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Survey Articles

The Liberal Democratic Party at 50: Sources of Dominance and Changes in the Koizumi Era

Patrick KÖLLNER*

More than 50 years after its founding, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is still going strong. It has become *the* dominant party within a democratic setting. How did the LDP manage to cling to its dominant position for such a long time? And to what extent has the LDP changed colours under the leadership of Koizumi Jun'ichirō? This survey article attempts to answer these questions by focussing on the three dimensions of LDP dominance: electoral, parliamentary, and executive dominance. It argues that clientelist politics explain a good deal of the success of the LDP in the past. Such an orientation however became decreasingly effective and sustainable in a political environment that has changed significantly since the early 1990s. In the Koizumi era, the LDP managed to rise again to the challenges posed to its dominance by appealing directly to voters, by optimizing electoral cooperation, and by making efforts to centralize policymaking. Whether these more recent approaches to maintaining LDP dominance can be sustained, however, remains an open question.

I. Introduction

In November 2005, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) celebrated its 50th anniversary. Apart from a short period in 1993–1994, the LDP governed Japan during these 50 years, most of the time on its own. It is not too much to say that the LDP has become *the* dominant party within a democratic setting. Whereas dominant parties in other democracies have lost their grip on power or have disappeared altogether, the LDP continues to be the most popular party in Japan, dominating both the parliament and the executive.

What explains the success of the LDP? And to what extent has the LDP changed colours under the leadership of Koizumi Jun'ichirō? Based on an examination of the various dimensions of LDP dominance, I will address these questions in this article. I will argue that clientelist politics played a major role in maintaining the electoral and parliamentary dominance of the LDP until well into the 1990s and that factional dynamics within the party helped to maintain executive dominance during this

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period. The 1990s, however, saw manifold changes in Japan's political system that challenged the dominance of the LDP. These challenges are highlighted in section 4 of the article. New approaches in the Koizumi era to overcome these challenges by bringing new voters into the party's fold, optimizing electoral cooperation, and creating a more coherent party are discussed in section 5. A short section on the LDP's perspectives concludes the article, but I will begin with a brief conceptual and analytical introduction to the topic of dominant parties.

2. Defining and Analyzing Dominant Parties

Why do dominant parties such as the LDP arouse interest? Two reasons can be suggested: one is more academic and the other is a practical explanation. If we understand 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 interest 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.

But what exactly is a dominant party? More than 50 years ago, Maurice Duverger defined such a 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 that 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 influence; they deplore it, but admit it (Duverger 1959: 317).

Yet there is no consensus on the yardstick to be applied for contenders to the title of '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 (cf. Bogaards 2004: 174–176). But even the most comprehensive list of requirements for a dominant party, put together by Brendan O'Leary, has been widely met by the LDP. O'Leary (1994: 4) postulates that a dominant party in democratic systems has to exhibit the following characteristics:

First, it...must be dominant in number: it must regularly win more seats in parliamentary or congressional elections than its opponents....Secondly, this party must enjoy a dominant bargaining position. It must be able to stay in government on a regular basis. If 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.¹

What are the specific challenges faced by dominant or would-be-dominant parties? Françoise Boucek (1998) distinguishes three distinct dimensions or, from the viewpoint of the parties in question, challenges. Such challenges exist for many parties, but dominant parties have to master them over an extended period to stay in power. 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

1. O'Leary's list is based 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 and mutually supportive policies'.

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 strategies¹. In other words, the dimension of electoral dominance is concerned with the question of how parties attract a large number of voters to lay the basis for a hegemonic position in a country's party system.

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 (including the design and redesign of electoral 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 cooperation with other parties within the framework of electoral alliances. Of sometimes even greater importance can be how other parties in the relevant party system deal with the challenge of electoral coordination and cooperation. Clearly, maintaining a dominant position in parliament is easier when the opposition does not work together in terms of unified 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 and maintaining coalitions is vital 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. For dominant parties with a majority of their own, internal coordination can become a vital question. Intra-party groups, so-called factions, can play a significant role in terms of managing dominant parties (Boucek 1998: 107–108; Nyblade 2005: 2–3, 15). Focussing on these three dimensions of dominance, I will now turn to the case of the LDP.

