

Time for a Change? Recent Elections in Japan

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The most important election held in 2001 was that to the House of Councillors. Here, however, I will report on several surprising gubernatorial elections and the shocking LDP party presidential election. Each of these elections sent a similar message from the voters: ‘it is time for a change’. Powerful political machines using tried and true campaign techniques were repeatedly defeated by novices whose primary attraction was that they were not part of the political establishment.

The Nagano gubernatorial election

After Nagano’s first elected governor retired in 1959, he was succeeded by his vice-governor who served for five terms and 20 years. Nagano’s second postwar governor was also succeeded by his vice-governor who also served for five terms and 20 years. With two exceptions, 1971 and 1975, these incumbents and their successors were supported by all of the major political parties (a pattern called *ainori* or ‘everyone on board’). Governors in Japan influence the flow of construction expenditures within their prefectures. In rural areas where local politicians depend upon bringing construction projects to their constituencies, governors can construct inclusive political machines that dominate prefectural and municipal politics. In 2000, when the incumbent governor retired, a powerful political machine had governed Nagano Prefecture for 40 years.

The first candidate to throw his hat into the ring was, unsurprisingly, vice-governor Ikeda. Yet another noncompetitive *ainori* race was building up when Tanaka Yasuo, a well-known author, decided to enter the race. Tanaka was supported by the prefectural *Rengou* (the largest federation of labour unions), but refused formal support from any political party. He ran as an outsider, appealing to anyone frustrated with the *status quo*. Among the frustrated were some members of the local business establishment. Nevertheless, any calculation of relative strength would have had to predict an easy Ikeda victory. Tanaka could not even keep his union support

unified as the local government employees' union endorsed Ikeda. The Democratic Party declared its neutrality. Though the national party headquarters was interested in supporting Tanaka, the local party did not want to risk being on the losing side and becoming an opposition party. The most powerful Democratic politician in Nagano, Hata Tsutomu, declared his neutrality but his organization supported Ikeda.

As the election approached, a poll by the *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun* (30 September 2000) found that 49 per cent of voters wanted some change in prefectural politics and 40 per cent more wanted major changes. The political establishment grew nervous and resorted to dirty tricks. The local government employees' union distributed a report that Tanaka planned to cut the salaries of civil servants across the board. They were forced to retract their statement before the election but prefectural bureaucrats illegally mobilized to defeat the challenger. Several faced criminal prosecution after the election.

Tanaka won a surprisingly comfortable victory, finishing over 100,000 votes ahead of Ikeda. As governor, he has attracted media criticism for his 'dictatorial' methods, but his popular support remained high. His success also spawned several successful imitators. Each candidate was encouraged by the previous successes to run, but the candidates had little more in common than being outsiders running against the establishment. In Tochigi an upstart mayor upset an incumbent running for his fifth term. In Chiba a female member of the upper house supported only by an *ad hoc* citizens' group defeated two candidates, each supported by one of the two major political parties. A similar attempt in Shizuoka, held after Koizumi became prime minister, however, failed. Prime Minister Koizumi's popularity may have put an end to this phenomenon.

The LDP Party Presidential Election

Prime Minister Mori never enjoyed much popular support and he squandered what he had in a series of misstatements and policy errors. When his support fell below 10 per cent, the LDP knew they could not win the House of Councillors election with Mori at the helm. The process by which Mori had been chosen had been heavily criticized because it was done behind closed doors so the party had to use a more open process this time. The party leadership wanted a vote of Diet members plus prefectural representatives, while the young reformers wanted an open primary involving all party members. The leadership compromised but refused to hold an open primary. Nevertheless, all but two prefectures responded to public pressure and held open primaries to determine how their representatives should vote.

Four candidates entered the race but only two had any chance of winning. The favourite was former Prime Minister Hashimoto, who possessed all of the traditional keys to victory. He was not only leader of the largest faction but also had sufficient support from other factions to guarantee a first ballot victory among Diet members.

About two-thirds of LDP party members joined the party through an affiliation with some interest group, and the Hashimoto faction had by far the best connections to those interest groups. The primary challenger was Koizumi Junichirou, who ran as an outsider promising to reform the party. Koizumi essentially ran against the LDP for the LDP presidency. The result was a stunning landslide for the challenger.

Koizumi won 58 per cent of the party members' vote to only 30 per cent for Hashimoto. Koizumi finished first in all but six of the 47 prefectures. The vote of Diet members became a mere formality. Popularity among party members had overwhelmed both the factions and the organizational vote. LDP party members failed to vote according to the endorsement of their organizations and factions. Instead, they demanded change and got it.

Koizumi belongs to along line of LDP party reformers. In 1976 Kouno Youhei, fed up with the way the LDP was being run, led a few defectors into the New Liberal Club. In 1993 Hata Tsutomu, Ozawa Ichirou, and Takemura Masayoshi led two more groups out of the LDP. In 2000 Katou Kouichi led a different group to the brink of defection when he threatened to vote in favor of a motion of no confidence. Ten years from now, looking back on the Koizumi cabinet, we may be saying that Koizumi finally succeeded where each of the earlier reformers had failed. On the other hand, we may be saying that Koizumi was just another name on a long list of failed reformers.