

Japanese Politics in Flux: Mixing Idealism and Realism

After almost forty years of relative stasis, the July elections in Japan have brought about shifts in the balance of political power which have left the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) not in the majority for the first time since 1955. Both Japanese and foreign analysts are striving to understand the process of change and the path which the politics of this world economic giant will take.

by Nicholas Breyfogle

Around the world, political analysts watched with bated breath as Japan went to the polls on July 18, 1993. For the first time since 1955, the Japanese faced the prospect of a government not dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Certainly, the LDP reign had never seemed wholly secure, but an LDP majority and a stable Japanese political system seemed to be established truths.

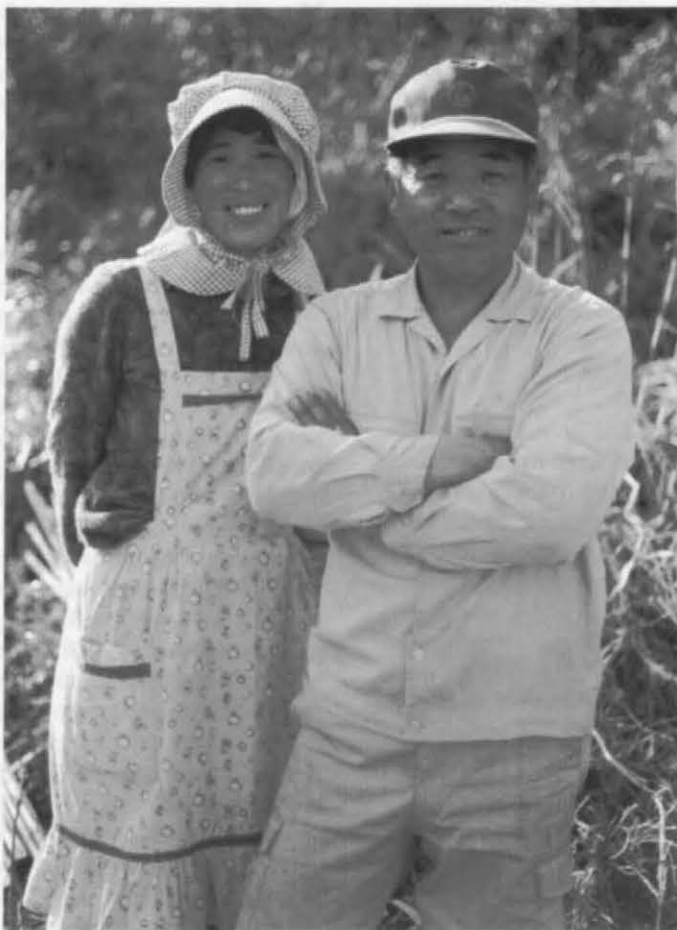
The elections were not the first signs to appear of the breakdown of LDP hegemony and of the political consensus that had brought Japan successfully through the postwar period. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese political establishment was challenged by charges of corruption—illicit connections to large corporations and organized crime. They have also suffered under policy criticisms of the relative slowdown in Japanese growth since the mid-1970s, as well as of the price paid by the Japanese people both in environmental terms and as consumers in a producer-oriented society. Early this spring, the LDP felt the shock waves from the formation of new political parties by split-off LDP members and they were staggering from the impact of a resulting no confidence vote, that led to the most recent elections.

As expected, Japanese voters—apparently tired of LDP hegemony, corruption, and status quo attitude—cast

their lot with the string of new parties. The LDP remained the largest party in the Diet with 227 seats but failed to win the necessary 256 to constitute a majority in the 511-seat house. The other postwar party, the Social Democrats, also suffered a serious electoral setback as their representation dropped from 134 to 70 seats. After the haggling was done and the dust had settled, a seven-party coalition pushed the LDP over into the opposition and Morihiro Hosokawa, leader of the Japan New Party which had won only 35 seats, assumed the mantle of Prime Minister.

At stake in the whole proceedings were some very fundamental questions that will directly affect Japanese society. The coalition—composed of the Japan New Party, Japan Renewal (*Shin-seito*) Party, and New Party Harbinger (all center-right) along with the leftist Social Democrats and Democratic Socialists as well as the Clean Government (*Komeito*) Party and a few independents—has come to a consensus for the moment that, by all accounts, will be difficult to prevent from fragmenting. They have united in the desire to reform the existing political order, but the vision of the future often differs from group to group.

