

Japan: Power to the Party

Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama recently became the first modern Japanese government chief to mention the Meiji Revolution of 1868, which restored imperial power and helped lay the groundwork for modern Japan. • That was a bloodless overhaul that helped introduced the country to the party system. • Now Hatoyama's "revolutionary" Democratic Party of Japan faces its first test with partial elections in 2010.

by Stefano Carrer



For two decades, "The Enigma of Japanese Power," a famous political textbook by Dutch writer Karel van Volferen, lay on the desks of foreign diplomats in Tokyo. Released in 1989, van Volferen's tome acted as something of a roadmap through the murky terrain of Japanese politics. But now, and perhaps for the first time, there's a hint of change afoot, a sense that the conundrum of Japanese power - in which formal and substantive responsibilities don't correspond and apparently consensual decision-making masks vested interests - may actually be opening itself up to closer critical scrutiny.

Last August's Lower House elections promoted a party and a ruling class that promised not only to change the country's economic development model also the way it was governed, a revolutionary pledge. As a result of the deepening global economic crisis, Japanese voters ended more than half-a-century of virtually unchallenged Liberal Democratic Party (Jiminto) rule and put Japan in the hands of Yukio Hatoyama's Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto), or DPJ.

Hatoyama's party was born a decade ago as an outlet for disaffected former Liberal Democrats and Socialists. As party president, Hatoyama was automatically named prime minister. In his first formal speech to the Diet in late October, Hatoyama mentioned the "Heisei Restoration" (Heisei referring to imperial rule) and referred also to the 1868 Meiji revolution that ushered in the restoration of imperial power Japan, a transformational moment in the country's modern progress. He mentioned the rev-

Yukio Hatoyama, the head of the Democratic Party of Japan, following his Aug. 31 election victory. His party displaced the Liberal Democrats after more than five decades.

olution, he said, because it had been bloodless. It put an end to the ruling stasis of those times and introduced a healthy alternation of power between different factions.

The evolution of events in Japan now can't be seen as entirely surprising. Major change in Japan is not the product of a grassroots process. It usually comes from above. While the 19th century generated a civil war, 2009 saw an electoral duel between two prominent grandsons, Hatoyama, and Taro Aso, both members of dynastic political families that over the years have supplied Japanese ministers and government leaders. In the 1950s, Hatoyama's grandfather Ichiro ousted Shigeru Yoshida, who was Aso's grandfather.

There's more.

In a country generally allergic to political leaps of faith, political change isn't produced by figures fresh from anti-establishment barricades. Quite the contrary, the political leaps are usually set in motion by established, veteran figures whose roots are deep enough to reassure large groups of voters of their good intentions. The Liberal Democratic Party was born in 1955 as the result of a fusion of political factions loyal to Hatoyama and Yoshida. The slogan of Hatoyama's Democratic Party became "regime change," which came with an Obama-like "Yes We Can" accent, and was backed up by Hatoyama's family coat-tails.

The unprecedented switch from a conservative government to one with a centrist core (though open to the



left) is these days explained overseas in terms of the economic and foreign policy options offered by the winners. In economics, the Democratic Party takes a dramatically different approach from that of the Liberal Democrats, who were intrinsically tied to industrial interests, both politically and institutionally. The incumbent party looks, and is, less “business friendly”; it puts direct support for families and consumers ahead of preferential treatment for larger firms and vested interests. In foreign policy, it seeks a more direct role by Japan in decision-making, including a more “balanced” with Washington.

It’s an innovative perspective when weighed against decades of supine acquiescence to American wishes. It also evidences an old ambivalence between two siren’s songs, the one promoted by more Western thinking or the one that exists in the tradition of Japan’s Asian context. At the same time, the new direction has an element of the problematic. In a country whose population is shrinking it’s hard to imagine domestic demand taking the place of exports. At the same time, promoting a more independent and Asian-oriented foreign policy risks irritating Washington without necessarily being appreciated (outside formal nods) by neighboring countries.

