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The Liberal Democratic Party in Japan: Conservative Domination

JOSÉ ANTONIO CRESPO

ABSTRACT. This article explores the relationship of Japan's ruling party vis-à-vis other actors in the political system, such as the bureaucracy and the business community—which have been the main pillars of conservative rule in that country for 38 years—as well as other interest groups. It also specifies in what way the democratic processes within the ruling party itself, and in the political system in general, have allowed, notwithstanding the prevailing ideological conservatism, Japanese society to show one of the highest indexes of equality of income distribution in the world.

Introduction

The Japanese party system represents the prototype of what has been called the dominant- or predominant-party system—that is, a system in which the same party wins most national elections under fully competitive conditions.¹ Authentic partisan competitiveness and the prevailing electoral transparency allow it to be situated in the democratic camp; nevertheless, the fact that alternation has not occurred for several decades has prompted some authors to doubt the truly democratic nature of such regimes. Still, there is a very widely accepted conclusion that the key indicator of partisan competitiveness is not actual alternation, but its institutional possibility. So true is this that when the opposition in such regimes obtains (generally by forming a coalition) more votes than the ruling party, alternation occurs without great difficulties, and without endangering political stability.

This clearly differentiates dominant- or predominant-party systems from other practically one-party (or hegemonic-party) regimes in which the opposition, albeit being legally registered and competing formally for power, has no real possibilities of attaining it. In sum, we might say that in competitive-condition, ruling-party systems, alternation is possible, although unlikely, whereas in hegemonic-party regimes, although alternation is possible in theory, it is institutionally impossible. In the latter, alternation demands the regime's qualitative transformation into a fully competitive system, or its overthrow by non-institutional means.

This difference poses an enigma to be solved in the case of one-party, democratically controlled systems, such as those that have existed in Japan, Sweden, Italy or Israel at some point during their historical evolution: How, in clearly competitive and democratic conditions, can a single party prevail in power for decades (Pempel, 1991: 11)? If in non-competitive systems the explanation is simple, it is much less so in democratically ruled ones. Various studies have attempted to elucidate this problem, by using multiple variables.

In the case of Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which was created through the fusion of two conservative parties in 1955 (the Liberal and the Democratic parties), succeeded in staying as the national government for 38 years, through basically legitimate means (from a democratic perspective). Naturally, part of the explanation lies in the performance of the LDP, which led most of the electorate to vote for it in election after election. In this sense it is not coincidental that the party remained so long in government, especially if we compare the situation of Japan after World War II with the present one.

In any event, in Japan as well as in other countries with a dominant party, the very length of time in power contributes to the creation of conditions in which this party's continual re-election is facilitated. The relationship that is established between ruling party and the governmental bureaucracy, although it differs essentially from that which exists in state-party systems, generates a dynamic that helps explain the protracted domination of a single party.² So true is this that, even when there is alternation, the dynamic does not disappear altogether, and it helps the once-ruling party in opposition to return to power in a short period of time (although this is not always so, as seen in the case of Israel). That is, alternation does not always bring the dominant party to an end; it is part and parcel of this system and even revitalizes it, under certain conditions. And this also marks the difference from single-party or hegemonic-party systems,³ in which—generally when alternation is forced through extrainstitutional means—the erstwhile ruling party tends to disappear.

This article examines some of the variables that explain the particular relationship between Japan's dominant LDP and the bureaucracy, which in turn, helps to explain its permanence in power for 38 years, in a fundamentally democratic setting. We will also stress how, in such conditions of democratic rule, the ruling party interacts with other actors—basically, interest groups—who take part, indirectly, in decision making. Finally, we will review the operative mechanisms that allow the government to impose a minimum, yet sufficient, degree of control, oversight and political responsibility, albeit with the absence of alternation for 38 years.

