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The LDP at 50: The Rise, Power Resources, and Perspectives of Japan's Dominant Party

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**The LDP at 50:
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of Japan's Dominant Party**

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Abstract

Japan's ruling party is a prime example of a dominant party. While dominant parties in other democracies around the world have lost their grip on power or have even disappeared altogether, the LDP is still going strong. What explains the success of the party? How did the LDP acquire its dominant position and how did it manage to cling to it? In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper discusses the rise, the power (re-)sources and the perspectives of Japan's dominant party.

Key words: Liberal Democratic Party, Japan, dominant party, party competition, electoral system

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Zusammenfassung

50 Jahre LDP: Aufstieg, Machtressourcen und Perspektiven der dominanten Partei Japans

Die japanische LDP kann als Paradigmenfall einer dominanten Partei gelten. Während dominante Parteien in anderen Demokratien nicht länger an der Macht sind oder sich sogar aufgelöst haben, sitzen die japanischen Liberaldemokraten weiterhin an den politischen Schalthebeln. Wie kann der Erfolg der LDP erklärt werden? Wie erlangte die LDP ihre dominante Stellung und wie schaffte sie es, diese aufrecht zu erhalten? In diesem Papier wird diesen Fragen im Rahmen einer Diskussion der Hintergründe des Aufstiegs, der Erfolgsquellen und der Machterhaltungsstrategien der Liberaldemokratischen Parteien Japans nachgegangen. Abschließend werden die Perspektiven der LDP thematisiert.

Article Outline

1. Introduction
2. Defining and Analysing Dominant Parties
3. Origins and Context of the LDP's Dominance
4. Maintaining a Dominant Position until the Early 1990s
5. Challenged Dominance: The LDP since the Early 1990s
6. Conclusions

1. Introduction

In November 2005 Japan's Liberal Democratic Party will celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding. Apart from a short period in 1993/94, the LDP governed Japan during these 50 years, most of the time on its own. The LDP is thus a prime example of a dominant party, if not *the* dominant party. Dominant parties in other democracies, e.g. the Italian Democrazia Christiana or the Israeli Labour Party, have lost their grip on power or disappeared altogether; but the Japanese Liberal Democrats are still in government. The LDP still is the most popular party in Japan, it dominates parliament and the executive. What explains the success of the LDP? How did the LDP attain its dominant position? And how did it manage to cling to its for such a long time? These questions will be addressed in this paper which will discuss the LDP's rise to power, its power resources and strategies for staying in power.

The following analysis proceeds in four steps. First, the general concept and characteristics of a dominant party are introduced. Here, we will also sketch the analytically relevant dimensions of a party's dominant position – electoral, parliamentary, and executive dominance. In a second step, we will highlight the origins and context of the LDP's rise to power, taking into account both domestic and international variables but also the strategies of the party itself. In a third step, we will discuss how the LDP managed to keep its dominant position. The discussion will centre on the links between the LDP and voters, the role of Japan's national electoral system, and the LDP's management of public policies. In a fourth step, new challenges the party has had to face since the 1990s are addressed. A brief section on the perspectives of the LDP concludes the paper.

2. Defining and Analysing Dominant Parties

Why is it worthwhile to spend intellectual energy on dominant parties? We would like to suggest two reasons, one more academic and one more practical one. If we understand, taking a cue from Robert Dahl, political science as the systematic analysis of relationships of power and influence among human beings (Dahl et al. 2004: 377), dominant parties are of particular relevance because of the high degree of power and influence they possess. How they use this power and influence is of practical importance to citizens in the countries concerned. Negative consequences for democracy due to the dominant position of a party cannot be ruled out.¹ Before we will focus on the LDP, we will first delineate the topic of dominant parties in a conceptual and analytical manner.

