Will Centrist Politics Be Revived? The "Filtering" and "Absorbing" Functions of Political Parties Put to the Test

On October 9, 2024, the debate between Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru and the leader of the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Noda Yoshihiko, seemed to symbolize that both the ruling party and the opposition party had begun to move toward the "center." On the same day, the House of Representatives was dissolved and a snap election was held on the 27th. Public opinion there also expressed "hope for centrist politics through cooperation between the two major parties."
Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

Kono Yuri, Hosei University

On the day the Lower House election was announced, I watched the movie *Civil War* (Japanese title: *Shibiru Uo: America Saigo no Hi*). It was written and directed by Alex Garland. The title *Civil War* refers to the civil war that divided America. The protagonist, an American camerawoman who has covered many battlefields, reflects that her past overseas reporting aimed to warn her homeland. However, now her home has become a battlefield. Her colleague comments that she has lost sight of journalism's purpose.Indeed,despite having lost sight of their original purpose, the women continue their grueling reporting, but for what reason? Neither the women themselves nor the audience watching can fully understand, as the movie progresses.

The movie depicts the civil war as if it has already started. Little attention is paid to the circumstances of why and how it came to be. It is a documentary-style technique. Perhaps the filmmakers thought that these techniques would give the movie a certain reality. This is because most of the audience (probably mainly North Americans) already know very well "why it happened." The filmmakers probably assumed that this was the case.

Developed Western countries at a standstill

In response to the shock of President Trump's election in 2016, Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt wrote *How Democracies Die (2018)* (Japanese title: *Minshushugi no Shinikata*), which can be read as a prequel to the film *Civil War*. The outbreak of civil war presupposes the collapse of democracy. So, what is the scenario in which democracy collapses? The factor they emphasize is the progression of social polarization. Of course, America is originally a two-party country. The Democratic and Republican parties have long competed with each other, backed by liberal and conservative supporters, respectively, and America is originally a society of intense partisan conflict.

But the situation in America has changed in recent years. First of all, the middle class, which does not belong to either party, is shrinking year by year. In addition, partisan conflict is increasing in both quality and quantity, with traditional partisanship gradually giving way to an entirely new kind of hostility.

The American people are coming to see citizens of different parties not as friends with whom they disagree but as enemies with whom they are incompatible.

What Levitsky and Ziblatt particularly emphasize is that American democracy is losing the "soft guardrails" that have kept partisan conflict within the bounds of healthy competition (p. 132 of the Japanese translation). The "soft guardrails of democracy" to which they refer do not refer solely to explicit institutions such as the Constitution or laws. They also refer to the norms that are written into the rules of the democratic game as unwritten rules, or in other words, self-control and mutual tolerance (p. 133 of the Japanese translation).

The rise of political leaders with authoritarian or dictatorial tendencies against a backdrop of populism — what we typically imagine as the collapse of democracy — is in fact merely the result of increased partisanship and the loss of "guardrails."

This is not confined to the United States. Yascha Mounk's *the People vs. Democracy* (2018) (Japanese title: Minshushugi wo Sukue!) argues that a similar situation is developing in Europe. Mounk sees this as the liberal democracy that has long sustained Europe since the end of the war breaking down into the two extremes of "liberalism" and "democracy." The centrifugal force on the side of liberalism is the trend toward "rights without democracy." It is mainly highly educated elites who impose the basic norms of diversity, environment, etc. over the heads of the people (democracy).

The centrifugal force acting on the side of democracy that arises as a backlash against this trend is "democracy without rights". This is a movement to directly implement the will of the people, disregarding or ignoring due process, which can easily endanger the human rights of minorities and the structurally weak in society. Furthermore, elites who fear this situation will further strengthen the imposition of the basic norm, and people who rebel against it will... and so on, and so the cycle continues. As each group stimulates the other, the process of polarization in society inevitably continues. This is how Mounk describes the situation. Left and right, liberal and conservative, elites and the great masses, society is clearly divided into two camps, "us" and "them," and a cold suspicion and harsh hostility is brewing between them. In such an environment, traditional liberal democracy can become dysfunctional.

It seems certain that the advanced Western nations on which Japanese society has relied for so long have begun to paint this self-portrait of their own societies.

A revival of the "moderate" in Japan?

What about Japanese society? As far as the major political parties are concerned, ideological polarization does not seem to be progressing for the time being. On September 23, 2024, the runoff election for the representative of the main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), was held, and Noda Yoshihiko, known for his centrist and conservative views, was elected representative, defeating Edano Yukio, whose support base is the left wing of the party. In response to this movement, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) declared a review of the so-called "opposition parties unite" with the Constitutional Democratic Party, mainly due to differences in security policy. In fact, the JCP has been running candidates even in electoral districts where it had not run candidates in the past out of consideration for CDPJ candidates.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election was held on September 27, 2024, and after a runoff, Ishiba Shigeru, who had long been a member of a fringe faction within the party, was elected president, defeating Takaichi Sanae, who had a right-wing support base within the party. He was nominated for prime minister at an extraordinary session of the Diet on October 1, and was appointed prime minister the same day.

Although it was a short Diet session that ended with the dissolution of the Diet on the 9th of the same month, the debate between Ishiba and Noda as party leaders seemed to symbolize that both the largest ruling party and the largest opposition party had begun to move toward the center. Each party emphasized respect for the other and showed an attitude of trying to respond after first accepting what the other party said. The attitude of the two-party leaders may have seemed refreshing to voters who had become accustomed to the structure of the Diet since the second Abe Shinzo administration, in which the LDP-Komeito bloc and the CDPJ-JCP bloc engaged in fierce confrontation and the exchange of sharp insults rather than debate.

