

Upper House Elections Mark the Beginning of the End of the Koizumi Era —A Major Confrontation is Impending over the Peace Constitution

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The three-year reign of Japan's rightwing populist Prime Minister was dealt a heavy blow as Japanese voters expressed clear non-confidence in him and his party in the House of Councilors (Upper House) elections on July 11, 2004. The major opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won 38% of the votes cast in the proportional representation (PR) ballot while the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) obtained only 30% [1].

All observers have long agreed that the LDP is in long-term decline and that it has only been thanks to Koizumi's extraordinary popularity (70% or more in his first year) that the LDP was able to stay in power. Now his magical aura that once won the hearts (if not the minds) of the people has faded, and for the first time in three years, those against his cabinet outnumber those for it. Various polls put support for him in the range of 35% or so while opposition stands at around 45%. Even the 30% support that the LDP enjoyed in the elections was only made possible with the help obtained from the LDP's coalition partner, the Komei Party, which, fielding candidates only in certain strategic districts, mobilized its members to support LDP candidates in other districts. But it was the ruling coalition as a whole who failed to win a majority, garnering 25 million votes compared to the 29 million won by the four opposition parties in the PR ballot. The gap was greater in the district electorates: 22 million to 29 million.

The three crucial election issues were: the new pensions program which the Koizumi administration had forced on the Diet (the Japanese parliament) immediately before the election, Japan's military participation in the U.S.-led multinational forces in Iraq, and Koizumi's go-it-alone style.

The new pensions program, which cuts benefits and raises the burden on the insured, is extremely unpopular, particularly as it was rammed through the Diet without serious deliberation and the LDP-Komei Party had to resort to irregular procedures amounting to bad faith in order to get their legislation through.

Regarding Japan's military involvement in Iraq, public opinion has swung widely between being for and against it since 2003. People have consistently opposed the Bush war, but on the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq, attitudes have fluctuated. Last year, when the government proposed a bill to dispatch Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) troops on the grounds of Japan's alliance with the U.S., opponents to the plan outnumbered supporters, but once the bill had been passed and troops were actually sent to Iraq, the tide changed and supporters temporarily outnumbered opponents. Though

not fully convinced, the majority accepted Koizumi's rhetoric that the SDF was "not going to war" but instead was in Iraq for "humanitarian reconstruction assistance." TV programs highlighted SDF troops in Samawah in southern Iraq distributing water to residents; they never reported on the SDF transporting armed U.S. soldiers.

Still, when Koizumi, during the G8 summit in June, promised President Bush that Japan would participate in the "multinational force" under U.S. command after the "transfer of sovereignty," the majority of the Japanese population felt that he had gone too far. Of course, Fallujah and Abu Ghraib had already shattered the American cause in the eyes of the majority. On top of this, when Koizumi pledged his commitment first to Mr. Bush in Washington while keeping the Japanese Diet and the public uninformed, he appeared to many to be just a miserable sycophant. This image was reinforced when he declared that "the end of the occupation" represented "the victory of the American cause," a phrase rarely heard from political leaders nowadays.

Last but not least, Koizumi himself was an issue. "An eccentric guy" as his erstwhile comrade, Tanaka Makiko, herself a political maverick, called him, Koizumi came to power in 2001 using his peculiar political style as the major source of his attraction. His use of impassioned personal language, instead of the tedious officialese of his predecessors, his simplified expressions, and, in particular, his showy iconoclastic gesture to "break up all forces of resistance" in his party to his "reforms" struck the public as a refreshing change. He even said that for the sake of reform he was prepared to destroy the LDP, of which he was president. This style earned him incredible popularity; more than 90% of the Japanese people hailed him as a savior at first.

Now, though, this approach has rebounded on him as more and more people have found his words to be shallow and empty, his pro-American policy too adventurous, his scornful disrespect of legality and constitutionality ominous, and the contents of his neo-liberal "reform" against their interests. "One-phrase politics" has now become standard media jargon for criticizing his political style, and the people have begun to feel increasingly uneasy when they watch Koizumi merely repeating simple catch-phrases to justify major policies that should have required careful discussion and examination. When Koizumi introduced draconian, and what many consider unconstitutional "emergency legislation" for the wartime mobilization of resources, services, and the people, the prime minister refused to say anything in justification beyond, "No need to worry if you are prepared." To those who questioned his neo-liberal "reform" package, which has caused mass unemployment and the bankruptcy of many small businesses, he simply repeated his slogan, "No reform, No growth." This, he believed, was an adequate substitute for a responsible explanation of his policies. When the Fukuoka district court judged in April that Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine (where executed war criminals are enshrined together with the war dead) were unconstitutional, his reaction appalled everyone - "I don't understand what the court means at all." More and more people, including even some LDP politicians, became fed up with this style of rule that holds the law in contempt; they find it dangerous.

