the issues concerned with national and international importance somewhat adversely affected the smaller political parties.

4. Observations

The voters turn out in rural areas seemed deteriorating in comparison with the previous consecutive elections. It has been shown that the LDP has somewhat lost its trust on its traditional vote bases. Prime Minister Koizumi's government is attempting to cut off subsidies to the agricultural and small scale industry, reducing construction projects in rural areas that probably disenchanted the rural voters who were the true supporters of the LDP from the very beginning when the party was formed in 1955.

The election result is also as an aftereffect of long-time strategy of the establishment to fulfill its innate desire to revise article 9 and if possible article 25 of the present constitution. The article 9 bars to form its own military force and article 25 bars to implement the policies and programs against the spirit of welfare state. For this too, the establishment restructured the erstwhile electoral system into the first part of the post system in 1996, which largely became operative to curtail the presence of political forces in the parliament, which have dissimilar policies than the establishment. It was presumed that if there would be the influential presence of two major political forces with close political ideologies it would be too convenient to remodel some provisions of the present constitution.

Three representative ideologies have cropped up among the parliamentary political forces. The conservative forces within the ruling LDP who are apparently keeping reservation with neo-liberal policies of Prime Minister Koizumi and aspired to safeguard the provision of article 9 of present constitution. The faction led by Prime Minister Koizumi within the LDP, which desired to revise article 9 for owning ones own strong military force, and stepping up to implement its declared structural

reform policies in economic and political sectors.


Similarly, within the DPJ, neo-liberal and democrats close to president Okada and Ozawa, the senior leader of party seem against the existing provision of article 9 of the constitution, they have somehow similar standpoint with what Koizumi led faction of the ruling LDP owns. However, there are some pro-social democrats parliamentarians within the DPJ who are elected on behalf of trade unionist, deliberately intend to preserve the article 9 and welfare state posture of Japanese constitution.

The third representative thought is of the JCP and SDP, who favor the welfare state and determined are to preserve the rights of trade unions, to safeguard the pacifist constitution, renunciation of war, the SDF and the Japan U.S. Security Treaty. The moderate left cum social democrat force like JCP and SDP got obviously defeated in upper house election, adversely the article 9 revisionists within the LDP and DPJ overwhelmed.

It can be observed that it is a transitional phase of Japanese party politics from 1955 system. There was firm identity of welfare state and almost political parties had policies of non-existence of military forces. On the contrary, party politics in Japan has been heading toward neo-liberal state and potentiality of owning robust military force in near future. For nearly five decades Japan remained a democracy and it has been ruled almost continuously by a single political party, The liberal Democratic Party whose leadership and internal structure is said to be neither liberal nor pure democratic, if the current trend of two party system sustains the nation, seems headed at least toward a two party political system. However, if the upcoming political equation sooner or later be maneuvered for the revision of current constitutional provision, it may restructure the political outlook of Japanese state that alternatively make changes in the contemporary power balance of International politics.

References

- Curtis, Gerald, Professor at Columbia University, New York, quoted in *Time*, July 14, 2004.
Jun Lio, Professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, quoted in *Time*, July 14, 2004.
Koizumi, Junichiro, Prime Minister, quoted in *The Daily Yomiuri*, July 14, 2004.
The Constitution of Japan-1946.
The Japan Times, July 14, 2004.
The Daily Yomiuri, July 14, 2004.



COSMOS
The International College for GCE 'O' & 'A' Levels
A COMPLETE COURSE AFFILIATED
University Board, U.K.

For More :
COSMOS INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE
Machhapuchchhre Tole (New Tourist Bus Park), Pokhara-7
Tel. : 061-526060