But philosophical aspect of change, and not just its political façade, is another key ingredient understanding the election results. They represented an explicit commitment to wrest control of the executive from the dead hand of the bureaucracy and make the strategic and operational aspects of policy a responsibility of government. That goal may be even more difficult than finding a business model that differs from traditional export-oriented model or aspiring to an equal footing with the United States, a crucial but often cumbersome ally.

After his inauguration, Hatoyama returned often to the theme of “regime change,” emphasizing that he intended to create a new system in which executive action was guided by public interest, implying a fundamental change in the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. It’s ironic that the ingredient considered by many as decisive to Japan’s postwar economic boom - a motivated bureaucracy with a potentially exaggerated sense of patriotism - may have ended up putting the brakes in the system itself, preventing the emergence of central political accountability and helping endorse projects that

dragged down public resources. The so-called “pension scandal” (in which millions of people, including members of the government, failed to pay their premiums) alienated the public from an increasingly self-involved, privileged ruling class, which not only set state expenditures and but also vigorously defended its own privileges, including post-retirement sinecures, which were mostly well-paid positions in the private sector.

This factor leads to superficial comparisons with Italy of 1992-93. In Italy, the total collapse of the ruling Christian Democratic Party, which had ruled throughout the postwar period, not only induced economic woes but also unsettled the traditional mediating mechanisms between the political and administrative side of the country and its social and productive side - all of it in the context of rampant and unsustainable waste.

These similarities may well continue - Japanese government continuity did stop the country from having



four prime ministers in as many years - but shouldn’t be exaggerated. After all, the very mechanism that permitted Japanese bureaucrats to earn more after retirement effectively reined in temptations toward corruption. Japan’s problem, if anything, is characterized by subtle systemic corruption, which the Democratic Party now seeks to extinguish by making the national budget into a matter of political choice, by emphasizing transparency, and by clearly delineating the government’s strategic priorities.

These effort began with the introduction of measures aimed at strengthening political clout of ministries, abolishing such groups as the Administrative council of Deputy Ministers (the senior-most position for career bureaucrats), the creation of new government strategy committees and internal checks and balances, and the immediate discontinuing of all financial directives order by outgoing Prime Minister Taro Aso’s Liberal Democratic government.

Many key aspects of these tasks have been entrusted to Deputy Prime Minister Naoto Kan, the politician considered best suited to lead the new National Strategy Office. In 1996, while briefly heading the country’s health

AT LEFT Hatoyama and his wife with U.S. President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama at the opening of the 2009 Pittsburgh Summit.

BELOW Italian President Giorgio Napolitano meeting with Hatoyama while on an official state visit to Japan in September.



ministry, he went public about a cover-up involving tainted blood within his own ministry, knowing no bureaucrats would dare challenge him.

Other former leaders of DPJ also received key appointment, including Katsuya Okada (foreign affairs) and Seiji Maehara (transport). The most publicly controversial party official, Ichiro Ozawa, a number of the PDJ until last spring when he was forced to pull back as result of a scandal involving illegal funding, was left out of the executive branch and instead assigned to manage the party machinery with the goal of winning Upper House elections next year. Fears that the increasingly powerful Ozawa still exerts exaggerated political influence based on the number of new legislators who owe their careers to his support seem contained for now. Hatoyama is emerging as a primus inter pares in a strong ministerial group of ministers strong with a limited number of key figures, among them former Finance Minister Hirohisa Fujii, cabinet chief Hirofumi Hirano and administrative reform leader Sengoku Yoshito.