The Triangle of Conservative Power

It is a platitude that in Japan decisions are taken in coordination among three basic sectors, which generally agree to follow a fundamentally conservative, pro-business policy, although within a framework of economic growth: the ruling party, the bureaucracy and the upper echelon of the business class (Krauss, 1989). Naturally, the center of power lies in the Diet (the Japanese parliament), which until 1993 was controlled by the LDP, but which has been replaced by another conservative coalition, led by parties that emerged following a split in the dominant party. The position of the prime minister, who is formal leader of both the bureaucracy and the Diet, corresponds to the chairman of the majority party. Hence, this politico is

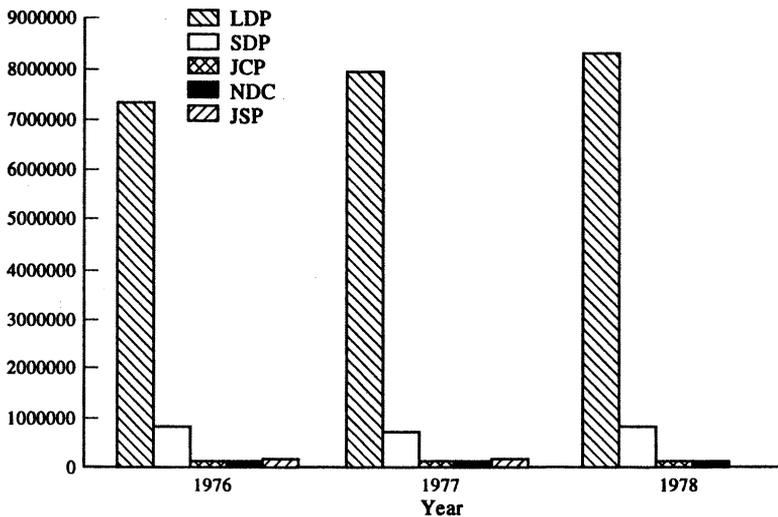
raised to the status of head of the dominant party, of the legislative branch, and of the executive branch.

The bureaucracy has strong links to the parliamentary faction of the dominant party, and consults it regarding the formulation of public policy. The different programs are devised within the bureaucracy, and the Diet passes, rejects, or, more commonly, modifies them according to the criteria of the make up of its different committees. The bureaucracy has, in this sense, a certain degree of autonomy, stemming from its specialized technical knowledge, similar to what Weber described in his classic studies. Still, this autonomy stems also from the fact that, in contrast to what occurs in other countries, the process of recruiting and promoting public officials is not intimately linked to the dominant party. In general it is the universities (and in particular the prestigious University of Tokyo) that directly supply personnel for the bureaucracy, who need not pursue a political career, or even belong to the dominant party. Through personal merit, and experience, officials who have been recruited in this way can reach the highest positions in their fields (except for that of minister, who must be chosen from among the members of parliament). Still, the highest officials normally have technical knowledge superior to that of the minister corresponding to their position (who has devoted time to building a political career); for this reason, they advise the minister and propose the policies they feel are most appropriate within their field, thus acquiring great political influence.

Still, we cannot speak of a dictatorship of the bureaucracy, since the cabinet, which has the real power to reject or modify the proposals, must take into account elements of a political nature, based on the needs of its electoral clientele (which is broad and diverse). However, the conflicts between the bureaucracy and the Diet are infrequent and minor, since most officials have a fundamentally conservative ideological training, which prevents strong confrontations between these two bodies of government. Moreover, there is normally feedback between the bureaucracy and the Diet, although in an inverse manner to that observed in other countries; old bureaucrats who have reached the high point of their careers are normally incorporated into the dominant party and from there obtain a seat in the Diet, thereby helping to give technical advice to legislators on the latter's relationship with the bureaucracy. It is not surprising that these veterans occupy the ministry corresponding to their field once they are in the Diet, or, naturally, that they form part of the specialized committees in their field.

The relationship with big business (*keiretsu*) is less direct, but, nevertheless, owners of large businesses are able to exert considerable political influence. Still, conflicts and confrontations between the business class and the bureaucracy or the Diet are rare; generally, a basic agreement has been maintained regarding policies to be followed, as well as a basic continuity in the LDP's power. The LDP's permanence in power has contributed to this. The upper echelon of the business class constitutes the LDP's principal (although not its largest) client. The other group most directly associated with the dominant party is made up of farmers. The former contribute money, which is so essential for political campaigns, and the latter provide votes (there still exists a sort of gerrymandering that favors rural areas over urban ones).

