



# Breaking Out of Low Approval Ratings and Destroying Each Other



[...] conservative parties are generally able to fight elections with an advantage. Opposition parties that seek to adopt a progressive or, in the parlance of the 1990s and later, “liberal” stance find themselves fighting both the conservative ruling party and the conservative-leaning opposition parties. No party, be it the SDPJ or the CDPJ, has ever won this battle. If they want to change the government, they should not compete with the LDP on the conservative-progressive axis.

The approval ratings of the opposition parties are still not rising. If the opposition parties want to change the government, they should not compete with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on the conservative-progressive axis. A leading political scientist discusses the strategy the opposition parties should adopt.

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## Is it “the eve of a change of government”?

The Kishida LDP (Liberal Democratic Party), which was not very popular to begin with, has been in turmoil since the end of last year, 2023, due to the so-called “slush fund scandal.” According to a survey by *Jiji Press* (the same source for the figures in the following polls), the Cabinet’s approval rating at the time of writing (April 2024) was at an extremely low 16.6%, and the LDP’s approval rating has also continued to decline over the past six months, falling to 15.3%. If this trend continues in the next Lower House election, it is inevitable that the LDP will lose a significant number of seats.

However, if asked whether the LDP will step down in the near future, the answer is that it is unlikely at this point. The reason for this judgment is the continued low approval ratings of the opposition parties. In the above survey, the approval ratings of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) and the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) were 3.8% and 3.5%, respectively. In surveys conducted by other media, the LDP remains an overwhelmingly strong “dominant party” even though it is rapidly losing support (although the *Mainichi shimbun* newspaper survey alone has an unusually high approval rating for the opposition parties, which requires careful attention). Of course, party approval ratings and election results are not exactly correlated. However, the gap in approval ratings between the ruling and opposition parties is still large enough that the CDPJ’s 2024 activity plan to “become the leading party by surpassing the LDP” does not seem realistic. Incidentally, in a survey conducted just before the 2009 Lower House election (in August of that year), in which the LDP actually lost power, the LDP’s approval rating was 17.1%, while the Democratic Party of Japan’s (DPJ) approval rating reached 18.4%. Looking at these numbers, it is easy to see why the DPJ’s rise to power was inevitable.

It should be said that such expectations for the leading opposition parties have not been fostered today. Since the second Abe Shinzo administration came to power in late 2012, the support for the leading opposition party (the DPJ changed to the Democratic Party [DP] and then to the CDPJ) has remained low and stable at around 4–5%. While the CDPJ has a small, solid base of support, it has continued to fail to expand its support beyond that base (or perhaps because of it). Like the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ [active from 1945 to 1996, changing its name to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the same year]), the CDPJ is not seen by most voters as an “alternative to the LDP” and it has failed to capitalize on the LDP’s slush fund scandal. Although many voters who have stopped supporting the LDP temporarily become “independents” (there is a clear negative correlation between the LDP support rate and the non-support rate), they should be seen as more likely to return to supporting the LDP (at least more likely than to support the CDPJ) once the heat dies down due to a change in prime minister, etc.

## **The structure of opposition parties trying to destroy each other**

The narrowness of the party’s support base is not the only obstacle to the CDPJ’s bid for power. The competition for support bases with other opposition parties is another headache. In this regard, the coordination of candidates in single-member constituencies is a problem when it comes to elections, and although the CDPJ has asked the JIP and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) to cooperate, there is no sign of significant progress in cooperation. In addition, the JIP and the DPP regularly criticize the CDPJ’s policies and its handling of Diet affairs, and from the ruling party’s perspective, they are a welcome presence that helps tarnish the image of the leading opposition party without getting its hands dirty. There are various factors that divide the opposition parties in this way, but in terms of policy, the main difference is their ideological stance centered on foreign and security policy. Or, in this regard, there is a deep divide between the CDPJ, JIP, and DPP over the distance from the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which is the most left-wing (among the major parties).

The conflict between the opposition parties over the issue of constitutional revision symbolizes this point. On the issue of constitutional revision, with Article 9 as the focal point, the JIP and DPP are proactive (even more so than the LDP recently), while the CDPJ has been conspicuously passive and in sync with the JCP. It is not uncommon for the JIP and DPP to criticize the CDPJ for trying to obstruct the deliberations of the Research Commission on the Constitution. JIP representative Baba Nobuyuki went

so far as to say that the CDPJ “should leave the Research Commission on the Constitution” (*Mainichi shimbun*, November 2, 2023).

The same situation was seen in the issue surrounding the government’s recent decision to lift the export ban on next-generation fighter jets. The JIP and DPP have expressed support for the policy. In response, CDPJ Secretary-General Okada Katsuya expressed concern that “this would change the principles based on the pacifism of the Constitution” and sided with the JCP in calling for the government’s decision to be reversed (*JLJI.COM*, article distributed on March 26, 2024).

