The Politics of Party: The Liberal Democrats and their Rivals

J. A. A. Stockwin

1 The Party System

The formation of the Liberal Democratic Party in 1955 was a political achievement whose significance can hardly be exaggerated. It led to more than three and a half decades of single-party dominance, covering a period in which Japan moved from relative poverty to becoming the second largest economy in the world—a position that it still holds. Japan then entered a period of economic difficulty and political instability, during which time the dominance of the LDP was seriously threatened. Had it remained out of power for a substantially longer period than its nine months’ exile from office in 1993–4, it is quite doubtful that it could have survived as a viable organization. Nevertheless, it was gradually able to reassert its dominance, though from this date it needed the assistance of smaller parties in coalition arrangements.

Koizumi promised to ‘smash’ the LDP from within, but he ended up consolidating its rule by changing the system in which it operated. It remains to be seen how far the changes he made to the LDP itself will survive. His bold action in expelling the postal privatization rebels in August—September 2005 brought him a spectacular victory in the September elections. Much new blood (the so-called ‘Koizumi’s children’) entered the party, giving it a new sense of purpose. His successor, Abe Shinzō, however, readmitted many of the rebels to party membership, throwing some doubt on the party’s capacity to maintain its direction and momentum.

In retrospect, we can see that the party system since the 1950s has been more fluid than is often believed. Some observers and participants long assumed that the LDP had a divine right to rule, or at least that an indefinite extension of LDP rule into the future could be taken for granted. It was therefore a shock to the party to find that, having been ousted from power in August 1993, senior civil servants lost no time in pragmatically disconnecting from the LDP and linking up with the newly formed Hosokawa coalition government. Something
that is perfectly normal in British-type political systems when there is a change in government had been outside the Japanese experience for longer than most politicians could remember.

The history of party politics since the 1950s shows that there have been fluctuations in the degree of LDP dominance. Various factors have contributed to this. One is the extent to which the party has been able to reinvent itself, both in the sense of responding creatively to the emergence of new issues and also in the sense of cultivating sections of the electorate that were not necessarily supporting the LDP previously. In the early 1960s Ikeda presented the electorate with a new formula—that of economic growth—and defused much of the tension that had blighted politics under his predecessor, Kishi. A decade later Tanaka saw that LDP support was slipping dangerously, and set out on new paths in environmental and welfare policies, as well as mending fences with China. LDP leaders in the early 1980s energetically tackled problems of government overspending. When, in the 1990s, the necessary leadership to solve the banking crisis was slow to appear, the LDP reaped the whirlwind in terms of loss of electoral support.

A second factor is the relationship between strength of control by the dominant party and strength of control within the dominant party. This of course relates to the ways in which factions interacted with each other inside the LDP. Speaking very broadly, the 1950s were a period of disputed factional control, whereas in the 1960s the faction led by Satō during his long tenure of office was dominant. The 1970s saw a return to bitter factional contestation, to the detriment of the party’s fortunes, whereas during the 1980s the Tanaka faction asserted its ability to control the factional system, and the party did well under Nakasone, who had been Tanaka’s nominee (though not of the same faction). In the late 1980s the control exercised by the dominant faction slackened, leading to turmoil, weak party leadership, and a serious party split. The 1990s were spent in attempts to recover LDP fortunes, under a succession of leaders. With the election of Koizumi as party leader and thus Prime Minister in 2001, the LDP once again enjoyed strong and determined leadership and prospered as a result. His successor, Abe, proved incapable of maintaining such momentum.

Third, the reverse side of single-party dominance is opposition party weakness. The role of opposition parties in Japanese politics is often neglected by commentators, but these parties have at times played a vital role in articulating dissent and exerting pressure on government. As with the dominant party, so there have been major fluctuations in opposition party fortunes. For instance, they were resurgent during the 1970s, and again from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Their greatest weakness was that they were divided into several discrete parties, and found great difficulty in uniting in such a way as to