What exactly is a dominant party? And what role does it play in a party system? For decades political scientists including Maurice Duverger and Giovanni Sartori have grappled with these questions. More than fifty years ago, Duverger defined a dominant party as follows:

“A party becomes a dominant party when it represents a whole epoch, when its ideas, its methods, its whole style are identical with those of an epoch. A ruling party is one which is believed to be one. Even the enemies of a dominant party, even citizens who do not vote for it, acknowledge its superior status and its influence; they deplore it, but they admit it.” (Duverger 1959 [1951]: 317, translation by the author)

Authors more interested in inter-party competition have tried to come to terms with dominant party systems, following the lead of Sartori (1976: 92-101). Andrew Heywood has stated that a ‘dominant party system is competitive in the sense that a number of parties compete for power in popular elections, but is dominated by a single major party that consequently enjoys prolonged periods in power’. (Heywood 1997: 243-244, cit. by Dunleavy 2005: 4)²

¹ There are so far only few comparative treatments of dominant parties. Following the lead of the volume edited by Pempel (1990) on dominant parties in industrialised countries, another volume edited by Giliomee and Simkins (1999) has focused on the four young or electoral democracies South Africa, Malaysia, Mexico, and Taiwan. The volume edited by Wekkin et al. (1993) restricts itself to descriptions of democratisation processes in former East European and non-European one-party states. The volume edited by Rimanelli (1999) exhibits an even wider geographical scope but remains at a fairly descriptive level. In early 2005 an ECPR Joint Sessions workshop on ‘dominant parties and democracy’ has been devoted to the analysis of the background, the internal life, and consequences of dominant parties in various parts of the world (www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/jointsessions/granada/workshop_list.aspx). Another workshop, organised by the German Overseas Institute, on the impact of dominant parties on democracy and the fate of former dominant-authoritarian parties will take place in spring 2006.

² Limited competition as a defining characteristic of such party systems is also emphasised by Boucek (1998: 103, 104).

With regard to dominant parties *per se*, there is so far no consensus on the yardstick to be applied to contenders for the title of a 'dominant party'. Diverging opinions exist with regard to the necessary length of time in government, the necessary share of seats and votes or the necessity of ideological hegemony of the party in question (Bogaards 2004: 174-176; Dunleavy 2005: 4-5). But even the most comprehensive list of requirements for a dominant party, put together by Brendan O'Leary, is met by the LDP. O'Leary (1994: 4) postulates that a dominant party in democratic systems has to exhibit the following characteristics:

- First, the party must be dominant in number: it must regularly win more seats in parliamentary or congressional elections than its opponents.
- Secondly, the party must enjoy a dominant bargaining position. It must be able to stay in government on a regular basis. It must share power with smaller parties, [...] it is nevertheless the key agent in the political system, with privileged access to the key executive and legislative posts.
- Thirdly, [...] a dominant party must be chronologically pre-eminent. It must govern continuously for a long time, [regardless of whether] three or four general election victories [or one decade or more in power] are the crucial benchmarks of dominance.
- Finally a dominant party must be ideologically dominant: it must be capable of using government to shape public policy so that the nature of the state and the society over which it presides is fundamentally changed.³

We can now turn to the challenges faced by dominant or would-be-dominant parties. In conceptual-analytical terms, we are thus dealing with the various dimensions of dominance. Boucek (1998) distinguishes three concrete dimensions or – from the viewpoint of the parties in question – challenges. First, there is the dimension of electoral dominance which refers to the aspect of vote acquisition. Boucek (1998: 105) notes that “[d]ominant parties achieve electoral dominance by maximizing their electoral support. They aggregate broad segments of the electorate through successful collective appeals (via issues and policies) and preference-accommodating strategies.” In other words, the dimension of electoral dominance is concerned with the question of how dominant parties attract a large number of voters to lay the basis for a hegemonial position in a country's party system (see also Nyblade 2005: 3).

The second dimension focuses on parliamentary dominance. Of interest is here how votes won in parliamentary elections are translated into seats. This is for one a question of the mechanical aspects of electoral systems (i.e. the concrete modes of transforming votes into seats) and the instrumental aspects of electoral systems (the design and re-design of electoral

³ O'Leary's list is based mainly on Pempel (1990a: 3-4) who, however, does not state the necessity of ideological dominance but simply talks of a national political agenda being shaped by interlocking policies.

systems with the aim of ensuring as many seats as possible for the largest party). Of potential importance in this respect is also the dominant party's co-operation with other parties within the framework of electoral alliances. Of sometimes even greater importance can be how the other parties co-ordinate among themselves ahead of elections. Clearly, maintaining a dominant position in parliament is easier when the opposition follows non-cooperative election strategies by not working together in terms of candidacies and voter mobilization (Boucek 1998: 107; Nyblade 2005: 3, 15-16).