Overall, the coalition has agreed to freer, more open debate, to a greater openness to the outside world, to the decentralization of the Japanese political structure, and to the reform of 'Japan Inc.'—that seamless interweaving of politicians, bureaucrats and business interests which has been the trademark of Japanese governance in the postwar era and the cause not only of great economic success but also of much highly publicized corruption. They call for electoral



"Japanese Gothic:" Support for the LDP has been traditionally high in rural areas. [Christopher Travell]

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reform that would end the current structure—so crucial to LDP election success because of the weight it gives to rural areas—in which multiple candidates are elected from the same riding. Further, as Hosokawa has stated: “It is time to admit candidly that Japan has so far put its highest priority on economic development and has not paid sufficient attention to improving the quality of life for each and every person.”

Political pundits are struggling to understand the meaning of the recent elections. From one perspective, some argue that the changes are superficial. They point to the LDP origins of the reform movement’s leadership (as well as the similarity of political ideology) and argue that it will be business as usual, only under new people and a new guise. Others assert that the pace of any change will be slow. No matter how much the politicians want reform, the power of the bureaucracy in Japanese politics makes overnight alterations improbable.

From the other perspective, commentators, like Tomoaki Iwai, professor of political science at Tokiwa University, believe that “it is the start of real politics,” and that these shifts in the political spectrum are only the beginning of much more fundamental changes in the structure of Japan itself. For what is perhaps the first time in Japanese history, a group of politicians have openly challenged those foundations of government that have served Japan admirably through its “economic miracle” from the late nineteenth century to the present. More importantly, whereas political parties have traditionally found their power source in the industrial conglomerates and local level bureaucracy, the new coalition has looked to the will of the people for support and legitimacy.

The Meiji Restoration

Japan’s first steps in the realm of democratic politics followed on the heels of the Meiji Restoration of 1868. At that time, the existing military-feudal system of government (the Tokugawa Shogunate) was toppled and the Emperor ‘restored’ to the top of the political order. (Since the early 1600s, the Shogun (military leader), rather than the Emperor, had been the nation’s political and administrative leader). The Restoration stemmed from a combination of internal and external factors. The internal forces—economic decline of the landowning nobility, the rising merchant class and frustration at the rigidity of the hierarchical administrative structure—were by far the most important. The external factors acted only as a catalyst.

From the mid-1850s, internal loss of confidence in the Tokugawa Shogunate coincided with the arrival of the West. Foreign ships steamed into Japanese ports, with the United States under Commodore Perry leading the way. Under the threat of superior force, the Japanese signed a series of unequal trading treaties giving the Westerners access to Japanese markets and resources as well as extraterritoriality for their representatives. When the Tokugawa Shogunate proved unable to



[Electromap, Inc.]

“expel the barbarian”, other Japanese patriots moved to confront the nation’s relative weakness themselves.

The reversal of these unequal trading treaties—and western acceptance of Japan as an equal world power—became the primary goal of the new Meiji leadership and permeated most actions of the Meiji government (outside of personal interests of the various leaders). In their strides to overcome the weaknesses and failures of Tokugawa government and in the search for national security, the new Meiji leaders introduced an efficient, centralized, bureaucratized, and industry-focused political structure. Moreover, they fostered a national ideology that would speak to the masses,

capture their allegiance, and bring them into the new political and social order as active, while controlled, participants.

The 1889 Constitution and the Birth of Democracy

Most Western nations, especially the United States, would not consider a revision in the unequal treaties until Japan could prove herself civilized and modern (i.e. democratic and capitalist). After a great deal of debate, the majority of Meiji leaders believed that to match the West, Japan must become more like the West. Yet, the ‘West’ was by no means a monolithic block and there was not one ‘West’ to copy. During the 1870s and 1880s, Japanese leaders were dispatched on international fact finding missions to determine what parts of the western world were best to appropriate.

