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Reasons behind the Stability of Abe Administration

DOI: 10.12775/sijp.2020.56-59.17

ABSTRACT
The paper is devoted to the reasons of stability of the LDP power system that evolved in Japan after 2012. The author attempted to examine the factors of paradoxical popularity of Abe cabinets against the background of the split in the public opinion towards the key issues of state policy. Special attention is paid to the effectiveness of the political technologies used by the ruling Liberal Democratic party to retain its dominance in the Diet. However, in the author’s view, LDP faces a serious management crisis rooted in the autocratic style of its management under Abe’s leadership. LDP has yet to find a formula for transferring power to the next generation of political leaders.

KEYWORDS: Abe, Liberal Democratic Party, slogan style of communication, two-party system, management crisis

Introduction
After returning to power in late 2012, Abe occupied the post of Prime-Minister for more than 6 years. He won three national elections, including two general elections to the lower House and two elections to the upper House.
Traditionally every new cabinet starts with high ratings against certain public expectations for a better political commitment, but in a year or so there usually occurs a noticeable decline in popularity (we should recall practically all cabinets since the retirement of Koizumi in 2006). But after 2012, with the ‘revived’ leadership of Abe, this did not happen (Naikaku shijiritsu 2017).
In 2017-2018, Abe’s popularity substantially declined in the face of resonant political scandals in which high-ranked representatives of the ruling party were involved, like the Moritomo gakuen and Kake gakuen scandals. According to public opinion surveys held in July 2018, on the verge of the LDP leadership elections, 75% of respondents voiced their dissatisfaction with the explanations by Abe himself and his administration officials over the Moritomo gakuen and Kake gakuen issues, while only 14% where ‘satisfied’ (Kuraoka 2018). The support ratings of Abe
government in March and April 2018 declined under the 40% line (the worst result since his revival as Prime Minister in 2012), while disapproval rate stood at 52.6 percent (Cabinet’s support 2018). Yet, this did not lead to a collapse of Abe administration. The stability of Abe’s cabinets is especially paradoxical given that the Japanese public opinion, judging by the polls, does not unambiguously support the ‘patriotic’ views of the Prime Minister. Specific surveys on the Constitution, security policy, historical past, etc. have shown a variegated and contradictory picture, demonstrating a deep split in the public opinion (Abe naikaku 2015).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the reasons for the unusually long life of Abe’s reign against the background of the split in the public opinion.

**Resources of Abe’s Popularity**

High ratings of Abe are to a large extent associated with the fatigue from a lengthy ‘mosaic’ period of political instability when the premiers of the ‘revolving doors cabinets’ changed almost every year. One should recall that Abe’s return to the political Olympus was preceded by a ‘disastrous’, in the eyes of most Japanese, period of the DPJ rule in the years 2009-2012. In the circumstances of the late 2010s, none of the opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party, the People's Democratic Party or Japan Innovation Party, was capable of building a serious rivalry to the LDP. One of the reasons for that is the majority-based electoral system, under which the election mechanisms unequivocally provide considerable advantages to larger parties possessing nation-wide organizational and financial networks. At present, LDP turns to be the unconditional and sole beneficiary of the majority system, obtaining a significantly larger number of seats in the lower house than it would have received proportionally to the percentage of votes in its favour. In the 2017 general elections, the LDP received the bulk of its mandates in the 218 majority constituencies, where the vote is not for the party, but for the candidate. Out of 208 electoral districts, where the candidate of the ruling party was opposed by several opposition candidates, the LDP won in 173 (83% of the districts) (Ota 2017). As for the proportional representation districts, where the vote is for political parties, the LDP won only 66 seats out of 176, or 38% of the total.

Another reason for an advantageous position of the ruling party lies in the chronic schism in the opposition camp. Opposition parties compete with one another for the same electoral strata and lack bright and charismatic leaders capable of captivating the masses. In reality, the opposition parties
can win in the majoritarian constituencies only after reaching an agreement on avoiding mutual competition or nominating a unified candidate. The first experience of such an agreement, in which the Communist Party of Japan participated for the first time in postwar history, was acquired only in the mid-2010s. For example, in the 2017 general elections in the districts where the LDP candidate was opposed by a candidate of the united opposition, the LDP was lucky only in 55% of cases (in 18 out of 33 districts) (Ota 2017). Yet, the prospects for this practice arouse a great deal of skepticism, given the prejudiced attitude to radicals even in the protest segments of Japanese electorate.