Thirdly, there is the dimension of executive dominance. For dominant parties without a parliamentary majority of their own, the question of entering into and maintaining coalitions is of importance in this regard. In most general terms, the positioning of a party in or near the centre of the relevant ideological spectrum makes entering coalitions easier.⁴ Dominant parties can also reap advantages from the formal and informal rules governing which party will be asked first to form a government and which committee posts go to which party. For the dominant parties with a majority of their own, internal co-ordination can become a vital question. Intra-party groups, so-called factions, can play an important role in terms of the management of dominant parties (Boucek 1998: 107-108, see also Nyblade 2005: 2-3, 15).

Addressing the dimensions of dominance one after another, will now turn to the case of the LDP. We will start by discussing how the LDP became the dominant actor in Japan's party system.

3. Origins and Context of the LDP's Dominance

As Giuseppe di Palma (1990) has noted, it is not easy to establish one-party dominance in democratic systems. It takes favourable constellations and environmental conditions. Yet on their own these are not sufficient to explain the establishment of a dominant position within a party system. Every relevant explanation has to take into consideration the strategies of the party in question. We will illustrate this with a view to the LDP.

In simplifying a complicated story somewhat, we can first note that the international environment favoured the dominance of the LDP from the party's founding in 1955, but it did not determine it. Surely, the weakening of the Left, in particular the Communists, within the context of the 'red purge' undertaken by the US occupation authority in 1947/48⁵ provided the now unified conservative political elite with a good starting position. The LDP also benefited from material help provided by both Japan's business community and – as in the case

⁴ On this and other aspects of the coalition potential of political parties see Bartolini (1998).

⁵ On the purges and their background see e.g. Sims (2001: 258-263) and Neary (2002: 49).

of Italy's Democrazia Christiana – the CIA (cf. Johnson 1995). With regard to political issues, the demilitarisation and the loss of the sovereign right to wage war, both forced upon the Japan by the occupation authorities, proved to be quite popular with the citizens of Japan (cf. Katzenstein and Okawara 1993: 109; Katzenstein 1996: 118-120). Under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella, Japan could concentrate her resources on economic revival. Against this background the demand of the Socialists for a neutralization of the country did not receive widespread support, thus relieving the opposition of a powerful lever in elections (cf. Otake 1990). Nevertheless, as in other cases of the rise of dominant parties (see Di Palma 1990), the dominance of the Conservatives cannot be fully explained by reference to the international constellation in general and the role of the Americans in particular.

A favourable domestic factor seems to be of greater importance in this context: The LDP was able to rely on an organized support base in the form of farmers and small shop owners. Such social linkages endowed the Liberal Democrats with important 'vote banks'. In the course of time, the LDP expanded this original support base by adding other social groups. As a consequence, the LDP evolved – on paper at least – into the conservative party which could boast most members in an industrialized country.⁶ The organized support base of the LDP stood in contrast to Japan's fragmented labour movement which did not make the task to assume power any easier for the Left (Pempel 1990a: 27, 29). Finally, it should not be overlooked that the economic rise of Japan, starting in the 1950s, proved favourable to the establishment of a dominant position of the Liberal Democrats. Though opposition parties were able to expand their presence in parliament in spite of the country's economic achievements, Japan's economic rise gave the LDP the resources which it needed to satisfy sectional interests and important voter groups (see below).

