

# Change and Prospect of Japanese Politics

**Japan saw a change of government on August 30, 2009. The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) was removed from office by the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), after ruling Japanese politics for most of the post-war period. The DPJ aims to bring about a number of changes for the nation.**

In the general election of Japan's House of Representatives, the main opposition party (DPJ) defeated the ruling party (LDP) with a slogan advocating a change of government. It was the first time in the post-war era that a single opposition political party was able to form government, and marked the end of 16 years of continuous LDP rule. The House of Representatives is the Lower House of the Japanese Diet and the party holding a majority of seats can elect the Prime Minister. Additionally, the House's decision takes precedence over the Upper House (the House of Councillors) in certain areas if there is a difference of opinion. With the Lower House being 480 seats in total, the historic victory marked an enormous loss for the LDP, reducing their seats from 300 to only 119. On the other hand, the DPJ almost doubled their standing to obtain 308 seats from the previous 115 to secure the majority. The turnout was 69.28% in the non-mandatory voting system of Japan and this was the highest since changes to the voting system in 1996, reflecting the heightened public interest in the campaign. As a result, the DPJ's President, Yukio Hatoyama, was elected to become the new Prime Minister. After the election victory, the DPJ built a coalition with the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party to consolidate power at both the Lower and Upper Houses.

Although the LDP won an overwhelming victory in the Lower House election of 2005, problems such as corruption and the bungling of public pension-premium payment records caused a collapse in support for the party. The LDP lost its Upper House majority to the DPJ in the 2007 election, and public desire for the change in government started to grow. The loss of an Upper House majority brought about a situation called *Nejire Kokkai* (Twisted Diet), resulting in delays to the legislative process. In such a difficult situation, the LDP changed Prime Ministers three times in as many years, as well as being unable to implement policies to effectively tackle the global economic crisis, leading to a further loss of public support.

The DPJ's aim, as a newly elected ruling party, was to shift the Japanese political system from one where high-profile bureaucrats



The newly elected Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (front row centre) and the DPJ formed a cabinet that will play a total leadership in contrast to the previous bureaucratic government.

Photo: AP via AAP [Itsuo Inouye]

create most legislation and politicians merely debate and vote in the Diet and then announce the new laws to the public. The new system was to be one where politicians run the administration themselves, which may result in a higher priority being given to improving the lives of the people. To achieve this, the DPJ established a manifesto at the election with several key promises. These included ending wasteful spending and the eradication of *Amakudari* (senior bureaucrats retiring to high-profile positions in the private or public sector), reducing the costs and inequalities that exist in the education sector and establishing a reliable pension system as well as increasing the number of doctors to deal with an ageing population. Additionally, the DPJ's manifesto contained promises to increase regional sovereignty and abolish tax rates such as gasoline tax to cut the cost of living and establish a viable regional society, as well as pledges to reduce the corporate tax rate for small and middle-sized enterprises and to promote measures against global warming.

Hatoyama's first official international appearance came at the United Nations Summit on Climate Change in New York. He announced Japan's greenhouse gas emissions were to be reduced by 25% from 1990 levels by 2020, which received much international attention. He also had conferences for the first time with a number of world leaders including the US President Barack Obama, the President of China Hu Jintao, the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev, and the Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd. The Hatoyama Government, however, seems to face challenges in actually achieving their political goals, due to public opposition around issues such as child allowances, finance to small and medium businesses and the eradication of tolls on highways.

In contrast to the previous bureaucratic, LDP Government, the Japanese have chosen the DPJ Government and its promises to lead the country forward. Now, the Japanese people are hoping they can make good on their undertaking and bring change to the political system. ⑦