Overhaul has been entrusted to a few key government leaders and a parliamentary majority made up of a large number of newcomers with little legislative experience. The difficulties they face are enormous at all levels. Van Volferen fears the creation of an unhealthy holy alliance between bureaucrats resistant to change and the media, which he considers adept in generating scandals and muddying the political waters at will. He insists the media has genuine sabotaging power. Hatoyama has already been weakened by allegations over potentially unfair fundraising techniques, an issue that hangs over him like a Damocles Sword. The litmus test of the economy will also provide difficult to turn in his favor. Japanese government debt is the highest among developed countries. Many foreign observers observing the evolution of the current situation see it as a retreat from the period of genuine, old-fashioned liberal reform undertaken under former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. This seems to have fallen out of favor, witness the government about-face on the privatization of the country’s vast postal system, Japan Post. Some still fear incursions from the extreme right, which at least can no longer collude with Liberal Democrats, which was another breaking measure hindering reform. Skeptics ridicule the notion of Yuai (or “Brotherhood”), which Hatoyama has placed at

the center of his political vision. In policy terms, it means above all paying attention to protecting the weaker facets of society, while in foreign policy to promoting the idea of an East Asian Economic Community based on the European model as a more decisive leadership matter of global environmental protection. It was Hatoyama's famous grandfather who first rendered into Japanese the concept of brotherhood laid down by European federalist father Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi by inventing a cluster of ideograms to suit the idea. More European-leaning segments of Tokyo seem more at ease with an executive that has closer cultural ties to Europe, in particularly applauding the appointment of Keiko Chibo as justice minister. She's a human rights activist who personally opposes the death penalty.

But this sense of affinity doesn't necessarily translate into broader business opportunities, particularly "peaceful" Europe principle ambition, relating business to diplomacy, is to sell the Japanese on the Eurofighter as centerpiece of its refurbished air force. Predictably, Wash-

ington wants Tokyo to choose "Made in the U.S.A." and has been frustrated by Hatoyama's early tendencies. From the American standpoint Tokyo's bid for greater autonomy makes no sense without linkage to a greater willingness to assume broader international responsibilities and take on its own national defense.

The Hatoyama government has suspended Indian Ocean refueling operations for Allied support vessels connected to the war effort in Afghanistan. Tokyo says it wants to support only civilian-oriented projects. Even the redeployment of American troops in Okinawa has been stalled, though Washington protected itself on that front by signing a foreign ministry-level deal approving a more controversial plan (decided on long ago) that calls for a new runway on Okinawa to replace the cur-

Hatoyama's triumph saw the Liberal Democrats displaced for the first time in 54 years.

At the same time, both the Democratic Party and the Liberal Democrats share deep establishment roots.

rent Marine base at Futenma. Efforts to rope U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton into going to Tokyo to sign the deal haven't worked because Hatoyama has said he wants full approval to be contingent on compensating the islanders, who feel cheated by the American plan. They feel that if 8,000 U.S. Marines are forced to move to Guam mostly at Japanese expense, they shouldn't have to stand aside while a new runway is built on a scenic part of the island.

Given the Okinawa unease, nothing would infuriate Washington more than the Japanese choosing the Eurofighter over the U.S. entry. It's clear that Tokyo's new European affections will always be hindered by Japan's economic and strategic priorities as a result of its location between Asia and the United States.

In the midst of all this, Japan's fondness for Italian cul-

The triumph saw the new prime minister pin a flower on winning election results alongside party General Secretary Katsuya Okada.

ture came shining through when Emperor Akihito accepted a September invitation from visiting Italian President Giorgio Napolitano to attend a performance by Milan's La Scala opera troupe, which was visiting Tokyo. Never before had Japanese emperor attended so symbolic representation of Western culture. Akihito arrived together with Napolitano for the third and fourth acts, with the curtain opening on Don Carlo's famous monologue about the nearly unbearable weight of the crown.

In a curious irony, the real burden of political power is on the shoulders of Hatoyama, and not the emperor. It wasn't that long ago, in 2005, in fact, that Koizumi's Liberal Democrats won the most resounding victory in the party's history. Four years later it absorbed its worst defeat. Hatoyama has already said he'll assume personal responsibility should he lose his popular consensus over the next four years. He already faces a crucial test in 2010, with Upper House elections looming, elections which in 2007 spelled the beginning of the end for the Liberal Democrats.