Explanations of a party's dominance are not sufficient without taking into account the respective strategies of the relevant parties. Here it should at least be mentioned that in terms of inter-party competition, the LDP chose in the beginning to take a tough line against the Left.⁷ In the second half of the 1950s, the leaders of the LDP, prime ministers Yoshida Shigeru and Kishi Nobosuke, tried to delegitimise the leftist opposition (Pempel 1990b: 346-347). They thus followed a pattern also observable in other cases where dominant parties assumed power. The leaders of the LDP brandished the leftist alternative to them as an un-

⁶ In 1991, at the height of the rise of its membership, the LDP had according to its own figures nearly 5.5 million members. Back then the organisational density of the LDP (i.e. party members as a share of the electorate) was nearly six times as high as that of the German CDU. For details see Köllner (2005c: chapter 3) where also the LDP's official membership numbers are discussed.

⁷ This did however not hinder the LDP from cultivating co-operative informal relationships with the opposition parties in the decades to come (cf. Christensen 2000: 125-128). For a good overview of conflict and co-operation between parties in the Japanese parliament see Richardson (1997: chapter 6).

democratic force intent on doing away with the constitutional order. Certainly, the rejectionist attitude of the Socialists and Communists *vis-à-vis* a number of institutions enshrined in the constitution – the self-defence forces, a market economy, the emperor, to name just a few – offered sufficient grounds for friction. In the context of the Cold War, polarization thus formed an important strategy of the LDP in terms of inter-party competition.

4. Maintaining a Dominant Position until the Early 1990s

It is one thing to establish a dominant position in a party system, another to keep this position for an extended period. How do dominant parties defy for such a long time “the inevitable rhythmic swing of the pendulum of the voter” (Nyblade 2005: 22)? Patrick Dunleavy (2005: 12) has argued that dominant parties are simply more effective than other parties. And as Nyblade (2005: 20) adds dominant parties are more successful than other parties in terms of ‘surviving’ in government. Greater effectiveness and success can have a number of sources. As suggested by Dunleavy (2005: 13), first there is better access to financial flows – a governing party which everybody expects to remain in power in the medium to long run can reasonably expect a higher willingness on the part of business and other organized interests to donate to its coffers. In addition, dominant parties have the advantage of receiving more media coverage than other parties.⁸

A structural advantage most dominant parties enjoy lies in their support by important interest groups or organizations. In some cases links to predominant ethnic or linguistic groups within society may exist. Particular historical achievements, e.g. in the process of democratic transition, gaining independence or the establishment of an encompassing social security system, can endow parties with a strong momentum, or in other words: long-term support by a broad spectrum of voters. Besides, dominant parties can hold coalition advantages due to their central position in political competition. Finally, the electoral system can favour the biggest party or can at least make its deselection more difficult (Dunleavy 2005: 13-14).⁹

While there is *per se* not much to say against such a listing of factors which might individually or cumulatively help to shore up the dominant position of a certain party, it remains somewhat unsatisfactory in analytical terms – in particular when one attempts to capture the dynamics of dominance over an extended period. In analytical and conceptual terms it seems more fruitful to pinpoint, with respect to the separate dimensions of party domi-

⁸ Where a free press exists, this can however also turn into a disadvantage when scandals are uncovered.

⁹ As Dunleavy admits himself, some of these factors can also constitute advantages for parties other than dominant ones.

nance, the sources of dominance and their changes in the course of time. With regard to both the parliamentary and the executive dominance of the Japanese Liberal Democrats, the particular role of the electoral system in Japan has repeatedly been emphasized. Until 1993, the so-called single non-transferable voting system (SNTV for short) was used in Japan in electoral districts with on average four MPs. SNTV is a peculiar creature. It combines the decision rule of the majority principle at the local level with a relatively high degree of proportionality (in terms of the votes-seats ratio) at the national level (Lijphart 1999). Under SNTV every voter has a single vote which s/he gives to a particular candidate at the local level. The candidates receiving the highest number of votes in a district are elected. 'Excess votes', i.e. votes going beyond the number required for a candidate to get elected, cannot be transferred to another candidate of the same party in this electoral district – hence *non-transferable* voting system.