In 1889, the Meiji leadership fixed upon a Prussian-style constitution and assembly structure: known in Japan as the “Emperor System”. As is clear from the name, the Emperor held the pre-eminent position constitutionally. However, despite his theoretical powers, the Emperor was not intended to rule directly but, rather, to legitimize the policies of the ruling elites and ministers. Thus, the political structure was dominated by a small group of Meiji oligarchs who administered and engineered the process of change. These elites chose the Prime Minister and the cabinet of ministers (who stood atop the newly formed and highly efficient civil bureaucracy as direct advisors to the Emperor), often from within their own ranks. They also acted as the arbiters between the different loci of political authority outlined in the constitution—between the parliament/political parties, the military establishment, the bureaucracy, the Emperor and the zaibatsu (large monopolistic industrial-business combines).

As one historian has noted: “The Meiji constitution envisaged a political community directed by a small elite at the head of an extensive bureaucracy. In theory, the elite would consult public opinion as it was expressed in the Diet, but the elite would be fundamentally neutral, standing above groups and factions represented in the legislature and acting in the interests of the whole nation.”

The military—whose importance was unparalleled in Japanese processes of self-strengthening—held a special, autonomous position, answerable only to the Emperor. At the same time, business and industrial interests also came to take central stage. The success of the large conglomerates, which had begun to develop in the Tokugawa years, was deemed imperative and they were given extensive government privilege and support.

Popular government was limited. The newly created parliament—a consultative elected assembly with voting restrictions—was erected by the Meiji elite for reasons that were not always connected to western democratic principles. On one hand, many Japanese leaders argued that the only way in which they would ever compete with western strength would be to adopt western practices. On the other hand, certain elites believed that if they were to have any hope of reversing the unequal treaties and and reconstructing Japan's image abroad, they would have to appear 'civilized' to the western world. Thus, while they may not have agreed in the inherent superiority of western political structures, they realized that the adoption of parliamentary and democratic practices was required, at least in form, to placate western desires.

There was hardly unanimity over the imposition of the parliamentary system. Many of the Meiji elite considered political parties, and especially opposition groups, to be wrong to the point of immoral. Consensus rather than confrontation were the characteristics the Meiji strove to enhance.

Thus, Japanese democracy was born from above, not from below. Participation in government was not necessarily considered an innate right. Rather than an institution that would reflect and represent the will of the people, the national assembly was to be an institution that would transmit the wills and goals of the Meiji oligarchs to the populace while explaining government policies and educating the public in the art of participatory government.

Moreover, the parliament would serve as a safety valve. In the course of their missions abroad the Meiji leaders had witnessed the social dislocations that racked newly industrialized countries. The Meiji government hoped to avoid these pitfalls through a national assembly that would foster a sense of national unity and loyalty among the Japanese people and, in theory, override any divisive tendencies.

As the historian Kenneth Pyle has written, the Meiji leaders were "intent upon finding ways of spurring on the populace, of achieving national unity, and of preventing harsh antagonisms that would make impossible—or at least much more difficult—the task of building an industrial society." As a result, the Meiji leaders fostered a national ideology that would be strong enough to confront the strains of industrial change but one which also had resonance because of its deep roots in the culture of the Japanese people: social harmony, selfless dedication, loyalty, obedience, deference to authority, and subordination of individual interests to consensus and community.

Taisho Democracy

The passing of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 and the succession of the Emperor Taisho (1912-26) serves as a benchmark for changes in the Japanese political spectrum. If the Meiji period was characterized by consensus and a uniform dedication to strengthening Japan, the Taisho era saw the demise of this unity.

The political-economic structure erected by the Meiji oligarchs had worked exceptionally well in bringing about an unprecedentedly rapid and successful industrialization of

Japan. Their efforts appeared vindicated in 1894 with the repeal of the unequal treaties. However, the very speed of the economic change combined with the top-down approach to politics confronted Japan's leaders with new problems to solve.

Despite the oligarchs' best efforts, industrial transformation and economic development brought with them dislocations and social tensions. The economic growth had been staggering, but it had not benefitted the population equally. Divisions were especially noticeable in the rural-urban split, where the agricultural sector was hurt because the Meiji government favored industry and imported less expensive foreign rice in order to feed the cities. Social unrest was on the rise, witnessed in the Rice Riots (1918), a rash vigilante attacks on Koreans living in Japan, the growth of labor unions, women's organizations and tenant farmer associations as well as in the influx of radical political thought from abroad (especially socialist and communist). The established order felt challenges from all sides. Economic ups and downs, and especially the 1929 world depression, served to exacerbate the already growing tensions and unrest.

