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Essay:

“Although the 1955 system is dead, the LDP is back in power. We can expect that they will remain in charge for many years to come.” Agree or disagree with this statement.

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party persists as the democracy's most alarming governmental pillar. Since its formation in 1955, the LDP has unitarily dominated Japan's politics without much substantial competition. The party's single major lapse of power occurred in 2009, in which a series of scandals and gradual changes in Japan's political scene elevated the Democratic Party of Japan to power, albeit only until 2012 when Shinzō Abe became Prime Minister and the LDP resumed control. The LDP's return is not unexpected, considering the party's long-lasting role as the face of Japan's government and political ideologies, but with recent underlying political and representational changes in Japan it is pertinent to question if the LDP will retain power or if we will finally see a fundamental shift in how Japan's leaders and politics function. Although the LDP's fall in 2009 is cohesive with changes in how Japanese individuals vote for and view Prime Ministers, the party will probably maintain dominance due to its demonstrative ability to adapt and reassert credibility despite worrying central structure.

To interpret the LDP's future, we must first look at how the party initially dominated politics and later wavered. The LDP was a cornerstone of Japan's 1955 system and the party

greatly suffered when the pillars upholding this system fell apart. The pillars of the 1955 system, all of which focused on national unity under a catch-up perspective,¹ supported the LDP's position as the solitary face of Japan's policies. Under unified leadership, Japan successfully modernized remarkably quickly and efficiently in the economic and construction sectors.² Although the LDP earned its reputation as a credible and effective political superpower, the party always suffered in popularity. Steven Reed writes, "Between its founding and its [sic] first loss of power in 1993, the LDP had only two unambiguous general election victories..." (14). Thus, the LDP relied on questionable tactics to maintain supremacy, which fed into corruption and a loss of credibility that legislators later accredited to the party's downfall in 2009.³ The LDP was able to persevere regardless of its unpopularity because the 1955 system established the party as synonymous with the government. In such a system, "it is better to be in government than in opposition" (Reed 17). Ultimately, the LDP's ambivalence towards its faulty internal structure and rampant corruption led to the party's downfall.

The 1955 system technically fell in 1994 when Japan had a Socialist Prime Minister, but political scientists attribute the fall of the LDP due to the Democratic Party of Japan's surprise success in 2009. In 1994, Socialist leader Tomiichi Murayama won the election because of multi-member districts with single non-transferable votes, wherein several parties cooperated to specifically work against the LDP.⁴ Immediately following this election, the electoral system was reformed into many single-member districts, which mostly bolstered the LDP as the dominant party.⁵ Meanwhile, the DPJ's rise to power represents a more substantial threat against the LDP, since the event exhibits a concrete alternation of power (Krauss and Pekkanen 14). Prior to the DPJ's rise, smaller parties campaigned to raise issues without any hope of winning.⁶ Now, the

opposition successfully entered the government for more than one fluke election, and as such scholars cannot take the LDP's return to power for granted.

With the LDP back in power, what is different? Most notable is the party's demonstration of successfully maintaining a strong political figure as leader. Japanese Prime Ministers often serve terms as short as one year, but with the rising focus on Japanese leaders as social characters, parties can no longer brush away a political leader in order to appease the public on contentious performances.⁷ A poor performance now implicates the leader as well as the party,⁸ and although the LDP found a uniquely popular leader with Junichiro Koizumi, the party again fell into instability with its next several leaders.⁹ With the LDP's return in 2012, Shinzō Abe has now served a full four years not including his previous one-year term. The LDP's focus on supporting a likeable¹⁰ political figure is derivative of a raise in media awareness of the Prime Minister,¹¹ which itself is derivative of landmark technological advancements in the last few decades. Abe's long-term office position may also play into the LDP's tactic of reconciling after a period of turmoil, but this will only become apparent once future leaders assume office. Regardless, with the advent of the internet and new digital media outlets, the LDP needed a credible public leader, which the DPJ failed to do with its turbulent three leaders.