Under SNTV Japanese parties aiming at a majority of seats in parliament had to present more than one candidate in many electoral districts. This led to co-ordination problems. If a party nominated too many candidates in a given district, the result could be the collective failure of the candidates in question (so-called *tomodaore*). Against this background rational-choice analysts have tried to show that the LDP was particularly apt at solving its co-ordination problems by means of effective nomination strategies (Cox 1996, 1997; Boucek 1998: 116).¹⁰ Other scholars have partially rejected this argument. For example, Christensen (2000) has shown that in cases in which the opposition parties co-operated partly or fully in national elections, it was sometimes even better able to co-ordinate its candidates than the LDP. However, such effective co-operation between two or more opposition parties remained, for internal party and other reasons, restricted to individual elections between 1972 and 1990 (see also Johnson 2000; Baker and Scheiner 2004; Scheiner 2005).

SNTV generally generates incentives to pursue candidate-oriented vote-mobilization activities (Grofman 1999). With regard to the Japanese case, the ability to engage in pork barreling proved to be an advantage for the ruling LDP, an advantage other parties did not possess (Cox 1996; 1997; Nyblade 2005: 16). Individual LDP candidates also reacted to the electoral system by firmly institutionalising personal support organizations, so-called *kôenkai*. A well-functioning *kôenkai* was seen as a precondition for obtaining the necessary number of votes under SNTV – in particular in electoral districts where more than one candidate from a

¹⁰ Optimal candidate nomination strategies have to be based on proper evaluations of vote potentials and thus learning processes. A totally 'rational' nomination behaviour however seems not possible because of intra-party barriers and informational uncertainty (Baker and Scheiner 2004). See on this point also the controversy between Browne and Patterson (1999, 2002) on the one hand and Reed (2000) on the other.

given party competed for votes.¹¹ Accordingly, Lam (1994: 124) has called the successful establishment of solid personal support organizations a necessary but not sufficient condition for the electoral successes and the long-term rule of the LDP. Even though Socialist and Communist politicians also established *kôenkai* in their electoral districts, these personal support organizations usually did not reach the same scope and level of complexity as those of LDP politicians. This weaker institutionalisation was certainly due the long-time opposition status of both parties but also to the fact that in contrast to the LDP there were far fewer electoral districts in which a number of SPJ (let alone JCP) candidates competed against each other.¹²

One further aspect of the electoral system which continues to be of relevance even after the reform of the electoral system in 1993 concerns malapportionment. Woodall (1999: 34, 35) has come to the conclusion that “[t]he blessings that SNTV bestowed upon the LDP are striking. [...] [M]alapportionment and disproportionality spawned by SNTV housed in middle-sized districts helped enable the LDP to realize nearly four decades of unrivaled legislative hegemony.” In spite of changes in the size and number of districts, substantial imbalances between electoral districts continued to exist in the 1990s: in numerous rural districts only half as many votes as in urban districts were needed to get elected (cf. Woodall 1999: 33-34; Hrebenar 2000: 45-49). Many of these rural districts were bastions of the LDP which for understandable reasons never showed much interest in radical re-districting aimed at rooting out malapportionment.

The over-representation of rural districts was however, as Gerald Curtis (1988: 51) has noted, never the sole explanation for the electoral strength of the LDP. But it contributed to it. And it helped to cushion the effects of rapid urbanization starting in the 1950s which otherwise would have favoured the opposition parties even more strongly. In the last couple of years the most severe imbalances between electoral districts have been reduced,¹³ but as late as 2004 the (voters per parliamentary seat) ratio between the most populated and the least populated electoral district of the Lower House still stood at nearly 2.2 to 1. With regard to the electoral districts of the Upper House, the ratio remained even higher at 5.2 to 1 (*Nihon keizai shinbun*, 5 August 2004, 14 June 2005).

It would certainly be too much to trace back the dominance of the LDP solely to the effectiveness of the party's candidate nomination and voter mobilization or the favourable zoning of electoral districts. Doing so would amount to overlooking other sources of the LDP's

¹¹ See e.g. Grofman (1999: 381) and the literature cited there.

¹² On personal support organisations of Japanese politicians see in detail Köllner (2005c: chapter 5).

