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THE FUTURE OF JAPANESE DOMESTIC POLITICS AND JAPAN'S PATH AHEAD

Katsuyuki Yakushiji

Several times a year the Japanese Diet holds a party leaders' debate modeled on the UK's "Question Time." Each occasion sees the prime minister and the leaders of the opposition parties exchanging criticisms amidst loud heckling from onlooking MPs. It has become a ritual that does nothing but waste time. The party leaders' debate of November 14, however, was different. As planned, Shinzo Abe, President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), called for an early dissolution of the House of Representatives by Prime Minister (and head of the Democratic Party of Japan [DPJ]) Yoshihiko Noda.

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Everyone had expected the prime minister to offer some vague justification for postponing the dissolution. Instead, Prime Minister Noda proposed reducing the number of seats in the National Diet and then bluntly added, "Let's just cut to the chase. We will dissolve the Diet on the 16th."

In an instant the heckling stopped and the committee chamber became hushed. Never had a prime minister announced a specific date for dissolution in a statement to the Diet. The opposition members were naturally flummoxed, as indeed was the ruling party leadership. Abe was unable to hide his shock, and his subsequent remarks trailed off into meaninglessness.

The Japanese media conduct frequent public opinion polls. The latest poll shows support for the Noda administration down to about 20% and that for the DPJ in the low teens, less than half that for the LDP. If this holds true into the general elections, the DPJ will seemingly suffer a major defeat as the LDP reclaims power as the dominant party. No Diet member welcomes an election in which he/she is certain of a loss. There was overwhelming opposition to dissolution and general elections within the DPJ, of course, and Prime Minister Noda had been expected to hold off dissolving the Diet until next year.

Turning the opposition parties' demands for an early dissolution against them, though, Prime Minister Noda countered by insisting on conditions such as a reduction in the number of Diet seats as he announced the dissolution. It was colorful turnabout theater. Many of the viewers watching the party leaders' debate on television began rethinking their assessments of Prime Minister Noda's leadership ability, and some of them may even switch their support to the DPJ. This is how effective the "bombshell" was.

There are undoubtedly several reasons for the prime minister's determination to dissolve the Diet before year's end.

Since becoming prime minister in autumn of last year, Noda has been primarily focused on raising the consumption tax. Japan has a cumulative debt of approximately 1000 trillion yen, more than twice its GDP. This is far greater even than European countries such as Greece and Italy who have been thrown into fiscal crisis. Should its profligate public spending continue unabated, Japan will

ultimately find itself confronting the specter of fiscal collapse. An increase in the consumption tax was essential to avoid this.

A bill to increase the consumption tax was passed in August. The tax rate is to be raised in two stages, from the present 5% to 8% in April 2014 and then to 10% in October 2015. This rise is not set in stone but rather conditioned on “an upturn in economic conditions.” The Japanese economy remains sluggish, and additional appropriations for economic stimulus measures and smooth implementation of the fiscal 2013 budget will be necessary to satisfy this condition. If dissolution is postponed, however, resistance from the opposition parties will become fiercer, budget deliberations will stall, and ultimately the consumption tax rate may not be raised. To ensure trouble-free implementation of economic stimulus measures and an increase in the consumption tax, Prime Minister Noda has committed to dissolution and general elections in which he faces a strong likelihood of losing power.

He also appears set on rebuilding the DPJ. The DPJ secured 300 seats in the 2009 general elections to become the ruling party. In reality, though, the DPJ is little more than a political party that attracts the critical “anti-LDP crowd,” and the more seats it has gained, the weaker its party unity has become, with numerous intra-party disputes breaking out over personnel and policies. Prime Minister Noda is prepared to offer a general election campaign pledge on participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement, a stance that has generated strong opposition within the DPJ. In doing so, Noda is apparently seeking to rebuild the DPJ by encouraging Diet members locked into old political ways and conservative policies to leave the party and bringing in members abiding by the party line, even if their overall numbers decline somewhat. While the DPJ’s seat count might fall substantially in the next general elections, the party’s “blunting course” could over the medium to long term garner public support and allow the party to grow again and form a new government.


Voting and tallying for the general elections are to take place on December 16. It is highly likely that the LDP will become the dominant party and return to power. Having lost its majority in the House of Councilors, it will probably have to form a coalition with other parties to create a stable

government even if it does gain a majority in the House of Representatives. The New Komeito might be a potent coalition partner, but in certain scenarios it could choose to team up in some way with the DPJ. The outcome of the elections will determine which parties will join up in a coalition.

A new dimension to the upcoming general elections is the large number of LDP and DPJ defectors as well as prefectural governors who have created new political parties in the run-up to these elections. An all-time high of twelve parties have fielded candidates. This upsurge in the number of political parties can be attributed to the fact that, over the past few years, defectors from the LDP and DPJ have thrown their support behind well-known governors or other figures and formed new political parties to ensure their own political survival. This has been made possible by an electoral system featuring a combination of single-seat constituencies and proportional representation. While candidates from minor parties might find it nearly impossible to defeat DPJ or LDP rivals in single-seat constituencies, they do stand a chance at winning in proportional-representation constituencies. Hence, many political parties have been created in the hope of scoring victories in proportional-representation constituencies. These minor parties are running election campaigns focused solely on specific policies popular with the public – opposing consumption tax hikes or advocating a no-nuke energy policy, for instance – and they offer no overarching platform for national governance as a whole. In other words, the minor parties springing up one after the other display a distinctly "electoral mutual aid society" character in seeking to gain seats despite their small size, and it seems unlikely that they will win many seats.

It might be hoped that Japanese politics will settle down after the general elections and allow the focus to swing from politics to policy, but the situation is not so simple. In 2013, there are House of Councilors elections scheduled in July, and Diet debates among the various parties will no doubt heat up as these elections draw closer. A ready policy consensus would only serve to benefit the ruling party, so widespread and unproductive dickerings are an undeniable possibility. In other words, Japan has a political calendar that will make it difficult to avoid introverted political wrangling even after the general elections.

2013 will be an important year for the international community, one in which new administrations will take office in certain key countries – including the US, China, and South Korea – and pursue their own foreign policies. Wrangling over the rise of China in particular is expected to intensify within the international community. As it seeks to secure its development as a maritime nation, China will no doubt pursue assertive and even aggressive policies not just on its territorial issues with Japan but on numerous other political, economic and military matters. The US in making its pivot toward Asia will counter China through economic and military policy. The US can also be expected to request TPP participation and greater security cooperation from Japan.

Whether the Japanese government will be able in 2013 to respond flexibly to such developments in the international community is an important concern. Japan's presence in the international community can likely be restored if an effectively functioning coalition government can actively address domestic and foreign policy issues. On the other hand, if a new administration is swayed by domestic politics because of an unstable base, it will not have much leeway to devote effort to foreign affairs. In this sense, the December general elections are of significance for both Japan and for the peace and stability of Northeast Asia. 

Prof. Katsuyuki Yakushiji teaches at Toyo University. He is also an adjunct fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.