The prolongation of one-party rule of the LDP is facilitated by a relative economic homogeneity of the Japanese society. It is based on a strong middle class, and the ideologically "omnivorous" Liberal Democratic Party in this sense meets public expectations better than other political parties focused on much narrower electoral segments. In addition, the general vector of public sentiment is shifting towards the traditional ‘Japanese values’, which are associated in mass consciousness, due to a strong influence of the media on the political views of ordinary citizens, with the LDP leaser. Most of the Japanese electors (according to polls, more than 60%) (Seiken kōtai 2017) show a stable psychological distaste for any radical reforms and do not want any ‘overthrow of foundations’, which in turn certainly plays into the hands of the Abe administration. Moreover, conservative ideology is paradoxically popular in the low income electoral segments, which, under the rational logic, should form the electoral basis of the left opposition. In addition, Japanese voters are pragmatic and tend to support parties with the real prospect of coming to power. In many ways, such sentiments are associated with the widely-spread attitude towards the MPs from the ruling party as a ‘source of patronage’ (Stockwin 2008: 193). Another factor working for Abe is the growth of populism in the Japanese political sphere. (It should be noted that this is not a unique Japanese phenomenon but a world-wide trend). The image of Abe responds to the public demand for ‘appropriate’ political leaders who know how to speak in plain language to the masses and who are consistent in implementing their political program, even if this program is not to everybody’s liking. Abe managed to revive the one-and-a-half centuries old techniques of the mobilization of masses used by Meiji leaders for implementing national tasks. Among these technologies, one should highlight the skillful use of slogans as a technique of Abe’s personal image-making. His arsenal includes concise and succinct slogans that became the hallmark of his office. As a matter of fact, Japanese political culture has been enriched by
the apt use of slogans as a method of communication between political leaders and society (one can recall the slogans of the Meiji era fukoku kyohei ("Rich country – a strong army"), datsua nyuo ("Leave Asia and enter Europe") etc. After coming to power, Abe consistently introduced such slogans as chiho sosei (‘reviving regions’), josei katsuyaku (‘public activity of women’), ichioku katsuyaku (‘activity one hundred million’, an allusion to the entire adult population of Japan), hatarakikata kaikaku (‘reform of employment’) etc. Even though these slogans were substantively abstract and allowed for various interpretations, they created an impression of government activism in the social sphere and of its regular updating of the political agenda. This tactic was especially effective in the face of growing public disappointment over the actual results of the economic and social policies of Abe administrations.

The most famous and popular slogan, which has become a meme in global networks and, in fact, a hallmark of Abe’s reign, was abenomics – the economic policy aimed at stimulating economy through large-scale infrastructure investment, reservation of excess cash resources in the banking sector (the so-called policy of quantitative easing), and structural reforms. Many experts are very ambivalent about the results of this policy. On the one hand, national economy gained a lot from the growth of corporate profits, improvement in employment, increase of wages, etc. On the other hand, profits were obtained mostly by large enterprises, better employment was registered mainly among non-permanent workers, the problem of poverty has become more serious, and the growth of wages was halted by increasing food prices. However, hopes for the best, associated with not yet implemented expectations of abenomics, remained with the significant part of Japanese voters throughout the whole period of Abe’s tenure. It is not by chance that Abe successfully positioned abenomics in the center of his electoral manifestos at the elections to the House of Councilors in the summer of 2016.