3. Maintaining a Dominant Position Until the Early 1990s

As Guiseppe Di Palma (1990) notes, it is not easy to establish one-party dominance in democratic systems.² It is however even more difficult to retain dominance 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)? With regard to both the electoral and the parliamentary dominance of the Japanese Liberal Democrats, the importance of the electoral framework in Japan has repeatedly been emphasized. Until 1993, the so-called single non-transferable voting system (SNTV) was used in electoral districts with, on average, four Diet members.³ 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 coordination problems. If a party nominates too many candidates in a given district, the collective failure of the candidates in question (so-called *tomodaore*) could ensue. Some scholars have argued that the LDP was particularly apt at solving its coordination problems by means of effective nomination strategies (e.g. Baerwald 1986: 50–51; Cox and Niou 1994; Cox and Rosenbluth

2. On the context and the origins of the LDP's rise to power, see Pempel (1990a,b) and Lee (2004).

3. 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 at the national level. Under SNTV, every voter has a *single vote*, which she/he gives to a particular candidate. The candidates receiving the highest number of votes in a district are elected. 'Excess votes', votes going beyond the number required for a candidate to get elected, cannot be transferred to another candidate of the same party—hence 'non-transferable' voting system.

1994).⁴ This argument has however to be put into perspective. For example, Ray Christensen and Paul E. Johnson (1995) point out data problems leading to overestimations of the efficiency of LDP nominations. Moreover, Christensen (2000) shows that when the opposition parties cooperated partly or fully in national elections, they were sometimes even better able to coordinate their candidates than the LDP. Such effective cooperation between two or more opposition parties remained, however, restricted to individual elections between 1972 and 1990 (Baerwald 1986: 56–60; Johnson 2000; Baker and Scheiner 2004).

While nomination strategies under SNTV are not the ‘magic bullet’ for explaining the electoral success of the LDP, another aspect of the old electoral system merits closer attention: SNTV generates incentives to pursue candidate-oriented vote-mobilization activities (cf. Carey and Shugart 1995; Grofman 1999). With regard to the Japanese case, the ability to engage in pork barrelling proved to be an advantage for the ruling LDP, an advantage other parties did not or hardly possess at all (Cox 1996, 1997; Scheiner 2005). Individual LDP candidates also reacted to the electoral system and the challenge posed by the organizational support enjoyed by opposition parties [unions in the case of the Socialist Party (JSP) and strong party organization in the case of the Communist Party (JCP)] by institutionalizing personal support organizations, so-called *kōenkai*.⁵ A well-functioning *kōenkai* was seen as a precondition for obtaining the necessary number of votes under SNTV—particularly in electoral districts where more than one candidate from a given party competed for votes.⁶ Even though many Socialist and Communist politicians also established *kōenkai* in their electoral districts, these personal support organizations usually did not reach the same scope and level of complexity as those of LDP politicians (Masumi 1995: 347–48).⁷

One aspect of the electoral system that has been accorded prominence in terms of explaining the parliamentary dominance of the LDP has been malapportionment. For example, Woodall (1999: 34, 35) argues that ‘[t]he blessings that SNTV bestowed upon the LDP are striking malapportionment 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 (Woodall 1999: 33–34; Hrebennar 2000: 45–49).⁸ Christensen and Johnson (1995) show however that malapportionment accounted for victories for the LDP camp only in two national elections (1979 and 1983). Its importance for maintaining LDP parliamentary dominance should thus

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4. Optimal candidate nomination strategies have to be based on proper evaluations of vote potentials and thus learning processes. Totally ‘rational’ nomination behaviour however seems impossible because of limited strategic capacity and informational uncertainty (Baker and Scheiner 2004).
 5. On the beginnings of *kōenkai*, see Curtis (1971: 127–136) and Masumi (1995: 236–238). As Peng Er Lam (1994) shows, *kōenkai* have also been widespread in urban areas. For illustrative accounts of *kōenkai* operations, see Ishikawa and Hirose (1989: chap 3) and Bouissou (1998).
 6. See Grofman (1999: 381) and the literature cited therein.
 7. This weaker institutionalization was partly due to the long-time opposition status of both parties. Moreover, the resources of labour unions (in the case of the JSP) and the party itself (in the case of the JCP) in terms of finance, personnel, and logistics made it less necessary for such opposition politicians to build up personal support networks. In contrast to the LDP, there were also far fewer electoral districts in which a number of JSP (let alone JCP) candidates competed against each other.
 8. Many of these rural districts were bastions of the LDP, which—for understandable reasons—never showed much interest in radical re-districting. It has to be noted though that the most severe imbalances between electoral districts have been reduced since the early 1990s and that gerrymandering seems no longer possible (Horiuchi and Saito 2003; Christensen 2004).

not be exaggerated. As Gerald L. Curtis (1988: 51) suggests, the over-representation of rural districts was simply a contributing factor to the electoral success of the LDP. It helped to cushion the effects of rapid urbanization starting in the 1950s, which otherwise would have favoured the opposition parties even more strongly.

