

Japan's Tumultuous Political Environment

On September 20, 2010, Gerald L. Curtis, Burgess Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, gave his sixth annual lecture on Japanese politics titled "Political Turmoil in Tokyo" as part of CJEB's Distinguished Lecture Series. Curtis acknowledged that when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) first took power last year, he was hopeful, though not quite optimistic, given then-Prime Minister Hatoyama's reform agenda to "change the way politics was played in Japan." Unfortunately, the following months illustrated the "impressive manner in which the DPJ turned opportunity into disaster," ending with Hatoyama's dramatic exit after nine months in office. Curtis focused his discussion not on predicting the length of newly-elected Prime Minister Kan's term, but on what accounted for the political turmoil and the DPJ's failure to respond to the Japanese public's expectations. Curtis concluded his lecture with his observations on the future of Japan's political climate.

Curtis first emphasized that the DPJ's victory in August 2009 is best seen as the consequence of the former ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP's) collapse. The Japanese public was dissatisfied with the LDP and wanted to end the dominance of old-style political bosses who were out of tune with the values and policy preferences of the people. So while the DPJ has lost a lot of public support in the past year, support has not shifted back to the LDP. The LDP has failed to create a coherent program, and key players within the party have left to form separate small parties. Voters were skeptical about the DPJ when it first came to power and remain so. They want to believe that it will do well but they question many of its manifesto promises, including its child support program and highway fee elimination policy.

There are two main factors that Curtis believes explain the DPJ's failure to respond to the public's expectations. One was the administration's inexperience and its inadequate preparations for taking over the government. The other was the inept performance of Prime Minister Hatoyama and his readiness to allow the party's secretary general Ichiro Ozawa to exercise inordinate power.

Only two members of Hatoyama's administration (Fujii and Kan) had previous experience as cabinet ministers. Unlike in the United States, there was no transition team, and the government bureaucracy did not brief Hatoyama in depth before he came to power. The DPJ found it difficult to mobilize the bureaucracy's expertise behind its policy agenda. Too many senior DPJ politicians believed that "political leadership" meant excluding bureaucrats from decision-making processes. And too many bureaucrats bad-mouthed and tried to sabotage the DPJ's efforts. Curtis was not surprised by such behavior considering the LDP's historical dominance and influence within the bureaucracy.

However, conflicts with the bureaucracy would not have been so extreme if Hatoyama had provided stronger leadership. Hatoyama's public statements were inconsistent and abstract, raising concerns from international leaders as to what his true intentions were – particularly his statements regarding the “East Asian Community” and a more “equal” relationship with the United States, which seemed to mean simply that Japan should be more ready to say “no” to the latter. The underlying problem, Curtis argued, was that Hatoyama allowed himself to be pushed and led around by other politicians including Shizuka Kamei, the leader of a tiny party that was in the DPJ-led coalition, in addition to Ozawa. Ozawa himself grew increasingly displeased with the way the government was conducting its business and increasingly used his power to influence government decisions. As he did so, the public came to believe that Ozawa, who epitomized old style “money politics” and factional politics, was the real power in the DPJ. By the summer of 2010, the DPJ had lost a significant amount of public support, as reflected in their loss of seats during the Upper House elections in July.

At present, Curtis explained, the Diet is gridlocked; legislation cannot pass without opposition approval. Opposition parties do not want to cooperate with the DPJ and thus help it convince the public that it can provide effective government. In this respect, Kan faces much the same kind of problem faced by U.S. President Obama. But the opposition parties in Japan also face the same dilemma faced by the Republican Party in the United States. If they simply oppose everything the ruling party puts forward, they run the danger of appearing obstructionist and simply playing politics rather than dealing with the nation's problems.

Kan demonstrated impressive political skill in the way he waged his campaign for party president against Ozawa and in his subsequent cabinet appointments. The public liked this surprisingly tough streak in their prime minister, and his support went up dramatically. Additionally, Curtis argued that Kan's election and reshuffle has not been fully appreciated for bringing in a new wave of younger members who will “emerge as significant and interesting political leaders.” Kan also appears to be a more pragmatic politician than Hatoyama, speaking cautiously about foreign policy and not romanticizing Sino-Japanese relations. Due to these recent developments, Curtis believes that there are reasons to be hopeful about Japan's long term political future.

However, Kan will need to handle highly complex domestic and international issues including the Futenma relocation debate, fiscal stimulus exit strategies, the escalating tension in Sino-Japanese relations, and the continued lack of expertise within the DPJ. While Kan's popularity rating sits in the 65-70% range, that seems to be mainly the consequence of the party preferring the DPJ to the LDP and its anti-Ozawa sentiment. Very few voters appear to believe

that Kan has strong leadership ability. So unless he demonstrates this ability, his support will decline as quickly as it has gone up. Kan and his cabinet also have to build a new policy-making system; this will take time, and in the meantime they have to run the government. Moreover, all of this is taking place in a very difficult political environment where the government faces profound problems both in domestic and foreign policy.

Curtis predicted that Kan would try to avoid holding a lower house election for at least a couple of years and preferably until the upper house election in the summer of 2013. In the meantime there will be gridlock. Cooperation between opposition parties and the DPJ appears unlikely, but so too does a split in the DPJ, at least in the short term. Accordingly, Curtis does not anticipate substantial policy being made. His view is that Kan has to worry more about Ozawa than about the LDP or other opposition parties. Ozawa no longer has any chance to be prime minister, but if Kan makes a misstep, Ozawa will put forward someone who he essentially controls to challenge Kan.

In conclusion, Curtis noted that Japan's politics is going through a process of creative destruction, so we should expect at some point to see further party splits and reorganization. Political turmoil will continue, needed policies will not be adopted, and public dissatisfaction with politics will continue. But in a few years, younger politicians who are today getting experience at running government will be at the helm, and a new, hopefully more vibrant and responsive political system will emerge.

This event was moderated by Hugh Patrick, R.D. Calkins Professor of International Business Emeritus and director of the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB) at Columbia Business School, and jointly presented by CJEB and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute.