



A Diet Dissolution Solely for Survival Is the Root of All Evil for Japanese Politics

Refrain from arrogance, Mr. Abe

Sasaki Takeshi, former president of the University of Tokyo

Steer policies by looking ten years ahead: I cannot help but regret that such opportune timing was abandoned.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo held a press conference on the evening of November 18 (2014) and postponed a hike in the consumption tax to 10% by a year and a half, along with asking for a decision by the people and calling for a dissolution of the lower house of parliament.

I was frankly disappointed when I watched this press conference live on television. Although rumors of a dissolution had been circulating since around the end of October, I thought, “there is no way.” I was disappointed because Abe decided to choose a course that I had thought “should in no way happen.”

I had various views about the Abe administration’s individual policies, but also had great expectations for them. This was because his administration had created a precedent and made it customary to steer policies that looked five and ten years beyond, enabling politics and citizens to share a long-term time line.

Abe was able to resolve the so-called twisted (*nejire*) parliament – a phenomenon in which the ruling party lacked a simple majority in the upper house of the Diet – in the general election in 2012 by securing 325 seats, or over two-thirds of total seats, and also won the upper house election the following summer.

The term for the lower house is up in December 2016. Even if the possibility of a lower house dissolution finally starts to become a possibility once we are into 2016, the administration had actually enjoyed “the golden hour,” which allows it to guide policies toward fruition undaunted: a situation genuinely considered scarce in Japanese politics.



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National elections that occurred virtually every year; policy deliberations that do not make any headway due to the twisted parliament; a new prime minister every year... the citizens of Japan were anxiously hoping that they would not have to return to such times.

I had thought that Japanese politics would reach a critical turning point if Abe can shape politics into one in which members of the lower house could fulfill their duties during the entire four years of their term, and realize long-term policies, including Abenomics, as well as enabling politics and the people of Japan to share a time line. This opportunity was readily abandoned this time by the administration's intention to dissolve the lower house. And the voters are suspicious as to why the lower house was dissolved at this point in time.

Understandably, Abe may be hoping to buy necessary time precisely because of his aim to realize long-term policy goals, as it would take another four years to resolve pending problems.

Once one has a grip on power, that person starts to desire more power in order to maintain it. A common psychology among politicians from the olden times is that if one does not venture into a territory, someone else might do so. This could be seen as the true nature of a politician ever since the times of ancient Greece. The political vacuum after 2017 may have been getting larger in the eyes of Abe.

However, there were two years left of political capital, in other words, the capital given to the administration from the citizens during the last election. It is a leader's greatest mission to use this capital as much as possible and besides, an optimal stage was set for Abe.

Why was the dissolution problematic?

A politician also needs to be far-sighted in order to calmly ascertain one's own mission. Power does not last forever. An administration with guaranteed power that can resolve all sorts of challenges does not exist. As such, I would have wanted the Abe administration to do all it can to realize its policies, including Abenomics, and advance forward by steering its policies, without any regrets, until the end of its term. Regardless of the results, it would have been able to boldly face the judgment of the people in two years' time.

On the contrary, a lower house dissolution at this point in time tends to be plagued by comments that a dissolution has to occur now while the ruling party still has a chance of winning.

Isn't it time we question the "dissolution card" that the prime minister was dealt? What happened as a result of this dissolution?

First, the various policies that should have been carried to completion over four years were suspended.

Specifically, deliberations on a number of critical bills came to a halt. The bills for the Acts on National Strategic Special Zones, the centerpiece of the three arrows of Abenomics; the gender equality bill; and a bill to amend the Temporary Staffing Services Law were all scrapped. The most



important challenge for the Abe administration should have been to get growth strategies back on track, but just when things were about to proceed, the process, which was necessary for these policies to be realized, came to a halt.

Abe says the suspension would last only twelve days. However, these policies cannot resume right away, just because an election is over. It takes time to set them back in motion. I also have experience participating in government deliberations, and if the politicians in charge of an area change after the election, everything has to be explained to them from square one. It is easy to imagine a new politician in charge taking everything back to the start, claiming that he has never heard of anything pertaining to the matter.

The ability to think goes into panic mode the moment a Japanese politician hears the words dissolution and general election. And this time around, we also witnessed a phenomenon in which all policy deliberations evaporated into the ether. This is a foolish characteristic of Japanese politics in which a healthy dose of critical faculties is lost, even with journalism acting at the mercy of the series of the most recent political news.