¹³ For a discussion of redistricting since the early 1990s see Christensen (2004) who argues, *inter alia*, that partisan gerrymandering is no longer possible.

dominance. With regard to the electoral dominance of the Liberal Democrats, the party's success in linking up with numerous interest groups has to be mentioned. The LDP was able to base itself on a 'grand coalition' of different organizations (Okimoto 1988a). That many organized interests at the national level were drawn toward the LDP is not really surprising: for many years the Liberal Democrats were the only party which could not only formulate policies but also to implement them and to reward groups belonging to its 'grand coalition' (George Mulgan 2000: 423; Steslicke 1973: 12). Even groups which at first stood in opposition to the LDP, eventually had to come to terms with the party if they did not want to be marginalized (Pempel 1990a: 27). Being in power for such a long time, the LDP was able to firmly institutionalise the exchange of resources with national support groups. In exchange for donations, new party members and vote mobilization (particularly but not solely in Upper House elections), relevant interest groups were bestowed with direct influence (via their representatives in parliament) or at least indirect influence (via links to MPs and faction leaders) upon government policy.¹⁴

Not only interest groups at the national level have supported the LDP; the exchange of political goods and services has involved broader parts of the population. Daniel Okimoto (1988b) has distinguished four basic kinds of exchange. Within the framework of *clientelistic exchange*, traditional support groups of the LDP such as farmers, small entrepreneurs, 'health professionals' (doctors, dentists, owners of private clinics, etc.) or heads of post-offices support the LDP in exchange for favourable legislation, subsidies, generous tax breaks, and other benefits.¹⁵ *Reciprocal patronage* constitutes the prevailing pattern in the relations between the LDP and corporate interests in industries such as construction, transport, and military goods. In this sort of exchange relationship, public construction and procurement contracts flow in one direction and donations in the other. *Untied financial support* from big business (industry conglomerates, banks, and financial services), on the one hand, and a general 'pro-business orientation' of governmental policy, on the other hand, characterizes the third kind of political exchange. The fourth kind of exchange, *generalized voter support*, concerns the orientation of policies towards the broad and diffuse segment of political non-organized voters. In this context, welfare, environmental, and other policies have been aimed at improving the quality of life. Voters targeted by these measures include white-collar employees, housewives, the self-employed, and young inhabitants of urban areas. In the 1970s in particular, the LDP demonstrated an astounding ability to adapt its policies to changing social needs (Stockwin 1999: 145; Pempel 1982). Last but not least reference has to

¹⁴ The relations between the LDP and its national support groups are covered in more detail in Köllner (2005c: chapter 5).

¹⁵ On the links between the LDP and Japan's postmasters see in particular Maclachlan (2004).

be made to the successful crisis management of the LDP. As Kent Calder (1988) has shown, the LDP repeatedly managed to avert a loss of power by securing important voter groups through distributive political measures such as tax gifts, subsidies, or the introduction of welfare-oriented policy instruments.

Finally, the oppositional left, clinging to positions which were at odds with reality, made it comparatively easy for the LDP until the early 1990s.¹⁶ The increasing fragmentation of the opposition since the 1960s¹⁷ and its only temporary electoral co-operation at the national level likewise contributed to reducing the chances of the JSP-led opposition to assume power.

We have already referred to one important aspect of the executive dominance of the LDP, viz. the use of clientelism and patronage to cement relations with relevant support groups. Some other aspects of this dimension will now be touched upon. Challenges to the LDP in the area of executive dominance centred primarily on intra-party management. But even there the LDP was able to master these challenges by means of informal institutions.

Until the early 1990s the LDP did not have to share governmental power with another party – only between 1983 and 1986 the LDP was forced to enter into a coalition with the Neoliberal Club (NLC), a group of reform-oriented former LDP MPs. However, even during this brief period key posts remained with the LDP: the NLC was represented in cabinet by only one minister (Stockwin 2003: 188). Thanks to its majority in the parliament the LDP was also able to dominate committees in both the Lower and the Upper House. The party was thus able to pre-structure the legislative process. Politically important discussions took anyway mainly place in party organs rather than in the Diet (see also footnote 18).