Indeed, the political influence of large companies stems fundamentally from the financing they provide to the LDP itself or even, and more directly, to that party's members of parliament. Since public finances are clearly separated from the dominant party's finances, the contributions made by the business sector are vital



LDP = Liberal Democratic Party; SDP = Social Democratic Party; JCP = Japanese Communist Party; NDC = New Democratic Club; JSP = Japanese Socialist Party. (Source: Richardson and Flanagan (1984: 309))

FIGURE 1. *External Financing of Political Parties (thousands of yen).*

for the political continuity of the LDP and its leadership within the Diet (Hrebrenar, 1992). The large number of votes that the LDP normally receives is due not only to its skillful economic and social management, but also to the direct spending of enormous resources for the electoral clienteles of the different parliamentarians, in their respective districts (Curtis, 1971). Without those resources, they would be unlikely to win elections and get themselves re-elected over and over. A very high percentage of these funds comes from private companies. Indeed, the LDP has received more external funding by far than any other party.

For this reason, the LDP has had no choice but frequently to consult the upper echelon of the business class, and to link its own interests to the formulation of public policy, in coordination with the bureaucracy. It is even common for the LDP to invite its representatives to the committees that will devise a given policy within the bureaucracy. There are, for example, nearly 5 000 small subsidiary agencies of government bureaus, of sections within these bureaus, that help carry out and execute government tasks. These agencies (*gaikaku dantai*) depend almost exclusively on public financing and are normally headed by former public officials. Membership in them is collective, although voluntary, and includes interest groups, in order to promote cooperation with the formulation and execution of certain policies, and in this manner, to influence the process of the "input" as well as that of the "output" of the government's administrative function. The influence of the *gaikaku dantai* normally increases when they invite prominent parliamentarians to be members of their respective leadership groups, in which transaction both parties benefit: the *gaikaku dantai*, by being directly represented in the Diet, and the congressmen, by having their public image raised (George, 1988: 124–125).

Moreover, the bureaucracy also contributes to the political funding of the dominant party, but to a much smaller extent, and in an indirect manner. Parliamentarians often organize fund-raising events (dinners, breakfasts, etc.): the

officials of bureaus linked to a given parliamentarian's area of specialization are obliged by their superiors to attend, under the pretext that they need to establish direct ties with the corresponding representative or senator, and they pay the entrance fee with their own money. As one of these officials complained:

I have often bought tickets for the parties [given by] prominent members of the parliamentary committees linked to my work. The cost was covered by our ministry's budget. However, we also have to pay from our own pocket for tickets for politicians with whom we must form links. I personally attend an average of 15 to 20 parties a year, which represents a heavy financial burden for me (Van Wolferen, 1989: 133-134).

Clearly, this is an informal, although effective, link between the bureaucracy and the dominant party, which has been strengthened by the latter's long domination, and by the tacit alliance between the two.

The Dominant Party and the Interest Groups

The fact that the LDP has maintained its conservative ideology, and that big business is its main client, has not prevented the dominant party from including in its spectrum of clients other social sectors and interest groups, including those that form part of leftist opposition parties (such as the myriad unions and the nation's teachers). The LDP's most obvious client, aside from the business class, is, as noted above, the farming sector, in exchange for whose votes the Liberal Democratic government has kept the price of rice artificially higher than international prices. But this is not all: government policy toward the countryside, which following World War II went through a deep transformation due to the agrarian reform implemented by the Occupation authorities, have been such that the living standards between the rural and the urban sector do not show the enormous difference seen in other countries, (see Table 1).

