RESOLVED

Japan Needs A Two-Party System

FROM THE EDITOR

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is positioned to become Japan’s longest serving Prime Minister after securing a majority in the Upper House election held on July 21, 2019. The ruling coalition led by Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party has won a string of elections since he returned to power in 2012 despite pressure from opposition parties eager to present an alternative to his policy agenda.

In this ninth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Professor Koji Murata of Doshisha University and Professor Alisa Gaunder of Southwestern University to survey Japan’s political landscape and assess whether the country needs a two-party system.
Yes, Japanese politics needs a two-party system. Japanese people want realistic political choices. Otherwise, voters will be more and more cynical about Japan’s democracy. Currently, while the ruling coalition with different political ideas is so dominant in the National Diet, opposition parties are fighting with each other, and their policy coordination is fragile. Under these circumstances, it is not likely for Japan to have a two-party system in the near future, but movement in that direction is possible.

First, Japan needs to amend its constitution to avoid political cynicism. For example, many of the opposition parties are still criticizing the new security law of 2015, under which Japan can exercise the right of collective self-defense in limited ways, as unconstitutional. To propose constitutional amendments, the ruling party needs at least a two-thirds majority in both houses of the National Diet. Though the current ruling coalition comprised of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Clean Government Party (Komeito), together with the Japan Restoration Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai), an opposition party supporting constitutional amendments, lost its two-thirds majority in the House of Councilors election on July 21, 2019, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is still eager to pursue constitutional amendments in 2020. At least some conservative members of the National Democratic Party (Kokumin Minshuto) or other opposition parties might agree to discuss constitutional amendments in the future. Then, a two-party system may emerge based on public debate of the pros and cons of constitutional amendments and what kinds of amendments politicians are seeking.

Another scenario, while not highly likely, might also be considered. Prime Minister Abe is eager to revise the constitution, in particular, Article 9, which renounces war and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. But Komeito is reluctant because the Value-Creation Society (Soka Gakkai), a peace-oriented Buddhist organization supporting Komeito, is opposed to constitutional revision. If Komeito were to leave the coalition Japan does not necessarily need a two-party system. It would benefit from a more competitive multi-party system, a more likely outcome given its electoral system rules. The answer to whether Japan needs a two-party system is contingent on what problem the change in the party system is trying to address—political corruption, voter turnout, party responsiveness to the electorate, ineffective policymaking, or some other issue. While the Japanese party system could be strengthened, no one party system will be a perfect solution.

Party systems take on different forms, and each form comes with both advantages and disadvantages. A two-party system normally leads to more stability in government with periodic changes in the party in power. However, it often limits voter choices and prevents minority voices from being heard. A multi-party system does a better job of representing minority voices. In such a system, however, coalition governments are more likely, which can be less stable.

When Japan changed its electoral system in 1994, the prevailing rhetoric suggested that the electoral structure needed to change in order to produce a two-party system as a way for voters to “throw the rascals out” in cases of political corruption or policy failure. The electoral system adopted, however, will never produce a pure two-party system. In general, a single-member district system tends toward a two-party system at the district level. In 1994, Japan adopted a combined single-member district/proportional representation (PR) system for the more powerful lower house of the Japanese parliament. While this system had the potential of spurring party realignment, it still supports smaller parties through the PR tier. The upper house utilizes a combination prefectural-based multiple-member district system with a single nontransferable vote and an open proportional representation list.

Following electoral reform, Japan seemed to be heading toward a party system similar to that of Germany—one that favored two larger parties in single-member districts and a mixture of larger and smaller

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government over the constitutional debate and join opposition parties, a two-party system could happen because many LDP members rely on Komeito’s election machine for their victories, and the LDP would consequently be weakened considerably. A more liberal successor to Mr. Abe may be better at handling opposition parties and Komeito when discussing constitutional amendments, which could further reduce the likelihood of this scenario, but the notion of political realignment over the constitution is not inconceivable.

Second, the LDP has been called a catch-all party for a long time. The party includes different political forces with different ideas and policies. So, the LDP has been able to operate a quasi-multi-party system by changing prime ministers among different political forces inside the party. Currently under Prime Minister Abe, political forces with conservative social values and a small government orientation are dominant in the party. However, Shigeru Ishiba, Abe’s rival, takes a quite different position from Mr. Abe’s on the revision of Article 9. And Shinjiro Koizumi, a very popular politician of a new generation, is often critical of Abe’s paternalistic political style. To some extent, leaders such as these still function as opposition parties within the LDP. If political forces with social conservative values and a small government orientation become stronger and stronger, other forces might find it difficult to stay in the LDP and consequently join opposition parties.

Third, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been a core of Japanese foreign policy for decades. The Japanese public understands the importance of this alliance, but some are frustrated by Japan’s junior position in the alliance. Furthermore, President Donald Trump’s provocative remarks often cause antipathy towards the United States in Japanese society. Thus, it is very easy for opposition parties to criticize the way the Japanese government manages the U.S.-Japan alliance. I would call this the anti-American position of convenience. Ironically, this tendency prevents opposition parties from developing a realistic foreign policy, which is essential for a two-party system. Therefore, opposition parties should demonstrate more constructive and realistic views on the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Finally, despite the appeal of a two-party system, it seems to exhibit many fundamental problems. For example, political parties in countries with a two-party system, such as the United States and United Kingdom, appear to have embraced populism and do parties in PR. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) emerged in 1996 as an amalgam of disparate opposition voices. It took control of the upper house in 2007. This so-called “twisted Diet” provided a more prominent forum for the DPJ to challenge the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) positions on security and economic issues as well as political appointments even though the LDP still held the majority in the lower house. Fifteen years after electoral reform, in 2009, the DPJ won the government. Here, however, the vote was simply against the LDP; the DPJ did not offer or implement policies that differed significantly from that of the LDP. The DPJ’s weak performance in office proved that a two-party system or more specifically party alternation in itself cannot solve all problems. Party ideology, organization, and leadership also matter, and opposition parties have been weak in these areas for most of the postwar period.

The re-named Democratic Party (DP) broke apart prior to the 2017 lower house election, and Japan appears to be in another period of party realignment. This realignment will not stabilize immediately; however, the recent upper house election provides clues on where the party system might be headed. Several trends are worth noting:

First, voter turnout continues to be low, reflecting voter apathy. Turnout in the 2019 upper house election was the second-lowest in postwar history at 48.8 percent. On the positive side, though, low turnout suggests that there is potential for new leaders/parties to mobilize voters and gain momentum.

Second, opposition parties have been experimenting with supporting unified candidates in single-member districts in both the lower house and upper house elections since 2016, and such cooperation has made these candidates more competitive. In the 2019 upper house election, five opposition parties supported a unified candidate in all 32 single-member districts, and 10 of these candidates won. Ultimately, opposition parties agreed not to compete against one another by supporting one candidate; not on what to support.

Third, a potential positive effect of the break-up of the DP is that the split addressed some of the party’s longstanding internal policy differences, most significantly, differences regarding security issues including the revision of Article 9 of the constitution. The Democratic Party for the People represents the
not necessarily represent the full range of voices among the people. While I believe Japanese politics needs its own two-party system, Japan must learn from the American and British experiences and carefully consider the means toward that end.

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