Being in possession of sole parliamentary majorities most of the time, the main challenge the LDP faced in the executive dimension did not concern co-ordination processes in the cabinet or the Diet but rather intra-party management. Here intra-party groups, so-called factions (*habatsu*), played a major role. These increasingly firmly institutionalised power groups assumed tasks in the areas of candidate nomination, the acquisition of funds, and the allocation of party and government posts which in many other cases are taken care of by parties as a whole. The factional system inside the LDP was guided by institutionalised informal norms which determined in particular how cabinet and party posts would be distributed according to criteria of proportionality and seniority. From the 1970s onwards the LDP's institutionalised factional system served as an effective functional equivalent of formalized

¹⁶ This it not to deny that the Marxism propounded by the JCP and the JSP was open to flexible interpretations (cf. Johnson 2000: chapter 2).

¹⁷ In 1960 the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP, Minshatô) emerged from the SPJ and in 1964 the neo-Buddhist Kômeitô (Clean Government Party) was formed.

procedures and norms of party management. It can be argued that the factional system effectively contributed to the channelling and stabilization of competition and the flow of information inside the LDP. Informal rules on how party and cabinet posts were to be allocated made the political careers of LDP MPs more foreseeable and helped to reduce uncertainty. Intra-party tensions on matters of personnel could thus often be reduced to the unavoidable minimum. In sum, institutionalised informal rules had an integrative effect counteracting the natural centrifugal tendencies of factionalist party fragmentation.

The institutionalised factional system also served as a sort of a 'checks-and-balances mechanism' *vis-à-vis* the power of the president and the executive of the LDP. From the viewpoint of efficiency and accountability this can of course be judged negatively but inside the LDP this restraining of the party's core executive was seen by many in a positive light. Finally it can be argued that changing factional alliances led to a fair degree of pluralism inside Japan's dominant party. From a normative perspective this might be evaluated ambivalently. Certainly, changing factional alliances are not a genuine alternative to real turnovers in power. It can also be critically remarked that faction-induced pluralism did not increase the participatory opportunities of Japanese citizens. Nevertheless, faction-induced dynamic competition and the existence of intra-party alternatives in the form of different faction leaders increased the flexibility and adaptability of the LDP in the face of new demands and challenges and did thus contribute to the long dominance of the party in Japanese politics.¹⁸

5. Challenged Dominance: The LDP since the Early 1990s

As noted by Duverger (1959: 321) many years ago, every dominant party carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Long-term rule can lead to a party's wearing out and loss of vitality: "To the same degree that dominance stabilizes political life it also makes it tensionless. The dominant party [...] calcifies." (Duverger 1959: 319, translation by the author) Moreover, patronage-based strategies aimed at staying in power can turn over time into a boomerang by undermining the cohesion, the principles, the autonomy, the flexibility, and finally the ability of parties to win votes (Warner 1997).

¹⁸ On the origins, institutionalisation of LDP factions but also their functions and consequences see Köllner (2005c: chapter 4). It should be noted that the factions did only play a limited role with regard to policy-making. Material policy was discussed and decided upon within the framework of trans-factional organs and groups. The LDP's central decision-making body, the Policy Affairs Research Council, has never been colonised by factions but rather by groups of influential MPs, so-called tribes (*zoku*), bound together by their interest and expertise in certain policy areas. That some factions were more involved in a given policy area than others is a different matter. For details see Köllner (2005c: chapter 3) and the literature cited therein.

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party is certainly not immune to such dynamics. The chain of large-scale corruption scandals in the late 1980s and early 1990s were a warning sign in this respect.¹⁹ In the end however it was an intra-party conflict – and thus a problem in the domain of executive dominance – which brought the LDP down in 1993: After parts of its most powerful faction left the LDP, the party lost its majority in the July 1993 Lower House election. The LDP remained by far the biggest party in the Lower House but it was not able to compensate for the prior loss of 45 incumbent MPs, many of which were firmly entrenched in their individual electoral districts. As a consequence, a seven-party coalition under the leadership of Hosokawa Morihiro was able to assume power.²⁰