Nevertheless, the LDP is basically pragmatic and (despite its conservative orientation), it decided to open up to different sectors of the populace in order to maintain a more or less permanent coalition that would allow it to remain in power. Social and economic management would have to favor the largest number of

TABLE 1. *Ownership of Durable Consumer Goods in Japan (percentage, 1980).*

Goods	Sector	
	Rural	Urban
Refrigerators	99.2	99.1
Vacuum Cleaners	93.5	96.2
Washing Machines	99.3	98.7
Color Television Sets	97.6	98.3
Automobiles	74.5	54.2
Air Conditioners	17.4	42.9
Oil-Burning Stoves	96.4	90.7
Water Heaters	68.9	77.3

Source: Tomita, Nakamura and Hrebrenar (1992: 251)

citizens possible, and not only the most visible clients, if the ruling party was to remain uninterruptedly in power. Hence, in the late 1950s, when it was not clear that the LDP would be able to remain in power as long as it eventually did, and when the most important opposition party, the Japanese Socialist Party, threatened to return to power (after 1948), the top leadership in the Liberal Democratic Party recognized the need to undertake, in addition to the economic recovery program that it had implemented ever since assuming power in 1955, a series of reforms aimed at redistributing income for the sake of a more egalitarian society. The results of this program were spectacular, (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. *Income Distribution in Japan (1939–1976).*

Year	(A) Lowest 20%	(B) Highest 20%	Equality Index*	B/A**
1939	6.3%	55.1%	11.4	8.7
1955	6.6%	43.9%	15.0	6.6
1972	8.4%	38.2%	21.9	4.5
1979	8.7%	35.5%	23.2	4.1

*The closer this index is to 100, the greater the level of equality.

**Represents the number of times the wealthiest class's income is greater than the poorest class's; hence the higher the number, the more inequitable is the income distribution.

Source: Richardson and Flanagan (1984: 404).

However, the LDP did not shut out demands and petitions of groups and organizations not directly linked to it, and it was even receptive to the demands of sectors linked to the opposition. Naturally, the degree of receptiveness varied, as we might assume, in accordance with the political nearness to the LDP of the agency in question. For example, a study on the perception of the leaders of diverse interest groups and civil corporations⁴ indicates that, although the pattern of greater influence in proportion to greater closeness to the LDP has been maintained, the sectors that are farthest removed from the dominant party feel that their demands have been taken into account to a more than negligible degree, (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. *Political Influence of Interest Groups, as Perceived in Accordance with Closeness to the LDP (percentage).*

Influence	Degree of Nearness to the LDP			
	High	Average	Low	Very Low
Strong	25	10	10	4
Moderate	45	36	22	29
Average	23	49	50	40
Weak, Null	7	5	16	25
Total (%)	100	100	98	98
N=	71	61	72	48

Source: Muramatsu and Krauss (1991: 335)

Based on these data, the authors of the research project concluded that:

Far from being completely excluded from the exercise of influence on policy making, the social opposition groups appear to enjoy a reasonable degree of positive influence on policies, and to be even better at acting as veto groups, preventing disadvantageous policy from being adopted by the leading party. (Muramatsu and Krauss, 1991: 337)

In this manner, the LDP essentially fulfilled its function of linking the different social groups with the state machinery, although it is true that interest groups also go directly before government bureaus associated with their specific interests. Nevertheless, the dominant party's mediation between society and state has been irreplaceable.

Political Accountability of the Ruling Party

Permanence in power by a single party for decades tends to encourage impunity and political unaccountability vis-à-vis citizens or other actors and political institutions. This is the existing pattern in single-party and hegemonic-party systems, the abuses and inefficiency of which can only be penalized through enormous effort and at great cost borne by citizens, in a scenario of institutional breakdown. However, in the case of dominant-party regimes, the fundamental competitiveness between parties prevails, and this makes parties not altogether insensitive to the demands and needs of citizens, since they would otherwise lose power to the opposition (as all dominant parties have done, later rather than sooner). The income distribution policies applied by the LDP in Japan are a good example of this.