The political and administrative structures of the Taisho era reflected this turmoil in society. On the surface, the sturdy and successful Meiji constitutional structure carried over into the Taisho period unchanged—with power shared between the oligarchs, the civil and military bureaucracies, the Diet, the zaibatsu and the political parties. However, underneath, Japanese governance underwent shifts in the respective roles. The power of the parties (and of popularly elected government) increased substantially while the iron grip on policy of the Meiji oligarchs began to loosen. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the oligarchs and the political parties coexisted—sometimes operating in tandem, sometimes at loggerheads.



The Meiji Emperor (1868-1912) dressed in an adopted western-style uniform. [Metro Toronto Reference Library]

Through the Meiji era (and much of Taisho), the Prime Minister was chosen by the oligarchs. Beginning in 1905, a representative of the largest party in the Diet alternated as Prime Minister with the individual appointed by the Meiji elites. From 1924 to 1932, the British practice of the head of the majority party in the Diet becoming Prime Minister became the norm. Moreover, more widespread political participation was on the rise with the introduction, in 1924, of universal male suffrage (women would have to wait until after World War II). Rule by a small group of elites appeared on its way out the door.

In the end, however, parliamentary politics was unable to construct a stable political order. While the changes initially boded well for the growth of parliamentary party democracy—and there was a well-founded belief that democratic representation had truly come to Japan—many people within the power structure were unready and unsympathetic to the vagaries of parliamentary politics. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, party politics was challenged by those—especially the oligarchs, military and zaibatsu—who feared its instability and by those who worried that it might result in a left-leaning government.

At the same time, Japan's Taisho political parties were not fully mature democratic institutions, nor mass-based organizations. Their power derived not from the mandate of the people but from the power of the political and industrial structure itself. Kenneth Pyle has argued: "The rise of the parties did not involve them making a fundamental change in the political structure. Instead, they succeeded in shrewd infiltration and conciliation on institutional forces established by the Meiji constitution—the oligarchy, the bureaucracy and the military."

The principal Japanese party during this period was *Seiyukai*. Its leader, Hara Kei, "gained power [for his party] not by championing popular causes or by seeking reform of the political system ...but by accommodating to the needs of the bureaucracy, by trading party support of government programs for positions in the bureaucracy, and by regional development projects that built support at the local level." So long as the local leaders would provide their vote support, the gravy train would continue.

In connected trends, the parties



Emperor Hirohito (1926-89)—publicly renounced his divinity and Japanese racial superiority in 1946. [Japanese Consulate]

shifting of power from one set of elites to another within the confines of the same constitutional and institutional structures. With each accommodation and compromise, the parties became less and less representative of the will of the people and more a part of the consensus-loving elite.

By allying themselves symbiotically with the other power groups within the institutional structure (the bureaucracy, oligarchs and business interests), the political parties cut themselves off from the support of the people. They restricted themselves from instituting any serious overhaul of the existing social and political order (although they did not necessarily have a choice given the nature of the Meiji constitutional system)—structural reforms that would have been to the long-term benefit of parliamentary government and of the political parties themselves.

Most importantly, however, the parties were never able to legitimize themselves within the confines of Japanese values. The nationalist ideology and collectivist ethic, long a part of Japanese culture and purposefully fostered by Meiji oligarchs since 1868, had left their mark. The fluidity of the Diet, the competition between different interests, rule by majority rather than consensus, the charges of bribery and interest peddling ran counter to the traditions of the Japanese collective and the nationalist ethos.



A Western view of Japanese expansionism in the 1930s. [Metro Toronto Reference Library]

While the populace might have been more willing to accept such changes and chaos in good economic times, the downturns of the 1920s made such a seemingly unstable political system appear even more unpalatable. The country was left with a sense that it had been set adrift. Gone, many believed, was the 'organic unity' and consensus between the various governing bodies (oligarchs, bureaucracy, military, and the Diet)—the rock that had anchored the political community from the Meiji beginnings.

Militarism Ascendant: The Failure of Democracy

Many groups in the Japanese administration were frustrated with the breakdown of consensus and the instability of parliamentary government. The military, for instance, disagreed with the accommodationist foreign policy of the period that called for the status quo and the submission of Japanese territorial desires in favor of the will of the international community.