Owing to the influence of the media, Abe also succeeded in creating an image of the ‘savior’ of Japan, whose personal efforts enabled it to avoid the unpleasant consequences of globalization. Indeed, Japan has not experienced any turmoil associated with mass immigration, ethnic or religious problems. In the 2010s the situation in the sphere of public order in Japan was much better than in any of the G7 countries. Neither does Japan face the full-fledged problem of terrorism. In comparison with Europe, the unemployment rate in Japan is significantly lower, and the overall situation in the socio-economic sphere is not so depressing. As a result of the advocacy efforts of the Japanese government, most Japanese,
not necessarily Abe’s fans, tend to feel ‘gratitude’ to the leader, based on the false idea that under any other prime minister, ‘it would only get worse’. Besides, Abe was helped by the sense of external threat, associated with DPRK nuclear program and the PRC’s assertive policy in the East China Sea, that prevails in the masses.

Crisis of the LDP-C Model of Power
In spite of its formidable positions in the Diet of late 2010s, the LDP faces a serious management crisis. One of the reasons is the autocratic style of Abe’s management of party affairs. Many observers point out that the authoritarian style of Abe, who takes many important political decisions single-handedly, without consulting his colleagues, causes damage to both the LDP and the government.

Especially noteworthy is the absence of the in-party discussions that were characteristic of the model of ‘1955 system’. At that time the representatives of different factions were engaged in electoral competition in medium-sized electoral districts, and that competition per se created the conditions for an inter-party democracy (Richardson 1997: 56-58). During the cold war period the pluralism of opinions and the freedom of debate, negotiation-based methods and the search of consensus in the process of decision-making obviously compensated for the negative costs of the long-term LDP rule, which clearly contradicted the basic democratic principle of a regular change of power.

The party factions possessed sufficient financial and organizational resources for nominating their representatives in most electoral districts and for their career advancement in the party (Masumi 1995: 206). The actual autonomy of factions guaranteed their members immunity from prosecution for criticizing leaders of the opposing factions. All faction leaders enjoyed guaranteed access to the top posts in the party hierarchy in accordance with the rules of jun’okuri (‘rotation of power’). This provided even the ‘anti-mainstream factions’ with a political niche, allowing them to exert effective influence on the process of decision-making (Kono 1997:109-115).

The mechanisms of political representation within the framework of the ‘1955 system’ guaranteed to the party minorities proper consideration of their opinion on the highest party level. This highly conditional intra-party democracy created safeguards against subjectivity and excessive radicalism at all levels of the party and government decision-making. Such a model of democracy created in the eyes of ordinary citizens the image of a
revitalized LDP – the party retained its public authority simply by ousting disgraced politicians or the discredited cabinet.

After the political reform of 1994 only one party candidate in each electoral district was allowed for nomination, and the prerogative of selection was extended to the formal party structures. As a result, factions lost their original raison d’être as self-help organizations of MPs used for conducting their election campaigns, and were reborn as ‘research organizations’. Their voice in the party decision-making has inevitably weakened (Stockwin 2008: 191-192). In contrast to the Japanese traditions of consensus democracy, ready-made decisions started to be taken top-to-bottom, without using any intraparty coordination mechanisms.

It can be assumed that Abe’s intransigence to the opposition in the party ranks is fueled by the fear that open criticism of the party leaders from inside the party ranks, inspired by the intra-party debates, would damage the LDP’s public image and trigger a split of the party - the situation reminiscent of the 1993 disaster, when LDP was brought into opposition after the defection of the Ozawa faction. Some experts associate the crushing defeat of the LDP in the 2009 general elections with the absence of unity in the party ranks and the sharp criticism of the LDP leader Taro Aso from the members of his own party.

Lack of self-criticism inside the LDP leads to a situation when many MPs, according to the Japanese political commentator Soichiro Tahara, lose motivation for self-education and for political alternatives, preferring to spend more time for mere contact with voters. In other words, ordinary MPs have no interest in the content of policy, and consequently there is no pressure from inside the party over the party top management for a proper response to policy challenges (Tahara 2017).

What Next: a Two-Party System or a Patchwork Coalition?

Currently, the prospect of shaping a Westminster-type two-party system in Japan is obviously unrealistic. This is due to the fundamental problem of the Japanese party system, which does not provide mechanisms for the delimitation of parties along ideological lines.