While effective voter mobilization via pork barrelling and personalized support organizations can be pointed out as the main local mechanisms for maintaining the LDP's electoral dominance, we also need to look at the central level of politics. Here, additional sources of both the LDP's electoral and the parliamentary dominance can be found. Some but not all of these can also be subsumed under the label of 'clientelist politics'. First, the party's success in linking up with numerous interest groups has to be mentioned. Well into the 1990s, 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 towards the LDP is not really surprising: for many years the Liberal Democrats were the only party which could not only formulate policies but also implement them and reward groups belonging to its 'grand coalition'. 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).

During its long rule, the LDP was able to firmly institutionalize the exchange of resources with national support groups. Individual factions within the LDP cultivated links with particular interest groups and industries. In particular, the powerful Tanaka faction and its successors entertained a vast network of such relationships. Tanaka Kakuei referred to his faction as the 'general hospital' (*sōgō byōin*) that, by means of its pool of specialized doctors (i.e. faction members concentrating on particular policy areas), could deal with any problem. Tanaka can be 'credited' for perfecting 'machine style' relations between the LDP and interest groups at both the national and the local levels.⁹ In exchange for donations, new party members, and vote mobilization, national interest groups were bestowed with direct influence upon government policy (via their representatives in parliament) or at least indirect influence (via links to Diet members and faction leaders).

Yet, the exchange of political goods and services also involved broader parts of the population. As argued nearly 20 years ago by Daniel I. Okimoto (1988b), the LDP did not only target organized groups by means of clientelistic exchange, patronage, and a general pro-business orientation but also sought generalized voter support. A number of policies were oriented towards the broad and diffuse segment of non-organized voters. For example, welfare, environmental, and other policies aimed at improving the quality of life. Voters targeted by these measures included 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).¹⁰

Mention also has to be made of 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

9. A vivid description of Tanaka's approach to dealing with interest groups can be found in Johnson (1995: 183–211).

10. An interesting question is whether voters in Japan also rewarded the LDP for good economic performance and punished it for bad economic performance. The comparative literature on 'economic voting' shows that the strength of the linkage between economics and vote choice differs not only across countries and between elections but is also contingent on institutional context factors. With regard to Japan, Steven R. Reed and Gregory G. Brunk (1984) found that economic factors influenced election outcomes only in the post-oil crisis period (1975–1980). Christopher J. Anderson and Jun Ishii (1997) claim that the performance of the domestic economy did not affect electoral support for the LDP in the period of 1958–1992, but that openness to trade hurt the party in national elections.

groups through distributive political measures such as tax gifts, subsidies, or the introduction of welfare-oriented policy instruments. Finally, external factors also helped the LDP to maintain dominance. The oppositional left, clinging to positions often at odds with reality, made achieving parliamentary dominance comparatively easy for the LDP until the early 1990s.¹¹ The increasing fragmentation of the opposition since the 1960s¹² and its only temporary electoral cooperation at the national level likewise contributed to reducing the chances of the JSP-led opposition to assume power.

Challenges to the LDP in the area of executive dominance centred primarily on intra-party management. Until the early 1990s, the LDP did not have to share power with another party for long. Only between 1983 and 1986, the LDP was forced to enter a coalition with the New Liberal Club (NLC), a group of reform-oriented former LDP Diet members. However, even during this brief period, key posts remained with the LDP: the NLC was represented in government 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 until the mid-1970s and again in the 1980s. As far as Diet voting was concerned, tight party discipline was maintained in nearly every instance. The main locus of policy-making was located anyway in LDP party organs rather than in the Diet. The party was thus able to pre-structure the legislative process. Nevertheless from the mid-1970s onwards, the LDP sought to reduce frictions with opposition parties over controversial bills by means of inter-party consultations (Mochizuki 1982; Richardson 127–151: chap 6; Stockwin 1999: 113–121; Fukumoto 2000).