Although the LDP currently has a reputable Prime Minister, what other challenges does the party face? First, Abe's candidacy is not necessarily indicative that the next leaders will serve capably, especially when looking at the LDP's fall to the DPJ after Koizumi resigned. Furthermore, the move to an effective leader poses internal difficulties that the LDP must reconcile with, as the party is associated with the actions of an individual rather than a set of political ideologies.¹² Japan's central bureaucracy, while much weaker than during the 1955 system, also poses a blockade since bureaucrats draft most policies that then make their way up

to the Diet.¹³ This disrupts potential party plans to again change the system and prevent opposition parties from regaining office. At the forefront of the LDP's issues is that citizens are currently equipped to vote consciously. Shiro Asano demonstrated this change when Japanese citizens elected him as Governor particularly because his campaign explicitly attacked political parties and he ran without the support of any major political parties (Repeta 3). It is currently the LDP's task to build a party image and maintain it, and judging by the LDP's reputation of overcoming unpopularity through clever political manipulation,¹⁴ the party can most likely adapt to the newer transparent system or change the system to better suit the party's interests.

The odds lean in favor for the continuation of LDP rule, internationally as well. Nationalistic trends are starting to pervade democratic countries, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. In the US, President Trump's election symbolizes and enacts a dramatic change in immigration policy, while the UK has already voted to secede from the European Union. Meanwhile, Marine Le Pen continues to rise in popularity, which may culminate during her presidential bid for France in April 2017. The LDP has the unique opportunity to capitalize on global trends, where the party can either join the extremist nationalistic perspective or exploit the chance to grow into the world's eminent democracy where other democracies have faltered. Even though remnants of Japan's strict and nationalistic pre-1955 government persist,¹⁵ the LDP would more likely stay complacent rather than experience a nationalist sea change.¹⁶ Moreover, if politicians capitalize on liberal trends there is nothing that affirms the LDP as the leading party. In any case, we have yet to see if Abe's consistent leadership is an outlier or a tool of mollification, and while the LDP's history likely sets a precedent for its future, the next few years will be very revealing as to what shape Japan's government will take.

Notes

¹ The four pillars included the “catch-up-with-the-West” perspective, collaboration between interest groups and the LDP, strong central bureaucracy, and one-party dominance by the LDP (Curtis 39).

² “Construction is by far the largest industry in Japan. The absurd growth of the industry, symbolized by bridges to sparsely populated islands, bullet train lines running in to the mountains and dams all over the country, is not an accident, but a matter of policy” (Repeta 2).

³ The LDP’s reliance on *kôenkai* especially represents the party’s integral corruption (Krauss and Pekkanen 7). Additionally: party loyalty fell starkly after individuals revealed *shokuryohi* corruption (Repeta 3).

⁴ Krauss and Pekkanen, 6.

⁵ Although the LDP remained the most popular party, the DPJ became a closer contender for bipolar competition (Reed 20).

⁶ “...opposition parties tended to hold firm policy positions, especially on issues of national security, which they would not compromise merely to win an election” (Reed 19).

⁷ “The foundations of LDP dominance were laid in 1960 and the strategy of changing leaders whenever the party faced electoral defeat became part of the LDP’s standard operating procedure thereafter” (Reed 21).

⁸ “But for the first time in their lives voters were directly faced with the need to consider which party (not which candidate) to vote for” (Krauss and Nyblade 360). Additionally: “Both the decreased vote share of the LDP and the increasing percentage of the public that did not support a political party served to make the public image of the prime minister more crucial” (361).

⁹ Shinzō Abe, Yasuo Fukuda, and Tarō Asō each served for only one year after Koizumi resigned.

¹⁰ In regard to media persona, Abe appeared at the 2016 Rio Olympics dressed as Nintendo’s Super Mario, marking a unique moment of character and humility for a Japanese leader.

¹¹ “This enhanced coverage of the prime minister during electoral campaigns has gone hand-in-hand with the increased role the prime minister has played in these campaigns” (Krauss and Nyblade 363).

¹² This issue is the same that caused the downfall of the DPJ, since the elections increasingly focused on “valence,” especially with rural swing voters (Lipsy and Scheiner 311).

¹³ Chalmers, 123.

¹⁴ “...the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) effectively revised the laws that regulated local governments and manipulated the budgetary allocation to help the party stay in power” (Saito and Yamada 103).

¹⁵ This is most easily seen in Japan's judicial system, which can be regarded as nearing authoritarian due to its incredibly high conviction rate and inhumane practices. For more information, please see Ramsayer's and Steinhoff's respective articles.

¹⁶ "...it is better to do nothing than to do something that might split the [LDP]" (Reed 16).