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How Japan's Left is repeating its unfortunate history

Like in the 1990s, Japan's centre-left opposition is forging alliances without common principles — leaving it unable to challenge neoliberalism

In October 2020 the unusually long tenure of Japan's prime minister Shinzō Abe came to an end. He was succeeded by Yoshihide Suga who had hitherto served as his chief cabinet secretary. This change of leadership received a great deal of attention in the media. At the same time, a far-reaching restructuring of the opposition – a merger of centre-left groups – has not been widely reported although this process might shape the future of Japan's political landscape in a far more profound way.

Since the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) regained political power in 2012, it has been dominating Japanese politics with a two-third majority (together with a small coalition partner). While certainly in a weak position, parties of the Japanese Left are still able to pull roughly one third of the votes and thus continue to have a certain degree of backing in Japanese society.

The former main centre-left opposition, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), was Japan's version of third way politics and served since the mid-1990s as a 'big tent party' for a plethora of heterogeneous groups ranging from two socialist parties to liberal and conservative groups. Advocating an ambitious reform agenda with a neoliberal core, their common goal was to achieve the first real change of government since 1955. The party merged repeatedly with several groups ultimately coming into the position to oust the LDP from government in a landslide victory in 2009.

How the DPJ rose to power – and dismantled itself

At that time the DPJ had already supplemented its programme – then

mainly focusing on cutting 'wasteful' government spending for lobby interests – with social democratic policy proposals, especially in the field of social and education policy. However, positions of power in the party were held by former politicians of the LDP who had brought their collusion-prone political culture into the DPJ. The high degree of intraparty heterogeneity also proved to be highly problematic.

For these reasons, the three years of DPJ-led government were characterised by corruption scandals, distrust and internal strife. And after the 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster in Fukushima the representatives of public-sector labour unions stipulated a nuclear phaseout while those representing industrial unions rejected this policy, thereby perpetuating the old conflict of organised labour in Japan. As early as 2010 the DPJ lost its majority in the Upper House; in 2012, it was ultimately ejected from power by the resurgent LDP.In 2017, the DPJ finally dismantled itself in a rather unusual way: confronted with chronically weak polling and a bleak perspective on the upcoming Lower House election, the leadership decided to not file any candidacies but instead to encourage their lawmakers and candidates to run on the ticket of the newly-founded Party of Hope. This party had only recently been established to capitalise on the popularity of the governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, at the national level.

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This was a bad call. While the DPJ had noticeably shifted to the left in the preceding years, Koike comes from the same ultraconservative establishment as former prime minister Abe. The Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union – an important partner of the DPJ's left wing – immediately protested against this deal. Ultimately, Koike herself was unwilling to harbour all of the DPJ's political castaways and rejected several membership applications, mainly from liberal and leftist lawmakers. Therefore, Yukio Edano, a veteran DPJ politician, decided to establish the left-of-centre Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) as a political haven for the left wing of the unravelling DPJ. Others decided to join neither the Party of Hope nor the CDP and entered the 2017 election as independents.

Of splits and (re)unions

When votes finally got counted – only about the half of the population had cast their vote – it became clear that the Party of Hope was destined to betray its name: it finished not only behind the LDP but also the CDP, which had emerged only shortly before election day. Two factors were responsible for the CDPs surprising success: firstly, the support of the public sector unions provided it with a supply of organised votes. Considering the low voter turnout in Japan this is an increasingly decisive factor for electoral success. Secondly, Edano managed to draw support from the big pool of swing voters by renouncing the opportunistic backroom deals of Japanese politics.

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But support for the young party had started to erode quickly and it performed badly in the 2019 Upper House election. Perhaps the younger voters, who had been attracted by the party initially, were already too demotivated in view of the long-term LDP dominance to make a continued effort in the political process. Also, the competition with the smaller parties of the leftist spectrum – e.g. the communists and the social democrats – proved to be detrimental, since it continued the cannibalisation effects.

A new CDP

In the meantime, the right wing of the former DPJ had also set up a new party for the 2019 elections, the Democratic Party for the People (DPP). It achieved equally dismal results. And so the performance of the CDP and DPP almost inevitably led to a discussion of a reunion of the splinters of the former DPJ. The labour union confederation Rengō which represents both, the public as well as the private sector unions, advocated strongly for a merger. Finally, in September 2020 the CDP, the DPP and various independents hailing from the former DPJ did merge – in the guise of the establishment of a 'new CDP', thereby creating a large political force of 150 lawmakers. It turned out to be another bad move – for two reasons.

Firstly, the DPP's important group of lawmakers representing the private sector unions ultimately declined to participate in the merger, thereby perpetuating the split of labour representation. This divide not only weakens the left-of-centre opposition by keeping up cannibalisation effects in the electoral districts but also reveals the weakness of Rengō. If this situation is not remedied, a corresponding split of the labour confederation organisation is well possible, especially considering that the leftist public-sector unions and the more conservative private-sector unions had already been divided in two hostile camps from 1960 to 1989.

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In the light of these developments, the self-destruction of the DPJ seems ambivalent. On one side, it manifested a split in the representation of organised labour, weakened the centre-left forces and therefore aggravated the most severe problem in Japanese politics, namely the overwhelming dominance of the LDP. On the other hand, it made abundantly clear that the 'third way' of the 1990s had become outdated and that the profound heterogeneity and ideological vagueness of the DPJ had been a constant obstacle to success. If 20 years under one roof had not led to a reconciliation of the conflicts between several of the various intraparty groups, a split seemed only consequential, especially considering that the party had lost most of its electoral support anyway.

The Japanese Left today

Today however, the centre-left opposition has fallen back to its old pattern: discouraged by its meagre success and the adversities of the electoral system, it again resorts to quick fixes to enlarge its numerical force in the parliament. The merger with the DPP – staged as the establishment of a 'new CDP' – is hurting the CDP's credibility and dilutes its profile. The new party programme is still decidedly left-liberal; the leadership personnel however raises doubts about the party's political course: the position of vice general secretary is now held by Watanabe Shū – a politician well-known as an extreme right-winger and proponent of historical revisionism.

At the same time, the pacifistic and social democratic representatives of the public-sector unions remain the largest intra-party group – it is therefore only a matter of time until conflicts will arise. Probably the

most unfortunate aspect of the 'new CDP' is that the Japanese population sees it as a mere reconstitution of the rather unpopular DPJ. It is not unlikely that what's left of the DPP – now basically reduced to the group of private-sector backed representatives – will join the CDP in the near future. This would pacify the labour confederation Rengō but would heighten the CDP's heterogeneity and would make it look like a recast of the old DPJ even more.

After a quarter century, the centre-left opposition seems to have gone back to the 1990s: Once again it is forging an alliance without common political principles and is therefore in danger of repeating its unfortunate history. The most important factor holding the CDP together is its willingness to wrest power from the LDP once more. This might suffice to keep the centripetal forces inside the party in check – yet it will not be enough to overcome the widespread political apathy – and mobilise the people in support of an alternative vision of Japan's future.



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