The July election results represented the Japanese voters' response to Koizumi as well as to some of his major programs. If it had been a Lower House election, the July vote would have brought the Koizumi cabinet down. The fact that the eventual political outcome was not as spectacular as in Spain was only because the Upper House election system has institutional limitations when it comes to bringing down an unpopular administration. The Japanese Upper House opens half of its seats for re-election every three years, so the ruling coalition, with seats not up for re-election, can still command a majority even if it is defeated in a triennial election.

Though looking haggard when he appeared on TV the day after the election, Koizumi adamantly refused to admit defeat. Instead, he argued perversely that the Japanese voters had expressed confidence in his government. "Against the adverse wind," he said, "the voters gave us, the LDP and

Komei Party coalition, a stable commanding majority in the Upper House.” For these reasons, he said, he would stay on and “accelerate” the “reforms” he had initiated.

By now, though, statements of this kind sound hollow and most of the media, more or less the prime minister’s drum-beaters for three years, seem to agree that the Upper House election marked the beginning of the end of the Koizumi era.

Two Conservative Forces - a Bipartisan System after the American Model

But are the election results so welcome to progressive forces? Although most activists do welcome Koizumi’s decline, they feel no sense of glee, because the winner in this election was the Democratic Party, whose platform and political philosophy are as different from the LDP’s as Mr. Kerry’s from Mr. Bush’s.

The ruling elites have for some time been promoting the introduction of an American-type bipartisan system, in which two conservative parties sharing the same basic values and philosophy compete for and hold power by turns. For years, the mainstream media have backed this plan as if it were the only way to end the LDP’s perpetual rule. This time the strategy seems to have worked. The relatively principled opponents to the LDP-DPJ mainstream, that is, the Social Democrats, the Communists and the tiny Greens suffered serious defeats as voters disappointed with Koizumi and the LDP swung massively to the DPJ; this was particularly true of the non-affiliated vote. The Communist Party returned four candidates from the PR ballot but lost all its seats from district electorates. Its total number of seats (including those not open for re-election) plummeted from a pre-election 20 to 9. Combined with five seats held by the Social Democratic Party, the Left in the Upper House now has a meager 14 of the 242 house seats.

The only exception to this trend was Okinawa. With the Okinawa movement against the construction of a new offshore U.S. base resurging after a few years in the doldrums, all the opposition parties, including the Communists, the Social Democrats, and the Democrats, managed to form a progressive coalition and put up their joint candidate, Ms. Itokazu Keiko, a staunch leader in the Okinawan women’s peace movement. She won an overwhelming victory without making any compromise on the issues of the bases. In Okinawa, the confrontation then was not between two conservative forces but between progressives and conservatives.

The Democratic Party is a hotchpotch of different trends, united only in their ambition to take power. Reorganized last year by absorbing the conservative Liberal Party headed by strong-arm conservative politician Ozawa Ichiro, the party is now dominated by those seeking a stronger Japan and a more neo-liberal economy. It wants to compete with the LDP on these grounds. The party includes former Socialist Party members, but they are almost contained. In fact, the DPJ has competed with the LDP in its eagerness to introduce emergency laws. In its manifesto, it proposes to carry out a Japanese version of “force transformation” by strengthening a special counter-terrorist corps, increasing SDF reserve strength, upgrading military technology, and strengthening missile defense. On privatization and liberalization, the party is even more enthusiastic than the LDP. Three years ago, when Koizumi came out with his appeal for “reform” - a neo-liberal package centered on the privatization of the highway corporation, the postal service, and other public sector entities - the DPJ hailed it, even offering to cooperate with him. The DPJ has since been criticizing Koizumi for not implementing his “reform” thoroughly enough rather than for the program’s destructive nature.

Major Political Confrontation Impending over the Constitution

Now the mid-term focus in Japanese politics has shifted to the amendment of the 1946 Constitution, particularly on the revision of its pacifist clause, Article 9. A major political confrontation is due on this issue within a few years.

At the moment, powerful political momentum has already been created in order to change the constitution; it is as though any opposition to such a change now looks anachronistic. All major pro-revision actors are on stage. Ten days after the July elections, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage felt free to tell a visiting LDP leader, Nakagawa, that the war-renouncing "Article 9 of the Constitution had become an impediment to strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance." Armitage also told Nakagawa that while Washington supported Tokyo's moves to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, any nation with that status must be ready to deploy military force in the interests of the international community. Unless it is prepared to do this, Armitage said, it would be difficult for Japan to become a permanent member. Big business, headed by the Nihon Federation of Economic Organizations, is eager to revise the constitution because it considers this a golden opportunity to remold Japanese society into a neo-liberal society with no respect for labor rights. The right and right-of-center media are serving as flag bearers in this assault. The Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's largest newspaper with a circulation of 10 million, pioneered a campaign to change the constitution by publishing its first draft constitution in 2000. This year, on May 3, the memorial day for the proclamation of the current constitution, the newspaper published its third version, urging an acceleration of the revision process.