Whether a longer period out of power would have led the LDP to a fate similar to that of Italy's former dominant party, the Democrazia Christiana, remains a matter of speculation. But the LDP benefited from tensions inside the new coalition government which – after only ten months in opposition – brought the LDP, assisted by its former political foe, the Socialists (now Social Democrats), back into power. In 1996, the Liberal Democrats even recovered the post of prime minister. The moderate ideological orientation of the LDP now became a major advantage for the party. As suggested by spatial models of party competition, the positioning of parties in or near the centre of political competition, offers them more opportunities to enter into government coalitions. Forced by the loss of their own parliamentary majority into entering such coalitions, the LDP made the most out of its coalition potential by allying itself with the Social Democrats (1994-1998), the neo-Buddhist New Kômeitô (since 1999) and some other smaller parties.²¹

The short intermezzo of the Hosokawa government however had long-term consequences: political reforms enacted in early 1994 brought about a new hybrid electoral system which due to its strong majoritarian component makes turnovers in government easier than under the preceding SNTV system. Moreover, the reform of political financing contributed to a significant decline of donations by the corporate sector which at the same time was negatively affected by Japan's economic weakness. The introduction of the new electoral system and new regulations on the financing of political activities weakened central foundations on which the LDP's factions had been built. As a consequence, the intra-party groups lost in

¹⁹ See e.g. Curtis (1999: 73-78, 85-87) on these corruption scandals.

²⁰ The background of the LDP split, the establishment and eventual fall of the new coalition government are discussed in detail by Curtis (1999: chapters 2 and 3).

²¹ Government coalitions in Japan since the mid-1990s have included the Shintô Sakigake (1994-1998), the Liberal Party led by Ozawa Ichirô (1999-2000) and its splinter product, the New Conservative Party (2000-2003), which was finally absorbed by the LDP after the Lower House elections of 2003.

cohesion and influence.²² An important external threat to the LDP evolved in the form of the Democratic Party of Japan: The DPJ which had been founded in 1996 and increased in numbers by way of a party fusion in 1998 developed into a serious contender for power. The Lower House elections of 2000 underlined the potential of this new challenger.

After the LDP had already been on a downward slope, Koizumi Jun'ichirô, elected in April 2001 as the party's new president and Japan's new prime minister, instilled much needed new momentum into the LDP. Though Koizumi – who in 2005 became Japan's fourth most long-serving prime minister in the post-war period – remains fairly popular, he has lost some of his former sparkle. In consequence, the LDP looks with apprehension to its 50th anniversary in November 2005 (cf. Köllner 2005b). As the economic cake is getting smaller rather than bigger in Japan, the LDP has increasing problems to continuously reward the members of its 'grand coalition'. Or as Richard Katz (2005) has put it: "[T]he situation that allowed the LDP to be a catch-all coalition for decades is now long over; i.e. that the economy was producing enough growth for the LDP to distribute the fruits of growth to everyone. Now, it must apportion slices of a smaller pie." The glue binding together the LDP and various interest groups is bound to diminish in this process. What is more, the advantages of the old electoral system are gone for good, government turnovers have become easier, especially since (as attested by the Lower House election in 2003 and the Upper House election in 2004) Japan is moving towards two-party competition at the electoral district level. As a result, the LDP has lost its nimbus of being the 'natural' governing party of Japan.

6. Conclusions

The before-said does not mean that the end of the dominance of the Liberal Democrats is just around the corner. But such a scenario can also not totally be excluded. The future of the LDP depends on how it will master the challenges in all three dimensions of dominance. In other words, will the party be able to uphold its electoral dominance by means of being able to offer attractive policy platforms and personnel? Or will the party at least be able to frame electoral issues in a favourable way? Will the LDP be able to hold fast to traditional support groups and can it win over a substantial part of floating voters? Can the DPJ strengthen its claim to be a trustworthy and reliable challenger of the LDP? Will the opposition parties be able to forge effective electoral alliances in order to break the parliamentary dominance of the LDP? And with respect to the executive dominance of the LDP: will the coalition with New Komeitô, on whose vote mobilization efforts the LDP has increasingly become de-

²² For details see Köllner (2005a or 2005c: chapter 7).

pendent, hold? Or will the DPJ be able to drag New Kômeitô into its own boat? The answers to these questions will determine to a large extent at what point the dominant status of the LDP will only be of interest to historians.

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