Two possible responses existed for Meiji leaders uncomfortable with the rising social problems, pressures and instabilities of mass society. They could accede to the demands for reform and adjust the social and political institutions that they had created. Or, they could increase their reliance on authoritarianism and bolster their efforts to bring about national self-sacrifice and mobilization through the further accentuation of such traditional values as social harmony and deference to authority. More often than not, the elites turned to the latter and strove to restrict the range of political debate rather than expand the existing social and political structures: to quash opposition rather than to work with it. The Peace Preservation Law of 1925 served to contract the possible topics for discussion and, specifically, banned leftist political groups who might foment the kind of social revolution that the oligarchs desperately feared.

The party-dominated Diet could solve the spiralling social problems no better than the oligarchs. Their close links to the bureaucracy and zaibatsu left them little room to manoeuvre. When the Japanese military forces in China took matters into their own hands in incidents in 1931 (Mukden) and then decisively in 1937 (Marco Polo Bridge), the Diet could do little but stand by and give their tacit support to a fait accompli. There was even less they could do in the face of a rash of assassinations of political figures during the 1920s and 1930s. The parties and parliamentary government were simply not powerful enough to challenge the military who desired conquest and empire (and who were constitutionally responsible only to the Emperor) combined with the zaibatsu who craved the markets and resources that colonies would provide. Nor, for that matter, could the politicians rein in the forces of nationalism fostered by the oligarchs since the Meiji restoration.

Democracy collapsed fully in 1937 and Japan, ruled by a military-fascist government set out on a path of war that led eventually to Japan's complete defeat, a host of atrocities, the loss of millions of lives and a large-scale destruction of property.

The American Occupation (1945-1952)

The American Occupation of Japan (1945-1952) set the stage for the Japanese political structure of the Cold War period and came in two definable parts. The first—a period of reform—challenged the very foundations upon which the Meiji restoration had been based. The second sought to reverse the earlier reform and solidify the traditional political order.

In the first, the Occupation government, under General

Douglas MacArthur, implemented a series of 'radical' reforms that were designed to bring about a democratization and demilitarization of Japan. The American occupiers believed that a truly democratic political system (as opposed to what they considered the undemocratic the Meiji version) would make Japan less likely to go to war in the future. (Interestingly, the reforms the Americans introduced coincided uncannily with the policies of the banned Japanese communists in the 1920s so feared by the Meiji elite).

The first step towards this democratization came in 1947 with the revisions to the 1889 constitution. The new constitution cast the emperor in the role of powerless figurehead and symbol of national unity. The Diet was made the highest source of political power and the Prime Minister was required to come from the Diet as was the cabinet. An article was inserted in which Japan renounced war in perpetuity and which denied Japan the right to maintain any standing force for war potential. The political system was decentralized, shifting authority to local organs.

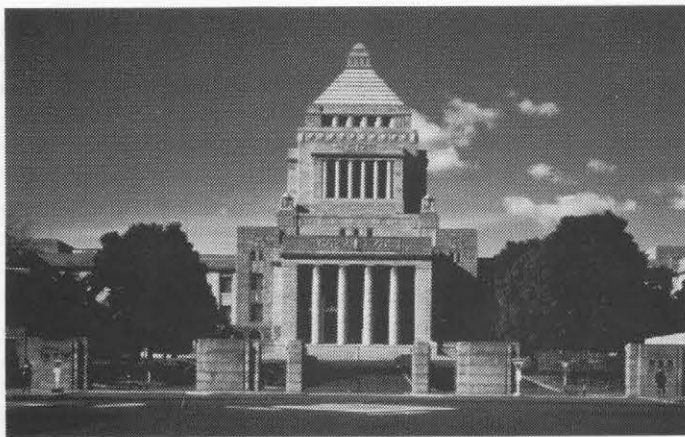


Hiroshima: Japan paid the price for its militarism.
[Christopher Travell]

Combined with this political democratization, the Occupation administration disbanded the zaibatsu, breaking up the intertwined industrial and commercial units. The occupiers saw the zaibatsu as villains whose monopolistic control of industry and commerce caused the need for a forceful Japanese external policy. At the same time, the Administration encouraged the formation of labor unions, and instituted land reform measures, in order to offset the strength of the industrial business powers.