In this climate, opinion polls give different figures, but certainly more than half of the Japanese people agree on the general idea of amending the constitution. But the situation is still fluid, and it is important to note that, according to recent polls, around 60% of the Japanese people are against changing Article 9.

The projected revision of the constitution involves the restructuring of the post-war Japanese statehood by uprooting one of its basic principles, pacifism. The postwar Japanese state is a complex entity. From its inception, it incorporated three mutually contradictory principles - loyalty to the American Empire, the continuity from the Japanese Empire, and the constitutional pacifism embodied in Article 9. These three principles are clearly contradictory. This is exemplified by the existence of the Japanese army, navy, and air force - now the third most expensive military in the world - in a country whose constitution states that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential will never be maintained" and that "the right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized" (Article 9). Although the U.S. occupation wanted this clause in the new constitution to pre-empt the possible resurgence of Japan as its military rival, the Japanese people in postwar years took it seriously, embraced it, and made it both their credo and a basis for all their social movements. However, another principle, that of the American Empire, asserted itself through the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, militarizing Japan in violation of the pacifist principle of Article 9. The embryo of the SDF was created by General MacArthur's fiat after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and over decades this military force has been nurtured to serve the American imperial strategy. The distance between Article 9 and the reality, acrobatically bridged by one flimsy legal excuse after another over the past decades, has grown so large that it is now a chasm.

The danger posed by the Koizumi government is that it has deliberately broadened this huge gap to the point where nothing can any longer bridge it. For instance, it is absurd to send an armed expedition into a battlefield as part of the U.S.-organized coalition forces and still claim that the SDF troops have nothing to do with war but instead are only doing NGO-like work. Note that since Japan has no right to belligerency, SDF soldiers, if attacked, can fight back only as an exercise of the

individual soldiers' right to self-defense, just as a civilian can legally fight back if attacked by a burglar. The trap is that if you point to such absurdities, you easily play into the hands of the revisionists who would tell you, "So the constitution is absurd. You should change it to suit reality." All this is upside down. Japan should not have sent military troops abroad and ought not to have supported the Bush war, and this is what the peace movement is saying. Although there is still widespread sympathy and support for the peace movement position at the grassroots, this support is not proportionately reflected either at the political level or in the mass media. On the other hand, in the environment of disrespect for the law that has been introduced by Koizumi, the military has begun to feel free to design the war plans it has long wanted to have but could not draw up because of the constitutional restraints imposed by Article 9. For example, the Defense Agency is now going to include in next year's defense program the introduction of cruise missiles and light aircraft carriers for a pre-emptive attack on enemy missile bases. This is a miniature version of Bushism: I will do what I want to do. If that is against the law, change the law. Through his arrogant disregard of the law, Koizumi has defiantly carried out a number of unconstitutional feats accomplished, whose weight has burdened Japan's postwar constitution to the point of collapse.

In this context, the conservative bipartisan system works as a mechanism to facilitate and accelerate the process toward revision of the constitution. The political monopoly constituted by the two competing parties, who are both keen to do away with Article 9, can effectively exclude from political debate the majority of the people who favor the article's retention.

Although Article 9 is crucial, the changes in the nature of the state that are now being promoted are more sweeping and far-reaching. In June, the LDP disclosed the "gist" of its amendment plan. This negates the very basis of the current constitution. The party says its plan only "raises points of discussion" but its framing of the issues clearly suggests what the LDP envisions as defining elements of the new statehood. It recommends that the position of the Emperor be raised to head of state based on the "historical and traditional statehood of Japan." Though the public was not consulted on whether to retain the Emperor system or not when the current constitution was made, still Article 1 of the constitution had to reconcile the postwar Emperor system with the basic principle of people's sovereignty by stipulating that the Emperor "derives his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power." In the same vein, the LDP also proposes to modify the current constitutional principle of a secular state and allow the imperial family's religious (Shinto) rituals to be defined as state affairs.

Also, the new constitution, according to the LDP's "gist," is to replace Article 9 with provisions about Japan's military forces and the exercise of the right to military action for "national and collective defense" ("collective defense" here meaning the engagement of Japanese military forces in American wars).

The constitution, the LDP asserts, should also have clauses about emergency situations where martial law can be declared to suspend basic human rights. Thus, to be written into the supreme law is the "people's duty to cooperate with the government in the defense of the country and in other emergency situations." Surprisingly, the LDP proposes to negate gender equality, too. The gist says, "We should critically review the current constitutional clause about the equality of both sexes in marriage from the point of view of appreciating family values."