Being in possession of parliamentary majorities most of the time, the main challenge the LDP faced in the executive dimension did not concern coordination processes in the cabinet or the Diet, but rather intra-party management. Here, factions (*habatsu*) played a major role. These increasingly institutionalized power groups assumed tasks in the areas of candidate nomination, the acquisition of funds, and the allocation of party and government posts. The factional system inside the LDP was guided by a set of informal norms that determined in particular how cabinet and party posts would be distributed according to criteria of proportionality and seniority (Satō and Matsuzaki 1986: 66–73; Curtis 1988: 80–116; Kohno 1992).

From the 1970s onwards, the LDP's institutionalized factional system served as an effective functional equivalent of formalized procedures and norms of party management. Arguably, the factional system contributed to the channelling and the 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 Diet members 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, institutionalized informal rules had an integrative effect largely counteracting the natural centrifugal tendencies of factionalist party fragmentation (Reed 1991; Richardson 1997: 63–68; 2001).

The institutionalized 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 be judged negatively, but inside the LDP, this restraining of the party's

11. This it not to deny that the Marxism propounded by the JCP and the JSP was open to flexible interpretations (cf. Johnson 2000: 24–56).

12. In 1960, the Democratic Socialist Party [Minshatō (DSP)] emerged from the JSP, and in 1964, the neo-Buddhist Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party) was formed.

core executive was seen by many in a positive light. Changing factional alliances led to a fair degree of pluralism inside Japan's dominant party. From a normative perspective, this can be evaluated ambivalently. Certainly, changing factional alliances are not a genuine alternative to real turnovers in power. It can also be criticized that faction-induced pluralism did not increase the participatory opportunities of Japanese citizens. In any case, 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 thus contributed to the long dominance of the party in Japanese politics (Curtis 1988: 236; Reed 1991; Hrebenar and Nakamura 2000; Park 2001; Köllner 2006: 104–108).

4. Challenges to LDP Dominance Since the Early 1990s

As Duverger noted many years ago, every dominant party carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Long-term rule can lead to a party's loss of vitality: 'To the same degree that dominance stabilises political life, it also makes it tensionless. The dominant party ... calcifies' (Duverger 1959: 319). 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).

Japan's LDP has not been immune to such dynamics. The chain of large-scale corruption scandals in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a warning sign in this regard.¹³ In the end, however, it was an intra-party conflict—and thus a problem in the realm of executive dominance—which brought the LDP down in 1993. After parts of the former Tanaka faction left the party, the LDP lost its majority in the July 1993 Lower House election. A seven-party coalition led by Hosokawa Morihiro was able to assume power.¹⁴ But after only 10 months in opposition, the LDP benefited from tensions inside the coalition government which brought the party, assisted by its former political adversary, the Socialists (now Social Democrats), back into government. 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 Cristiana, remains a matter of speculation.

In 1996, the Liberal Democrats recovered the post of prime minister. The moderate ideological orientation of the LDP now became a major advantage for the party in terms of executive dominance. Forced by the loss of their own parliamentary majority into entering coalitions, the LDP made the most out of its coalition potential by allying itself with the Social Democrats (1994–1998), the New Kōmeitō (since 1999), and some other smaller parties.¹⁵

The short intermezzo of the Hosokawa government however had long-term consequences. Reforms enacted in early 1994 brought about a new hybrid electoral system, which—due to its strong majoritarian component—makes turnovers in government easier. Moreover, the reform of political financing contributed to a significant decline of donations by the corporate sector, which at the same time was hit by Japan's economic malaise. The introduction of the new electoral system and

13. See for example, Curtis (1999: 73–78, 85–87) on these corruption scandals.

14. The background of the LDP split and the establishment and fall of the following coalition government are discussed in detail by Curtis (1999: 65–136).

15. Government coalitions in Japan since the mid-1990s have included the Shintō Sakigake (1994–1998), the Liberal Party (1999–2000), and its splinter product, the New Conservative Party (2000–2003).

new regulations concerning the financing of political activities weakened the central foundations on which the LDP's factions had been built. As a consequence, the intra-party groups lost cohesion and influence (see also below).