Naturally, a low level of true partisan competition, although institutional conditions of competitiveness may prevail, can hamper the opposition's ability to challenge abuses of power, and even to supplant the ruling party. However, in the Japanese case, this deficiency has been replaced with a type of internal democracy within the dominant party, or, to be more exact, within its leadership, formed principally by the parliamentary faction. In the LDP, as a party that was created through fusion, different factions coexist and compete among themselves to occupy the position of prime minister and the most important posts within the cabinet. Generally, the faction that has the most members is able to place its leader in the post of prime minister, after the conclusion of the general election. The leader of the most powerful faction is first named party chairman, and then all the LDP's parliamentarians, regardless of the faction to which they belong, cast their vote in favor of this person in the Diet.⁵

The strongest factions have the greatest chance of electing their leader—or one of their strongmen—to the post of party president, although this is not guaranteed. We might say that the relationship existing among the faction leaders is similar to the one that existed among the feudal lords (Daimyo), that is, one of legal equality, although it is hierarchized, based on political strength. The LDP's chairman, who until 1993 had corresponded to the post of prime minister, exercises an authority similar to the ancient military chieftains (Shoguns); that is, the prime minister is *primus inter pares*, rather than a monarch or unchallengeable chieftain (Matsuyama, 1989).

The "losing" factions—those who were not able to place their leader or candidate in the post of head of the party, although they threw in their support to the winning faction by designating the prime minister—control and supervise the

management of the head of government, so as to capitalize on any political mistakes or abuses committed by him. In discovering an act of corruption or political inefficiency, the "opposition" factions within the LDP can cause the downfall of a prime minister, and place their own leader (or one of their most prominent members) in that post. Thus to a certain extent, the absence of partisan alternation in the Japanese party system is offset by the competition among political factions within the LDP itself. As Kono Kenzo, former deputy chairman of the Chamber of Counselors, stated:

The conservatives make up the party that is permanently in power (LDP). If the factions within it did not exist, we would be under the dictatorship of the prime minister. The factions exercise oversight and control over his acts and decisions, preventing them from being unilateral (Thayer, 1969: 55).

In this way, the competition among factions allows the legal and political accountability of prime ministers and of the members of the cabinet to be strengthened to a certain degree. Moreover, the LDP's own factions impose a form of political accountability on heads of government, based on their performance, in terms of both national and party interest. This, in turn, is based on the notion that good government performance will translate into more votes for the LDP; hence, relative electoral defeats must normally be paid for publicly, through the downfall of the prime minister.

Despite the fairness of the rules that prevail in the competition among LDP factions—intended to avoid divisions—on some occasions the party's cohesion has been lost. The first time this occurred, when the Lockheed scandal was made known (1976),⁶ a group of parliamentarians left the party to form the New Liberal Club (NLC). This rift did not prove particularly costly to the LDP, which was able to overcome the crisis and remain in power. In fact, the NLC's legislators would customarily add their votes to the LDP's. In 1986, the LDP needed the NLC's seats in order to maintain its majority, and invited it to take part in a coalition government, which led three years later to the return of the NLC to its mother party.

More recently, however, new splits have been seen in the LDP, again because of corruption and political inertia, first in 1992 and then in 1993. As a result, the LDP was ousted from power and replaced by a broad, seven-party coalition. From these rifts emerged the Renovation Party and the New Party of Japan, which formed the core of a conservative coalition that succeeded in taking an enormous number of votes from the LDP. Even though in the 1993 elections the LDP obtained the largest share of votes (36 percent), as compared to the 11 percent of its closest contender, the Japanese Socialist Party, the number of members of opposition parties in parliament was higher than those of the erstwhile ruling party, and these parliamentarians were able to arrive at an agreement to form a government without the LDP.

Political accountability of government leaders has existed basically through the competition of the factions that make up the dominant party, although it was not until this party's internal cohesion was seriously threatened that this rivalry cost the LDP the control of the government that had not been challenged for 38 years.