The time lost is not limited to just the twelve days from the time a public notice of a lower house election is out until voting.

In Japan, regarding a lower house dissolution, the prevalent perception that is seemingly justifiable is that it would be a great idea to seek a decision from the citizens because to question the public consensus in itself is the very nature of democracy.

Looking back at the history of politics, there was a time from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century when it was popular to argue that an election should be held frequently. It was when the parliamentary system was just established and political awareness among the citizens of Japan had yet to mature, and thus a frequent election was thought to be good amid a strong sense of distrust for representatives. The awareness among Japanese people to give an affirmation by letting go of eliciting public opinion may be the very source of why voters have an inherent lack of confidence in politicians, but the tide of the times around the world is already changing course.

In Japan, the lower house election takes place roughly every three years and in the interim, the upper house election, the presidential election of the ruling party as well as regional elections take place. There are no other countries in the world that hold elections so frequently. To start with, it is extremely rare for other industrialized countries to give the prime minister the absolute power to call for a dissolution of parliament.

Parliamentary dissolution is prohibited in England, after which Japan modeled its parliamentary and cabinet system, excluding the case when a vote of no confidence was passed after the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011 was passed that year. The background to this may have included some tactics within the ruling party, but the priority was seemingly given to having the benefits of pushing policies and economic activities forward from a long-term perspective by giving the dissolution card a stamp of approval.



Similarly, in the parliamentary and cabinet system in Germany, the only time the Bundeskanzler can dissolve the Bundestag is either when the intention of a politician to assume the premiership is rejected or when a vote of no confidence against the Bundeskanzler passes through the Diet. Further, this vote of no confidence can only pass if the next prime minister is selected simultaneously. The reason behind such rigor regarding dissolutions is founded on Germany's bitter experience of instability of successive changes in administrations under the Weimar Constitution giving way to the rise of the Nazi Party.

In short, the trend overseas is to have a system that does not recklessly allow a parliamentary dissolution.

Why are there perennial elections in Japanese politics?

Then, why is it that only Japan has maintained a situation that make it easy to exercise power to dissolve the parliament and hold frequent elections?

In order to understand this, it is necessary to understand the two aspects that exist in politics. Politics would not be able to fulfill its role unless these two aspects can strike a balance. These two aspects are politics in the form of a competition to wrest power from others and politics that aims to realize and implement policies.

Politics in the form of competition to wrest power from others is a process in a fight that determines who takes control of the reins of power. This is what is referred to as political conditions by the media and thus an election is a critical turning point. The aspect of competing to wrest power always occurs in politics and no politics since ancient times has existed without this process.

That said, politics in the form of competition to wrest power alone does not mean that politics has fulfilled its duties. From the perspective of voters, naturally, a politician gets selected in order for policies to be realized. Thus, they would like an election – which is a competition to wrest power from others – to be a prelude to executing such policies. The focus should be on realizing and implementing policy, no matter what.

In fact, not that I'm referring to the "overemphasis of power" as indicated by Fukuzawa Eikichi, but Japanese politicians have a tendency to place great value on power itself. As a result, the competition to wrest power from others becomes the main event, with policy implementation turning into a secondary activity that occurs between elections. Consequently, emphasis is placed on elections, with the media getting into a fervor and in fact, ends up showing a tendency to welcome witnessing power to dissolve parliament.

The framework of Japan's political system accelerates this situation; namely, a system of holding an election for half of the members in the upper house of parliament every three years. Despite being given a long six-year term, it has become difficult to deliberate on policies that are anticipated to cover a long time span and the upper house in recent years has turned into a venue akin to the lower house



in which the decision of the people of Japan is sought. This kind of situation does not allow for any time to work on policies in a well-prepared manner.

After a Liberal Democratic Party meeting one day, I had a member of parliament with experience as a mayor call on me with the following comment:

“When I was a mayor, there was a solid four-year plan, but this is a day-to-day business, isn’t it?”

Also this time around just prior to the lower house being dissolved, with the daily rigmarole turning into a battlefield, politicians inspired themselves by referring to the situation as a permanent battlefield. This situation in turn puts long-term policy plans on the side burner. Actually, outer regions where the term is set at four years, with no dissolution, can maintain a better long-term perspective.

Given the political situation in Japan, being a politician also calls for an ability to convince the people of Japan to agree to difficult scenarios, such as a tax hike or a cut in social security benefits. In this respect, convincing citizens requires sufficient preparations. Having the conviction that one would be able to enter an election without losing any voters even after delivering a difficult proposal requires one to gather data to prepare for policies; keep a close eye on the assessment of such policies at home and abroad; deliberate as much as necessary; and secure party solidarity.