When it comes to the core of national policy, namely foreign and security policy, the JIP and DPP are not in sync with the CDPJ (not to mention the JCP) and are closer to the ruling LDP. Given this, even if the LDP (and Komeito) loses its majority in the next lower house election, the most likely scenario after that is that the LDP will remain in power by bringing the JIP and DPP into the coalition. This is at least a more realistic assumption than the formation of a CDPJ-JIP-DPP (and JCP?) coalition government.

In fact, CDPJ President Izumi Kenta has recently advocated the idea of a “mission-type cabinet” in which opposition parties come together to implement specific policies. However, their counterparts have responded coldly, saying, “If the JIP can work together to steer the nation with the current CDPJ, the answer is no” (JIP representative Baba) and “If we cannot agree on basic national policies, such a government will collapse” (DPP representative Tamaki Yuichiro) (*JLJI.COM*, article distributed on February 5, 2024). In this situation, it is difficult to predict whether a CDPJ-centered government will be formed in the near future.

## **Why was the DPJ successful?**

In retrospect, the DPJ was able to bring about a change of government in 2009 because it was able to unite non-LDP/Komeito, and non-Communist forces into one party. This included members of the Diet from a variety of backgrounds, including former members of the LDP and the former SDPJ. Because of this, the DPJ was often ridiculed as being fragmented, but the reason the party was able to remain united was simply because it was “blessed with the times.” Let me explain this point by looking back at history.

First of all, in postwar Japanese politics, the “constitutional issue” that arose during the occupation, that is, the issue of the consistency between Article 9 of the Constitution and actual defense policy, continued to be a major issue, at least at the elite level (politicians, political parties). It is true that after the *Anpo* protests (the conflict over the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty) and the 1960s, the constitutional issue was no longer a major issue that ordinary voters were aware of on the surface (because the LDP had effectively sealed off the argument for constitutional reform). But at the elite level, it remained a potentially important point of contention dividing the conservative and progressive camps. One reason for this is that as the appeal of socialism waned, the SDPJ began to emphasize its other selling point, pacifism, i.e., the protection of the constitution and the “non-armed neutral theory.”

However, instead of causing problems for the LDP government, the SDPJ’s unarmed neutrality theory—it should be noted that this constitutional interpretation was itself legitimate, as recognized by most legal scholars—based on Article 9 of the Constitution ironically promoted the LDP’s “permanent rule.” The SDPJ’s leftist dogmatic foreign and security policies were seen as unrealistic by many voters, and the party was suspected of lacking the ability to govern. In addition, the SDPJ’s foreign and security policies became an obstacle to cooperation (or merger) with centrist parties such as the Komeito and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). Due to the existence of Article 9 of the Constitution, the opposition

parties were divided on defense policy, and as a result, the LDP reaped the benefits. This state of affairs is known as the “1955 system” and lasted until the 1980s as the “standard” of postwar politics.

However, this situation began to change around the time of the transition to the Heisei era (1989–2019). The author refers to the 1990s and 2000s as the “era of reform.” During this period, the political world was swept by a trend calling for a review of the “national framework” from a broad perspective, including the political system (electoral system, cabinet system, etc.), bureaucratic structure, judicial system, and economic structure. The background was multifaceted, including the revelation of political corruption, changes in the international environment, and the collapse of the bubble economy. In any case, in this spirit of the times, every political force began to compete for the position of “true reformer.” Instead, the [conservative-progressive] ideological conflict of the past over constitutional and defense issues receded into the background.

Against this backdrop of a shift in the axis of conflict in the political world, it became possible for non-LDP forces to unite. In other words, under the banner of the new reformist party, the DPJ, a wide range of lawmakers (in terms of conservative and progressive ideology) came together and eventually grew into a force that surpassed the LDP. The result was a change of government in 2009. It was the victory of the “reform” (not “leftist”) camp over the conservative LDP.

### **The current situation as a “Neo-1955 System”**

However, with the change of government and the “failure” of the DPJ administration, the “era of reform” was in its twilight. Government reform was no longer the main concern of the times. And since the birth of the second Abe administration, the ideological conflict between conservatives and progressives over constitutional and defense issues, which could be called the “foundation” of postwar politics, has emerged as the axis of conflict in the political world. The background is the growing military threat from neighboring countries, but especially during the Abe administration [from December 26, 2012, until his resignation on September 16, 2020], the issue of exercising the right of collective self-defense became a point of contention. In addition, the prime minister himself loudly called for constitutional reform, which intensified the ideological conflict among political parties.