Conclusion

The Liberal Democratic Party governed Japan uninterrupted for 38 years (1955–93); it fulfilled the basic purposes of a ruling party, in terms of leading

a national project of economic growth and income distribution, although through a conservative capitalist model, catering—preferentially, although not exclusively—to big business and farmers. At the same time it has served to contain Japan's relatively independent and powerful bureaucracy, the recruitment of which does not depend on parties, not even the dominant party. On the contrary, the dominant party is fed by and benefits from the experience of some retired bureaucrats who, at the end of their career, venture into politics. Finally, it has been an intermediary between different interest groups and the bureaucracy itself, allowing the latter to consider the demands of the former in formulating public policies, although the level of influence exerted by such groups obviously depends on their ideological and political nearness to the dominant party.

The level of concentration of power that is generated in a dominant-party system is considerable—in many senses greater than that which is found in systems with more frequent alternation, given that the opposition is unlikely to be able to gather sufficient strength to contain the party in power, and much less remove it from power. The likelihood that such a party will shirk its political and legal responsibilities is greater. Nevertheless, in this lies its fundamental difference to single-party or hegemonic-party systems: the mere institutional possibility that the alternation will take place at some time generates pressure on the ruling party to work in favor of collective, rather than solely private, goals.

At the same time, the existence of basic competition within the dominant party itself—particularly at the top level of leadership—partially compensates for the oversight that normally occurs among political parties in systems of alternation. Hence, legal transgressions and poor political performance are denounced by the factions within the dominant party that are rivals to the factions holding the post of prime minister in the Diet. Mistakes, political inefficiency and acts of corruption can thus impose political accountability on the cabinet without an alternation of parties necessarily materializing.

The LDP was ousted from government in 1993 by a coalition of seven opposition parties, the core of which was formed by defectors from the dominant party which, therefore, also profess a conservative orientation. The reasons for these desertions were a new corruption scandal implicating the top hierarchy of the ruling party, and the refusal of then prime minister Kishi Miyazawa to carry out political-electoral reforms making the opportunities for competition equal among all parties.

The ousting of the LDP from the government could end the dominant-system regime in Japan (as occurred in Israel in 1977). The ruling coalition will surely proceed to change some of the legal and institutional conditions that favored the continual re-election of the dominant party. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to expect that, as occurred in India and Sweden, the LDP will return to power in a relatively short time. It is possible that the functions that it efficiently fulfilled until now may not be carried out adequately by a partisan coalition that is as heterogeneous and organically dispersed as the one now in power; if this occurs the electoral majority may swing back in favor of the LDP. In any event, the fact that there has been an alternation of power may strengthen the mechanisms of political and legal accountability, forcing the dominant party to exercise power with more caution and prudence, and with less complaisance than formerly, which clearly would contribute to strengthening the country's democracy, even if alternation continues to be an infrequent occurrence.

Notes

1. The term *competitive* refers to the institutional possibility that other parties can attain power, if they obtain the majority vote. On the other hand, *contended* elections refers to the fact that other parties do receive a degree of citizen support such that they do, in effect, have probabilities of attaining the majority vote.
2. As Segovia (Pempel, 1991: Prologue) points out, "all these democracies do not follow the patterns of American democracy and, nevertheless, it is impossible to deny [that they are democracies]."
3. Hegemonic parties differ from single parties in that the former share the political and electoral stage with other legally registered parties, although their link with the state guarantees that they will win most elections at all of the most significant levels of power (Sartori, 1980: 157).
4. Research project that included the 250 leading interest groups in Japan, conducted in 1980.
5. Naturally, there have been exceptions, when the rivalry between two powerful factions endangers party unity, in which case the leader of a third faction is named prime minister, even if this faction is far from the most important. Or, the largest factions can even lose the elections, if the remaining factions enter into an agreement to obtain the presidency. Since the voting process requires an absolute majority of votes, if none of the hopefuls obtains it in the first round, a second round is called, in which only the two candidates that had the most votes in the first round participate. The leaders of the smallest factions will agree that, if one of them is chosen for the second round, the votes of the losing faction will be for this faction, allowing it to surpass the votes of the dominant faction.
6. Comparable to the Watergate scandal in the United States; Lockheed had illegally offered funds to obtain a government contract. The then prime minister, Tanaka Kakuei—one of the most prominent figures of the postwar period—was implicated, and spent time in jail before being released on bail.

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