However, a permanent battlefield does not allow for a schedule to be solidified, thus, would not make it possible to prepare policies that are considered harsh for the public. Under normal circumstances, politicians should greet the people of Japan after an election wearing a tailcoat in a dignified manner, but they end up in jeans in front of the country’s citizens.

As a result, they end up creating a sugarcoated manifesto that is akin to a decorative cake without being able to make preparations to convey harsh conditions facing the nation at that moment in time. What results from this is the postponement of a critical problem and relentless fiscal deterioration, which is an embodiment of weak politics.

It cannot be helped if the delay in the consumption tax hike this time around is seen as exactly that.

The danger of political retrogression

The familiar issue of politics and money is another reason that prevents an administration from governing based on policies. This was one of the reasons that led to the dissolution this time around. In fact, the Abe administration clearly sustained a major injury as a result of this problem.

The same things will occur, even after repeated elections, if scandals surrounding politics and money are not vigorously blocked. The problem lies in the system and tracing its footsteps highlights the fact that the concept of management among politicians is primarily weak.

Naturally, this time around, I was monitoring the situation, thinking that implementing necessary measures would be the natural course of events in addition to clarifying facts, but instead we went right into the election campaign with nothing done. This is egregious and regrettable.



Regarding the so-called checkup of money issues, for example, isn't it true the Cabinet cannot be free of scandals unless we make it mandatory that members of parliament who intend to be appointed a minister or a vice minister go through an audit prior to assuming office? It would not be surprising for an administration to get dragged down at any time unless it is resolutely prepared to take on bold initiatives based on the major principle of knowing that its existence hinges on realizing policies. If this happens, the Diet will yet again run idle and fruitlessly deplete the golden hour.

Even once this general election is over, it does not necessarily mean that the political sentiment that had erupted would simply simmer down right away. During the press conference mentioned at the beginning of this article, Abe stated that gaining a majority would be tantamount to victory for the ruling party. I do not believe that I am alone in thinking that these words reflect the delicate ongoing situations within the ruling party.

If the number of lower house seats held by the ruling party breaks below two-thirds of the total as a result of this election, it would mean that bills that are rejected by the upper house cannot be tabled again to be passed via a resolution by the lower house. Opposition parties would start to work toward their campaign for the upper house election as they aim for a *nejire* parliament. The pressure on the Liberal Democratic Party during the next upper house election would intensify in one fell swoop.

One of the main reasons why numerous bills have passed parliament during the year and a half since the start of the Abe administration is the Cabinet's ability to focus on politics that realized and implemented policies. This was a result of stable power made possible by the ruling party obtaining a majority in both the lower and upper houses of parliament.

Within the dissolution this time around lies the danger of politics retrogressing into one that places politics in the form of competition to wrest power from others as the top priority.

Can politics accurately assess the current situation?

How should we look at the current status of Abenomics, which is to serve as the main point of contention in the election?

Back when the Liberal Democratic Party ruled the government for a protracted period of time, Japan's society was seen to be predictably the same, however you sliced it. However, what the Abe administration is facing head on right now is a fragmented society, which is far from the times when the middle class ruled across the board.

I believe there are three types of rifts that run through Japan's society today.

First is the income-based rift between the wealthy and the low-income earners; second is the region-based rift between those in the Tokyo area and outside; and third is the generational rift between the elderly and the young. It is difficult to find policies that could thoroughly blanket a society full of rifts. These types of rifts could serve to create weakness in an administration's foundation, but



could also lower voter turnout. This implies that composed, unswerving policies will increasingly become necessary.

Given such changes in the quality of society, there were areas that did not advance as Abenomics had initially anticipated.

For example, the trickle-down phenomenon, in which small- to medium-sized enterprises are revived as a result of an earnings improvement among major corporations, has not readily happened. Many experts note that this is due to the disconnected structure between the global economy in which major corporations are active, and the regional economy. Another unexpected result was that exports have not increased as had been hoped, despite the yen plunging by as much as 30% to 40%.

How does the Prime Minister perceive such problems? So long as he is able to jump into a general election by dissolving the lower house, he would have to provide a mid-term summary for Abenomics. The Japanese public would not know what to use as a gauge to measure the results unless he summarizes phase one and then relates what type of measures he would like to implement during phase two. Sadly, I was left dissatisfied on this point after the Prime Minister's press conference at the time of the lower house dissolution.