An important external threat to LDP rule evolved in the form of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which had been founded in 1996 and had absorbed a number of smaller parties in 1998, and developed into a serious contender for power. The Lower House election of 2000 underlined the vote-gathering potential of the DPJ. In terms of defending its electoral dominance, the LDP was by now faced with a triple challenge. First, the DPJ proved to be an attractive alternative to the LDP. The Democrats managed to gain ground under the proportional representation segment of the new electoral system. In 2000, the DPJ won 47 of the 180 available seats; the LDP was only slightly more successful with 56 seats. In the 300 single-member districts (SMDs), the DPJ was also able to gain ground (cf. Reed 2003b). The DPJ was particularly successful in winning over unaffiliated voters (*mutōhasō*), which by now accounted for around 50% of the Japanese electorate (cf. Tanaka and Martin 2003; Hashimoto 2004).

By the beginning of the new millennium, the LDP was in danger of becoming relegated to a rural party that had to rely mainly on the incumbency advantage of many of its Diet members and links with support groups at the local and national level (cf. Reed 2003b). In 2000, this combination was still effective enough to capture, in conjunction with its junior coalition partners, a majority in the Lower House. From a longer term perspective, it was however highly questionable whether this combination of factors would suffice to remain in power. Two further challenges put the electoral dominance of the LDP at risk. First, support groups at the national level were no longer able to mobilize the number of votes they were able to muster in the past. The Upper House elections in 2001 clearly showed the declining effectiveness of the 'organised vote' (*soshikihyō*) (Köllner 2002). Even though the DPJ, because of its links to unionized interests, was also affected by this trend, it had less to lose as it had also been more effective in terms of compensating for this decline by mobilizing unaffiliated voters.

A third challenge to LDP electoral dominance was potentially even more problematic than the declining effectiveness of the 'organised vote'. The problem was Japan's stagnant economy. As the economic pie was getting smaller in Japan, the LDP faced increasing problems with regard to rewarding the members of its 'grand coalition'. The glue binding together the LDP and its various interest groups was bound to diminish in this process. During the latter half of the 1990s, LDP leaders were happy to ignore this challenge and continued to engage in governmental largesse, which benefited traditional party supporters. In view of the rising mountain of public debt, however, this approach was untenable. In sum, the LDP's electoral dominance was clearly under threat by the turn of the century.

In this kind of environment, the LDP selected in 2000 a new party leader: Mori Yoshirō. Mori's disastrous performance in office—his gaffes provided continuous fodder for the opposition—sent cabinet support rates into free fall and imbued the party with a sense of crisis. To polish the image of the LDP which has been tarnished by the back-room selection of Mori, the party decided that his successor would be chosen in an open election in which the LDP's regional federations would be given increased voting power. Individual prefectural associations of the party decided to further the democratic appeal of the election by having their respective votes decided by primaries. This triggered a bandwagon effect, with many other prefectural associations following suit.¹⁶ Fearing a defeat

16. Personal interview with LDP deputy secretary general, Tokyo, October 2005.

in the upcoming Upper House election in 2001, party members voted overwhelmingly for Koizumi Jun'ichirō who appealed directly to them on the basis of his image of freshness and change. Koizumi's landslide win in the primaries induced a sufficient number of LDP Diet members to also vote for him, ensuring his election as the party's 20th president in April 2001 (cf. Lincoln 2002: 68–69).

5. The LDP in the Koizumi Era: New Answers in the Face of Challenged Dominance

With hindsight, the election of Koizumi proved extremely fortunate for the LDP. At a time when the party had been on a downward slope, the new LDP president turned things around. Effectively, Koizumi was instrumental to restoring the electoral dominance of the party. While he loosened, on the one hand, existing clientelistic links by means of reducing state subsidies for public works projects, privatizing public corporations, and so forth, Koizumi also brought new cohorts of voters into the party's fold. Koizumi managed to capture the imagination of the Japanese public by means of snappy slogans and dramatizing politics. What set Koizumi apart from most former LDP leaders¹⁷ was that he appealed directly to the public. While critical Japanese observers have labelled Koizumi a 'populist' (cf. Kubota 2004; Kabashima and Steel 2005), admirers have praised him for his non-elitist, unconventional demeanour, and use of easy-to-understand language (cf. Takase 2005).¹⁸ In any case, popular support provided Koizumi with the necessary mandate to pursue his reform agenda.