As a result, non-LDP forces were once again divided along the axis of conflict with the LDP. A symbolic example of this is the “Koike New Party (Party of Hope)” brouhaha in the fall of 2017. At that time, the declining DP (former DPJ members) wanted to merge with the Party of Hope, founded by Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko. However, Koike, who wanted an agreement on constitutional and defense policies, ended up “excluding” the left-wing lawmakers. In the end, the DP lawmakers who were excluded decided to form the new CDPJ, and the forces of the opposition parties were not united but rather placed in a more divided situation. After that, the CDPJ and the DPP (formed by the merger of the Party of Hope and the remnants of the DP) were explored for a merger, but the main reason they ultimately did not fully merge was again due to disagreements over constitutional and defense policies. Thus, Japanese politics returned to a “default” state, and the 1955 System-like situation, in which a conservative party was dominant and the leading ruling and opposition parties were ideologically polarized, was revived, in other words, a “neo-1955 system” was formed, in the author’s view.

Without a strong rival party, the ruling party will become complacent and corrupt. The “slush fund problem” should be seen as merely a symbolic manifestation of this. Everyone would agree that it is pointless to devote so much of the Diet’s resources to such a boring (but it cannot be overlooked) issue as



“politics and money” at a time when we should be concentrating on substantive policy discussions such as economic policy and measures to combat the declining birthrate.

Considering the current unpopularity of the LDP, it is quite possible that the LDP and Komeito will lose their majority in the House of Representatives, and there is also the possibility that they will temporarily lose power (although the author believes this is unlikely). However, even if this were to happen, whether the “tense politics” or “party system with the potential for change of government” that the political reform movement of the past aimed for would become the norm is another matter, and given the development of history, it must be considered unlikely. In the conservative-progressive axis of confrontation over ideological issues such as the constitution and defense, it has often been misunderstood that progressive forces have an advantage. However, conservative parties are generally able to fight elections with an advantage. Opposition parties that seek to adopt a progressive or, in the parlance of the 1990s and later, “liberal” stance find themselves fighting both the conservative ruling party and the conservative-leaning opposition parties. No party, be it the SDPJ or the CDPJ, has ever won this battle.

### **Bringing competitiveness to politics**

In other words, if the opposition parties are aiming for a change of government, they should not compete with the LDP on the conservative-progressive axis. In this regard, Baba’s comments that the JIP “should be the second LDP” (*Asahi shimbun*, July 24, 2023) and that it would be desirable for the JIP and the LDP to be “a battle for reform between conservative parties” (*Sankei shimbun*, online edition, March 30, 2024) are right on the mark. The prerequisite for a change of government is to shift the battle to a different ground, not a conflict over constitutional and defense policy, and in fact the DPJ succeeded because it was able to do so (and was blessed with the times). However, as long as the constitutional and defense issues exist, even if they can temporarily avoid them by diverting voters’ attention, they will not be able to avoid becoming a point of contention in the medium to long term, and this is why the LDP, which can compete on a favorable ground, has come to power by default.

From this point of view, the way to bring constant competition to Japanese politics is clear, and that is to fundamentally “de-contest” the constitutional issue. But is it really possible to resolve this complicated issue? The author believes that it is possible. First of all, the LDP is a party that has long made constitutional reform its party policy, so there is an aspect in which it would be able to save face if it could [amend the constitution](#), whatever the content may be (the same can be said of former Prime Minister Abe’s proposal to [add the Self-Defense Forces](#)). To take it to the extreme, wouldn’t it be a relief for conservatives (or the more traditional right wing) to change even one word of the “constitution imposed” by the occupying forces?

In contrast, the liberal opposition side should take the initiative for a constitutional amendment to develop constitutionalism. This would essentially justify a more liberal approach to constitutional reform, one that actively seeks to create a more liberal constitution with less risk of unconstitutional operation (in the view of liberals, the current government position on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense is unconstitutional). In fact, there are CDPJ members such as Yamao (Kanno) Shiori who have made such an argument.

So why do genuine liberal opposition parties not take this position as political parties (Yamao

eventually left her party)? One reason is that the way most politicians and media people perceive constitutional issues is still based on the fundamentally wrong idea that “constitutional change orientation  $\equiv$  right-wing  $\equiv$  unconstitutional” as in the 1955 system period. (Is Germany unconstitutional, since it has amended its constitution dozens of times since the war?) If we want to escape the 1955 system, we must first change the way we view the issues of the 1955 system. For a long time after the war, the liberal and progressive parties made a name for themselves by preventing constitutional amendments, while the conservative LDP gained the advantage of being in power permanently. If some kind of “settlement” is reached at the elite level on constitutional issues, this relationship is likely to be reversed. At that point, the “postwar” period of Japanese politics will finally come to an end, and the door to a new era will open.

Translated from “*Tokushu 2 Tsuyoi Yato wa Naze inai?: Tei-shijiritsu, Tsubushi-ai karano Dakkyaku (Feature 2: Why is there no “strong opposition”?: Breaking Out of Low Approval Ratings and Destroying Each Other)*,” *Voice*, June 2024, pp. 134–141. (Courtesy of PHP Institute) [July 2024]

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