One of the reasons is that in the past the opposition to the LDP invariably took place within the logic of creating a formal alternative, i.e. the priority of organizational sheath over ideological content. The main opposition party in this sense was no more than an amorphous association of moderate forces of different ideological orientations, consolidated by only one aim, which was to displace the LDP from power. Only radicals like
Communists/ Left socialists or explicit conservative traditionalists were not allowed to join. Ideology was of minor importance for such a party, which in most cases was a motley and patchwork coalition involving many different, often irreconcilable political forces and groups. Such was the Party of New Frontiers in 1994-1997 and the Democratic Party in 1998 – 2017, both actually the second political force in Japan. The Party of Hope, which in 2017 ceded the palm of the main opposition force to the Constitutional Democratic Party, can probably be categorized as a ‘loser’ (or ‘eternal opposition’) party.

Criticism of the LDP was at a certain stage conducive to these parties, allowing them to collect protest votes and gain widespread public support, which in turn supported their claims for power. In 2009-2012 such claims even led to a change of power and to the transition of the LDP to opposition. However, ideological amorphousness and the lack of a proper organizational core, as shown historically, invariably led those parties to an electoral defeat, and later to a split and collapse.

The fuzziness of a dividing line with the ruling party on the pivotal issues of socio-economic agenda did not allow the main political opposition (except for the CPJ) to form a coherent cohort of voters on the base of their ideological beliefs rather than on the personal loyalty to a particular politician (Streltsov 2015: 35). That is why in the Japanese Diet one can rarely hear a constructive political debate between the ruling and opposition parties on important issues related to the daily lives of voters. The opposition attacks the ruling camp mainly on the issues of personal sins of its individual representatives, and is unable to put forward an attractive alternative to the government policy in the social or economic spheres. A partial reason for this is the fact that the LDP, as it did in the cold war period, pursues a predominantly liberal course in the social and economic fields based on the traditional egalitarian values, the course that in general does not invite wide public discontent.

A niche for a party that could constitute an actual political alternative to the LDP can be assumed basing on the existence of a significant protest mood in the Japanese society. Such a mood grows with unresolved socio-economic problems, which include the crisis of the traditional employment system, the absence of a financially stable and self-sufficient pension and health care system, a critical situation in the sphere of gender equality, etc. Against this background, the way to a two-party system in Japan seems to be long and difficult. Certain hopes are associated with the center-left Constitutional Democratic Party, which presumably has a more consistent
and coherent program in the socio-economic field than its predecessor, the DPJ. However, at this stage it would be premature to speak of any meaningful success of the CDP.

**Conclusion**

Abe managed to consolidate his power to the extent that most political observers do not see even a theoretical opportunity for a serious opposition from inside the ruling party. After winning the LDP leadership election in September 2018, Abe actually safeguarded his position as the leader of nation until 2021. This means that he will have the longest prime-ministerial term of office in postwar history, exceeding the 8 years’ tenure of Eisaku Sato in 1964-1972.

However, there still remains an element of uncertainty over Abe’s prospects for ruling the party after the elections to the House of Councilors in summer 2019. Japanese political history is rich in evidence when even the ‘iron’ prime ministers infamously ended their political career after political scandals. One can recall the ‘bulldozer’ Kakuei Tanaka, who resigned in 1974 after accusations of fraud with land and subsequently found himself in prison, or the charismatic Morihito Hosokawa, who preferred to retire in 1994, only to avoid being subjected to a humiliating investigation of financial abuses. Shinzo Abe himself, quite popular at the beginning of his first premiership, chose unexpectedly to resign in the summer of 2007, citing ill health, and conscious of the political risks after the LDP's defeat in the elections to the House of Councilors.

The lack of open information on intra-party discussions relocates the problem of succession of leaders into the grey zone. It can be assumed that, for the sake of maintaining power, the post-Abe LDP will bet on a leader with personal charisma and powerful populist resource. However, the potential of factional politics is not fully exhausted, and the meeting of faction leaders still holds the function of a body of personnel policy. In this sense, the LDP has yet to find a formula for transferring power to the next generation of political leaders.

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