In Koizumi's reform agenda, the two pillars of a reform of Japan's political economy and a reform of this own party were closely interlinked. When Koizumi promised to destroy the LDP if it resisted reform, what he meant was not the destruction of the party *per se*. Rather it meant the destruction of the old-style LDP approach of nursing clientele relationships that had been perfected by former Prime Minister Tanaka and his factional lineage. In some ways, Koizumi revived a fight that his political mentor, former Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo (1976–1978), had largely failed to win (Kobayashi 2005: 154–155; Yomiuri Shinbun Seiji-bu 2005: 11–12). The political rationale of what were on the surface economic reforms—privatizing public corporations and postal services, reducing wasteful public spending on infrastructure projects, devolving more power and independent tax sources to the regional level—consisted of severing the traditional clientelistic links between Japan's dominant party and various interest groups. What this all boiled down to was a largely, if perhaps only temporarily, successful attempt at reinventing the LDP. Koizumi instinctively understood that after so many momentous changes in Japan and beyond in the 1990s—the collapse of the bubble economy, the rise of information technology, the increased momentum of globalization, and the unravelling of social and other ties in Japan—the LDP could not go on as if nothing had happened.

Koizumi's popular appeals for reform were certainly in tune with the changing electoral game. With the increasing importance of unaffiliated voters and the continued urbanization of Japan's electoral geography,¹⁹ the LDP could not hope to uphold its dominance in any sustainable way by sim-

17. Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro (1982–1987) being the other recent exception to the rule (cf. Krauss 2002).

18. It should be noted that Koizumi's direct appeals to the people were also born out of necessity, as he could not bank on a broad basis of intra-party support for his reform goals.

19. Based on census data regarding population density, Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs determined in 2003 that a third each of the country's 300 local electoral districts were urban, rural, and 'in between' respectively. In purely dichotomous terms (more urban or more rural), 187 electoral districts—that is well over 60% of the total—were on the urban side in 2003. For a detailed breakdown of districts, see Yomiuri Shinbun Tōkyō Honsha Seron Chōsabu Hensha (2004: 63–65).

ply relying on personalized and clientelistic approaches. Sure enough, even after electoral reform, *kōenkai* of individual Diet members continue to be useful as permanent links to sympathizers and as ‘vote banks’ that are especially valuable in times of low election turnouts (Krauss and Pekkanen 2004; Köllner 2006: 188–191). The same applies broadly to linkages with national support groups. However, such instruments are not very useful when it comes to capturing floating or unaffiliated voters.

In view of the increasing unravelling of family, community, or corporate bonds which in the past tied voters together,²⁰ non-traditional instruments and mechanisms must increasingly be used for mobilizing voters who are not core supporters of a given party or candidate. The most obvious way for getting in touch with such voters is by means of audio-visual media. Since the mid-1980s and increasingly so since the early 1990s, television in particular has changed the way politics is ‘consumed’ by the Japanese public (Krauss and Nyblade 2005). Although the trend towards full-scale ‘mediatisation’ of politics is still a fairly recent one in Japan, its impact on political communications and marketing is already profound (Klein 2006). Political parties have to professionalize their media communication strategies to get their messages across. Television in particular puts party leaders and, of course, the head of government into the spotlight. As Ellis S. Krauss (2002: 10, 12) notes,

the personalization of the role [of the prime minister] is increasingly important to voters....He (or she) will be much more central to party fortunes at the polls, but also the subject to increased scrutiny from media and voters—leading to greater accountability but not necessarily more political stability. Skilful and attractive prime ministers will gain popularity and better results for their party; unskilful and unattractive ones will find their terms quite short.

Among recent LDP leaders, Koizumi has demonstrated the greatest adeptness at dealing with the media. He used television and the Internet²¹ to portray himself as the champion of reform and his opponents within the LDP as ‘resistance forces’ stuck in the past. On numerous occasions, Koizumi made use of powerful imagery transmitted by the media. He frequently depicted politics as a colourful drama, managing to get even usually disinterested people involved in politics and to vote for the LDP at election time.²² Whether Koizumi’s successors will demonstrate similar media skills remains, however, to be seen.