The Democratic Party's position paper on the constitutional issue is strewn with more plausible sounding phrases such as "civilizational change," "imagination as global citizens," and other phrases of NGO origin. The emphasis of the report is on "adapting the state to the age of globalization," which requires "the relativization of the state." As for Article 9, it pays lip service to the "spirit of Article 9" but proposes that the new constitution should include a clause about Japan's right to use military force although it adds that the exercise of this right should be restrained. This relatively

low-key statement reflects intra-party conflicts over Article 9. About 20% of the party's parliamentarians, coming mostly from the former Socialist Party, do not favor the mainstream's dash toward constitutional revision, but the mainstream, coming from the LDP, are die-hard revisionists, not a few of whom are ultra-rightists. The party basically follows a strategy advocated early in the 1990s by Ozawa Ichiro, now the most powerful voice in the DPJ. His basic position is that by changing the constitution Japan should become an "ordinary country" that has a national military and participates officially in "collective security" activities sponsored by the United Nations. Domestically he has proposed a small but powerful central state that would have a monopoly in military and diplomatic affairs but be complemented by decentralization of the rest of the state's powers.

The DPJ's new president, Okada Katsuya, also a former LDP politician, visited the U.S. after the July election and surprised the public with an extremely hawkish statement. In a speech in Washington, he said that he would "revise the constitution to make it possible for Japan to use military forces overseas if a United Nations' resolution so requires." (Asahi Shimbun, July 30)

The difference between the LDP and DPJ is that the former gives first priority to U.S. strategic requirements while the latter wants to enter the global military club through the U.N. Both are now making final efforts not only to free themselves from the pacifist constraints embodied in Japan's post-war statehood but also to remake Japan into a ranking military power.

According to Koizumi's schedule, the LDP will finalize its constitutional draft next year, the 60th anniversary year of its founding. The DPJ is producing its own draft in competition with the LDP, trying to differentiate itself from the LDP by writing into its draft some "new rights" that make the DPJ sound like they are concerned with the environment and a multi-cultural society. The DPJ shuns the term "revision" and prefers to call its project "the creation of a new constitution." The Komei Party, whose selling point of "peace" reflects the harsh repression its mother religious sect Soka Gakkai suffered in pre-war years at the hands of the military and thought police, must perform a balancing act between its embrace of the LDP and pressure from the Soka Gakkai rank-and-file, mainly women and young people, who are attached to Article 9. In the Komei Party's official language, it plans to add to but not replace the current constitution. Its message to the membership: the spirit of Article 9 will be retained, only its phraseology is to be retouched.

Revising the constitution takes a huge amount of political energy. As a matter of procedure, two thirds or more of the members of each house must agree on a single draft and the draft will then be put to a referendum that requires for approval an over majority affirmative vote. Although all the parties, excepting the Social Democrats and Communists, are agreed on amending the constitution in one way or another, it will be an incredibly difficult task for them to produce a single draft to present to the people. Can all the revisionists agree on how Article 9 should be revised? How is the Japanese military to be defined? What will be the new status of the Emperor? What human rights should be written into the draft anew? Only unprincipled compromises can produce a single text, but that process would certainly kick off conflicts and strife between the parties as well as within each party, and that may lead to splits and a realignment of political forces. Such a development is only welcome if it generates a new line of principled political confrontation.

Given this prospect, the emergence of an extra-parliamentary political force and social movement as a third force not trapped by the bipartisan mechanism is crucial. Article 9 certainly should be the rallying point, but it should not be separated from the broader context. We need a pro-active approach whereby broad segments of the people envision what kind of society the residents of the Japanese archipelago wish to have, and discuss the principles that should underpin such a society, the kernel of which no doubt should be Article 9. We stop here, however. Where these forces are and how the people's movement can counter the dominant trend for constitutional revision will be

discussed separately.

Endnote

[1]: In the Japanese Upper House election, each voter casts two votes, one for a party or a candidate running in the proportional representation (PR) constituency and the other for a candidate running in his or her electoral district. The Upper House has 242 members, 96 of whom are elected under the PR scheme with the remaining 146 chosen from the electoral districts. Votes under the two schemes are tallied separately. This being the case, the two national tallies by party may differ significantly.

P.S.

* Posted on Japonesia Review website.

* MUTO Ichiyo: An activist/writer on political and social affairs, national and global; born in 1931 in Tokyo, he joined student movement and peace movement in the 1950s, active in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s, jointly with like-minded friends, founded the English journal AMPO and the Pacific-Asia Resources Center in the 1970s, engaged in Asian people's solidarity activities, initiated the People's Plan 21 in the 1980s, and founded the People's Plan Study Group (PPSG) of which he is a co-president in the 1990s; taught at the sociology department of State University of New York at Binghamton in the 1980s-90s; author of many books in Japanese, the most recent one being "Empire vs. People's Alliance" (2003, Tokyo).