The second half of the occupation period was characterized by a swing to the other extreme and a reversal of many of the original reform policies. As the specter of the Cold War became increasingly real for the United States, the so-called "reverse course" was designed to re-strengthen Japan as quickly as possible as a bulwark against communism in Asia. In it, the priorities of the occupation administration changed from the reform of a non-democratic country to economic recovery and the reconstruction of Japan's prewar power base.

Often, the occupiers repealed reforms that were already instituted. The leftist forces that had been pandered to, especially concerning the labor unions, were now considered pariahs. The zaibatsu were reconstituted and given official governmental support. A small Self-Defence Force was creat-



*The Japanese Diet: today the seat of political change.
[Japanese Consulate]*

ed. The police and educational systems were replaced under central government control. The bureaucracy was recentralized and many leaders who had been purged due to their wartime actions were reinstated for their expertise.

The greatest beneficiary of the Occupation among Japanese political elites was the bureaucracy. While the military and zaibatsu establishments were being deconstructed to reduce their power and the fledgling parties were learning the political ropes, the bureaucracy remained relatively untouched through both parts of the Occupation. As Japan entered the postwar years in 1951 with the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the bureaucracy held the balance of power.

After the Occupation

Post-war Japan is best characterized by the 'economic miracle' and political stability. In the first case, Japan grew from an economy devastated by war into the third largest economy in the world by the late 1960s—a rate of growth only matched by the unprecedented burst of the Meiji era. From 1950 to 1970 Japan orchestrated annual rates of growth greater than ten percent on average. It was not until after the 'oil shock' (the 1973 Arab oil embargo) that Japanese growth, while everpresent, became more uneven.

Following the 'to and fro' reversals of the occupation years, Japanese politics settled down to a pattern of stability in which parliamentary politics played the predominant role. Gone were the chaos and instability of the Taisho years, so too were the Emperor, military and oligarchs as active participants in government. However, the bureaucracy remained strong and many commentators argue that it has been this group, and not the parties, which held the real power in Japan's policymaking.

Post-war politics was divided between the left-wing (Social Democrats) and the conservative parties, who combined to form the LDP in 1955. The latter ruled this period with pragmatic policies and deft guidance of economic growth. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, were often too consumed by ideological stances to have any attraction to the majority of people, who feared that a Social Democrat government would mean a shift to a Soviet leaning economic policy.

While initially there was a certain amount of legitimate confrontation between the forces of left and right, the conflict quickly took on a solely rhetorical form as the postwar economic boom took off. It was hard for the Social Democrats to be taken seriously in their opposition to the existing structure when it was accomplishing economic miracles. Many political analysts argue that the Social Democrats quickly settled into

the role of honorable opposition with the realization that they would never hold office. In many ways the relationship between the the LDP and the Social Democrats was analogous to that between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. A tacit understanding was arrived at in which both sides agreed not to directly attack the other, but in which the level of rhetoric remained highly antagonistic.

The true arena of confrontation in postwar Japanese politics lay not within *inter-party* squabbling but in *intra-party* confrontation. The LDP was not a unified party but rather a conglomerate of some seven or eight different factions. Factions were, in many respects, parties in their own right. They existed in order to champion the cause of the faction leader. Once in a high position of power, that leader would reward his followers. Loyalty to the faction stood above loyalty to the party because it was the faction that dispensed funds and gave office. Overall party policy was decided in back room sessions where faction influence was ranked and strictly hierarchical.

As the economy soared, the influence of business in political circles returned to prewar levels. At the same time, the bureaucracy continued to dominate the entire political structure. The result was a gigantic political-bureaucratic-industrial structure ('Japan Inc.') that has been at the source of Japanese economic growth and the cause of criticism that it is not the politicians who rule Japan.

The Critics Take Power

In many respects, the recent Japanese elections demonstrate a desire on the part of both politicians and populace to incorporate more idealism into the highly pragmatic Japanese social-political-economic machine. They desire a merging of the "realist" politics that have brought—along with staggering economic success—corruption, back-room deals, producer oriented policies and a Japan often closed to the outside world, with certain idealistic principles: clean government, open debate, more direct public participation and a more even share of the economic spoils.

Not to misunderstand, they do not wish to give up their extensive economic growth. They are less opposed to LDP "policies" than to the manner in which "politics" was carried out. Herein lies a clue to Japan's political future. The call to the new politicians is to continue growth but to chose a path with a more "human face"—a path that will benefit, both spiritually and physically, the "Japanese" as much as "Japan". ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

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