Recent elections provide evidence about how the LDP managed to maintain parliamentary dominance in the Koizumi era. Electoral cooperation between the LDP and its coalition partner, the New Kōmeitō, reached a high point in 2005. At the time of the 2000 general election, that is before Koizumi took the helm of the LDP, electoral cooperation among the governing parties had been restricted to minimizing the number of SMDs in which candidates of the parties competed with each other for votes (cf. Reed 2003a: 54–55). Such coordination continued in the Lower House election of 2003.²³ More importantly, in that election, the New Kōmeitō also asked its voters in most SMDs

20. In other words, Japan is witnessing the phenomenon of the ongoing process of individualization (‘psychological anarchy’ in the words of a former LDP secretary general interviewed by the author in October 2005). For illustrations of recent social trends in Japan, see Nathan (2004).

21. In 2001, the Cabinet Public Relations Office began to email so-called lion heart newsletters focussing on Koizumi’s activities and thoughts. Until mid-2006, 220 such newsletters had been issued.

22. The general election in 2005 provided a perfect example of how an election can be framed by skilfully instrumentalizing the media. For analytic accounts of this so-called drama-like election (*gekijō senkyō*), see Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) and Klein (2006).

23. In fact, there was not a single electoral district in which candidates from the two parties competed head on.

in which it did not field a candidate, to vote for the candidate of the LDP. As a result, more than 70% of its voters complied. Individual LDP candidates thus benefited from up to 20,000 additional votes per SMD.²⁴ In 2005, finally there was nearly perfect electoral cooperation between the LDP and the New Kōmeitō. LDP candidates stood in 290 SMDs, New Kōmeitō candidates in nine SMDs, and in the last remaining district both parties supported a nominally independent candidate. Altogether 239 of the LDP candidates received official backing from New Kōmeitō. In sum, electoral cooperation between the two governing parties has come to function quite smoothly. On the contrary, electoral cooperation between the opposition parties has made far less progress in the new millennium. In 2003, for example, DPJ and SDP candidates competed for votes in 41 SMDs. In all likelihood, unified candidacies would have brought them five more seats, which instead went to the governing parties (Yomiuri Shinbun Tōkyō Honsha Seron Chōsabu Hensha 2004: 77–78). In addition, the JCP insisted until 2003, as a matter of principle, on nominating candidates in all 300 SMDs—in spite of not standing a chance of getting even a single candidate through.²⁵

Under Koizumi, who in 2006 became Japan's third-longest serving prime minister in the postwar period, important changes with relevance for the executive dominance of the LDP have also taken place. While party leaders before Koizumi either based their intra-party power on factional leadership or were dependent on the support of faction leaders, Koizumi tried to keep the factions at bay (Kubota 2004: chap 8). He deliberately ignored the principle of proportional representation of intra-party factions when putting together his cabinets and also in more recent reshuffles of the party executive. Koizumi thus hastened the weakening of the LDP's factions, which has resulted from the introduction of political reforms in 1994 (Krauss and Pekkanen 2004; *The Japan Times*, 26 June 2006: 1, 2).

Koizumi also tried to circumvent the traditional LDP decision-making process on material policy by strengthening the role of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy set up by his predecessor Mori and by relying on other advisory councils for policy input. More generally, the prime minister was able to build on administrative reforms passed in 1999. These reforms beefed up the institutional and personnel resources of the prime minister, *inter alia*, by way of establishing a new Cabinet Office. As a consequence of these reforms and related legislative changes, the power base of the Japanese prime minister has been broadened, and it has become easier for him in institutional terms to exert political leadership (cf. Shinoda 2005; Itō 2006).

In connection with the strengthening of the resources of the prime minister, Koizumi also attempted to wrest decision-making power from the LDP's Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC), the party's 'internal legislature' (cf. Richardson 1997: 68–69). These attempts met with resistance from the leaders of the party's 'policy tribes' (*zoku*) who used to wield tremendous influence in their respective policy areas. On a number of high-profile reform issues, Koizumi had to accept compromises due to resistance from *zoku* (cf. Eda 2004; George Mulgan 2005: 289–290). Only in the first few months after the electoral triumph of 2005 was Koizumi genuinely able to practise a centralized top-down style of decision-making.