Any type of policy could either succeed or fail. It is natural for Abenomics to have portions that are not faring too well, and Abe must provide a clear explanation of these areas.

When the growth strategy was unveiled in June 2013, everyone probably thought that it would be a long time before any one of the initiatives takes root. Advancements for women in society, creation of regional societies, agricultural reform... it is understandable that some people thought accomplishing even one of these measures would be a great feat.

None of these policies will advance unless we do away with aspects that are ingrained in society. These are also areas previous administrations intentionally walked away from and did not genuinely work on. I praise the Abe administration for its intention to face these challenges head on unlike other administrations from the past.

However, so long as a dissolution has been decided, the administration has the responsibility of announcing its forecasts and what type of policies it intends to implement within a specific timeframe.

Abenomics is an unprecedented set of extensive economic policies. The Bank of Japan implements monetary easing "of a different dimension" through buying Japanese Government Bonds (JGBs), and in foreign exchange, the yen is pushed lower. The Government Pension Investment Fund (GPIF), which manages as much as 130 trillion yen in public pension funds, gets the Bank of Japan to purchase a portion of the JGBs it holds, and in turn, purchases equities from the market. Abenomics is a mastermind that involved a huge undertaking of policies involving JGBs, the yen and stocks. Along with seeking an opportunity, the administration is taking on risks that are unprecedented vis-à-vis past administrations. Obtaining market acceptance is nothing other than a safety net for this administration. ¥



Honestly, the depth of this story is not just plainly about whether the economy has improved or the unemployment rate has dropped. Will it spark talk of the demise of Japan, if the financial markets were to explode? Depending on the capability and inventiveness of opposition party, a picture that is far from the government's official announcements could come to the fore, but we cannot anticipate opposition parties to take on this role any time soon, having witnessed how much of a panic they are in as they face the election.

If things remained unchanged, the essence of Abenomics itself will not be tabled as a source of discussions, but could very well end with nothing more than a debate on the economic data.

Deliberate on diagnoses based on reality

The world is anxiously monitoring Japan to see where it is headed amid the massive fiscal deficit, the monetary easing “of a different dimension” by the Bank of Japan and a rapidly aging society.

Given that the Abe administration had the ability to broadcast the success of Abenomics to the rest of the world, so long as it is to enter the race, it will have to deliver a high-quality campaign that is above board in terms of obtaining market acceptance. The term above board being used to describe an election may not be a familiar one: what I mean is that Japan should hold an election that anyone in the world would understand, by clarifying the type of circumstances and awareness that existed in holding an election.

Elections in Japan tend to veer toward debates on coming up with prescriptions on improving any given situation, and they did not involve composed deliberations on diagnoses based on reality. As a result, they ended up being a successive series of competitions that constituted paying lip service while disregarding harsh fiscal realities.

The problem in Japan is not rooted in the absence of policies, but rather that there are too many easy policy arguments.

What citizens would like to genuinely know in Japan today is a diagnosis of the Japanese society and economy that focuses on the actual truth without any embellishments. I would like politicians to mothball talk of providing simple improvements for now and instead have their parties clearly reveal a diagnosis for Japan. And in order to deliberate on this, it is necessary not only for politicians, but for the people of Japan to have psychological stamina that allows one to discern and contemplate an even negative story.

I fear that the psychological stamina is waning among Japanese people. Why didn't the members of parliament themselves who have local constituencies raise the crisis of regional extinction as questioned by former Iwate Prefectural Governor Masuda Hiroya? Given that there were so many members of parliament representing various regions, I cannot help but think that they cannot offer a proposal to mend this issue because they lack psychological stamina that enables them to discern and contemplate on reality.



I surmise that the information they are getting is nothing but positive things they would like to hear.

The final straw for a person in a position of power is when he can only listen to favorable information that he chooses to hear. I entered political science by way of researching Machiavelli. According to Machiavelli, so long as there are people in power there will always be sycophants. There are always those who would want to be liked by people in power, making it extremely difficult for powerful people to shield themselves from flattery, says Machiavelli.

Are Japanese politicians losing psychological stamina and looking away from reality?

In this election, I would like both politicians and voters to get fixated on the reality facing Japan. Christmas will be upon us as the election looms, but it would be problematic if politicians were to turn themselves into Santa Claus. I would like them to steadfastly question the citizens about the naked truth facing their country.

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