In the aftermath of the LDP's victory in the 2005 election, Koizumi was also able to push through a set of organizational reforms aimed at bringing about a more coherent governing party. These

24. According to a simulation of the Yomiuri Shinbun, such votes decided in up to 46 electoral districts between victory and defeat, *de facto* enabling the LDP to remain the number-one party in Japan (Yomiuri Shinbun Tōkyō Honsha Seron Chōsabu Hensha 2004: 70–74).

25. In 2005, the JCP did not present candidates in 25 districts (cf. Kabashima and Sugawara 2005: 116–117).

reforms resulted, *inter alia*, in the abolishment of a number of PARC divisions and special committees and—more importantly—in limiting the terms of division heads to two years (*Asahi Shinbun*, 8 November 2005: 4; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 10 November 2005: 2). The term limits were aimed at further undermining the clout of *zoku* leaders. A significant number of well-known *zoku* leaders had already retired from politics or had encountered electoral defeat during Koizumi's stint at the helm of the party. After more than four-and-a-half years of wrestling with *zoku* leaders and other LDP Diet members opposing his policies, Koizumi finally managed to centralize decision-making on core issues to a degree unprecedented in the more recent history of Japan's dominant party (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 20 October 2005: 2). It is an open question though whether his successors will be able to consolidate the gains made by Koizumi in terms of creating a more coherent party. While Koizumi has been remarkably successful in terms of scaling back the power of vested interests within his own party, it is not clear yet if and what kind of internal structures and processes will get institutionalized to take on some of the functions formerly performed by factions and policy tribes (Kobayashi 2005). Guaranteeing effective intra-party coordination and minimizing intra-party conflicts will continue to top the list of challenges to maintaining the executive dominance of the LDP.

6. Conclusions

For the better part of the past 50 years, Japan's Liberal Democrats have been fairly successful in terms of mastering challenges in all three dimensions of party dominance. They adapted well to the old electoral system, and they cultivated links with a host of interest groups. The LDP actively used clientelistic instruments at the local and national levels to cement support but also introduced popular policies aimed at the broader public, especially when its rule was under threat. The party also benefited from environmental conditions, including the fragmentation of the opposition and its failure to cooperate more effectively in electoral terms. Increasingly institutionalized informal structures and norms helped to contain intra-party dissent.

Since the early 1990s, however, a number of new challenges have arisen which threaten the dominance of the LDP. In particular, the advantages of the old electoral system are gone for good. Government turnovers have become easier. The oppositional DPJ has arguably developed into a serious contender for power. Moreover, with Japan's soaring public debt, the large-scale use of clientelism has become increasingly unaffordable. Finally, the ability of the LDP's national support groups to mobilize votes has declined, whereas unaffiliated voters have become ever more important in electoral terms. Faced with these new challenges, Prime Minister Koizumi managed to defend the electoral dominance of the LDP by means of loosening existing clientelistic links and appealing instead directly to voters on the basis of reform promises. He demonstrated an uncanny ability to instrumentalize the media, both old and new. Electoral cooperation with the New Kōmeitō progressed quite smoothly under Koizumi, contributing to the parliamentary dominance of the LDP. Last but not least, Koizumi also rewrote the dynamics of executive dominance by moving the LDP in the direction of a more coherent party. He hastened the weakening of factions, scaled back the power of policy tribes, and also made the most of the new institutional resources that Japanese prime ministers possess due to recent administrative reforms.

Yet it would not be prudent to assume that, as a consequence of the new approaches in the Koizumi era, the LDP is destined to remain Japan's ever-dominant party. The future of the LDP depends on how it will continue to tackle the challenges in all three dimensions of dominance. In more concrete terms: will the party be able to uphold its electoral dominance by offering 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 core ‘vote banks’, and will it be able to retain the support of a sufficient percentage of Japan’s fickle unaffiliated voters? Conversely, can the DPJ strengthen its claim to be a reliable alternative to the LDP and can it reconnect to its earlier successes in winning over a substantial part of the ever more important group of unaffiliated voters? Will the opposition parties be able to cooperate more effectively in national elections to break the parliamentary dominance of the LDP? And with respect to the executive dominance of the LDP, will the coalition with New Kōmeitō, on whose vote mobilization efforts the LDP has increasingly become dependent, hold? Or, will New Kōmeitō at some point jump ship? And finally, will the LDP be able to build on Koizumi’s ‘creative destruction’ of informal party institutions by establishing durable structures and mechanisms for maintaining party discipline and coherence? 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 future historians.

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