After the "1955 system"[1], which was once defined by an ideological conflict between conservatives and reformists, and the Heisei democracy era (Heisei period, 1989–2019), which pursued a two-party system with the possibility of a change of government, the momentum for "re-ideologization" between conservatives and liberals is growing again. These concern of political scientists about the resurgence of the "neo-1955 system"[2] during the long second Abe administration and its successor cabinets also seem to be receding for the time being.

This situation, in which the leading ruling party and the leading opposition party are moving toward the center at the level of the political elite, is likely to reflect the reality of voters in Japanese society.

The book *Where does Japan's division exist?* (Nihon no Bundan wa Dokoniarunoka, Keiso Shobo, 2024, hereinafter *Nihon no Bundan*), edited by Ikeda Kenichi, Maeda Yukio, and Yamawaki Takeshi, examines data from the SmartNews, Media, Politics, and Public Opinion Survey (SMPP Survey). According to their analysis, "Overall, Japan's division does not divide society into two parts" (p. 11). Japan does not experience the same emotional polarization as the United States. The media and information

[1] A two-party political system that lasted from 1955 to 1993. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which holds the sole majority, and the opposition parties, including the Japan Socialist Party, are at odds over constitutional revision. The Liberal Democratic Party's overwhelming predominance of the balanced structure continued, and the opposition parties aimed for one-third representation in order to revise the constitution and prevent rearmament.

[2] Sakaiya Shiro, "Decoding public opinion polls to understand the Japanese people's fickle attitudes towards the constitution: A look back at the constitutional revision debate and the 'Neo 1955 system'"

environment that people come into contact with differ depending on which camp they belong to, and the situation in the United States, where people living in two different worlds coexist in one society, is not the current situation in Japanese society.

Moreover, as society has become increasingly focused on academic qualifications, it has become a standard requirement for politicians to have a Ph.D. from a prestigious overseas school (mainly in North America), and a small ruling elite with sensibilities and education separate from ordinary voters in society is confronted by the majority of the general public. This is not the situation that Mounk fears in Europe in today's Japanese society.

This is fortunate. Even after the postwar dream of high economic growth was lost and we experienced the low growth period of the so-called "Lost Thirty Years" after the collapse of the bubble economy, this value may need to be reconsidered.

Like *How Democracies Die* (*Minshushugi no Shinikata*), David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends (2018)* (Japanese title: *Minshushugi no Kowarekata*) is an extremely pessimistic work that focuses on the setback or collapse of democracy, but the faint thread of hope offered in the final chapter is left to Greece and Japan. Japan is no longer the inspiring and glamorous model of democracy it once was. This is obvious to Runciman. But what Runciman focuses on is the incredible tenacity of Greece, whose economy has collapsed, and Japan, which is suffering from low growth. The conclusion is that stable democracies "retain their extraordinary ability to stave off the worst without addressing the problems that threatened disaster in the first place." (Japanese translation, p. 241) "If you could draw a lottery to determine the time and place in which you would live, and you drew the number 'Japan, early twenty-first century,' you would still feel like you had 'won the jackpot.'" (ibid., p. 240).

Insecurity in governance and lack of partisanship

However, it is obvious that this is not a happily-ever-after situation. First of all, Japanese society is not aware of its own amazing tenacity. In Chapter 6 of the aforementioned *Nihon no Bundan*, an interesting concept of "anxiety about governance" is introduced. "Anxiety about governance" is different from "political distrust" that is common in developed countries, and is "anxiety about the country's governance for the future" (p. 235). The level of this anxiety is exceptionally high in Japanese society compared to other societies. It is very likely that Japanese society is more pessimistic about its own society than it really needs to be and is plagued by anxiety. Excessive pessimism is unlikely to lead to productive political participation.

Second, the persistence of the threat is not structured at all. As *Nihon no Bundan* also notes, the fact that Japan is not polarized like America does not necessarily mean that there are no divisions within Japan. Although there are indeed various fault lines between labor and management, between the sexes, and between different moral values, Japanese society is characterized by the fact that these are not organized into partisan forms. If divisions that are not channeled into politics remain in society, they could lead to a decline in democracy in unexpected ways that are different from those in America and Europe.

Dysfunction of political parties

The aforementioned *How Democracies Die* (Minshushugi no Shinikata) and How Democracy Ends

(Minshushugi no Kowarekata) unanimously point out the importance of the function of political parties in a period of democratic decline. However, the two books focus on different points. *How Democracies Die* focuses on the filter function of political parties. What the book shows is that Trump is by no means the first example of a successful populist in the United States. There have been many Trumps in American history who almost succeeded, but they were all kept out (= filtered out) by the "smoke-filled back room" of their political parties, especially by some of the more influential people. Trump's success is the result of the dysfunction of that "smoke-filled back room."

In contrast, what *How Democracy Ends* expects from political parties is the absorptive function of public opinion. The book states that "[this] makes Mark Zuckerberg a greater threat to American democracy than Donald Trump." It does not focus on the polarization of society, as *How Democracies Die* did. It focuses on the fragmentation of society, arguing that the digital revolution represented by social media is a threat precisely because it promotes the fragmentation of public opinion in society. In other words, while *How Democracies Die* is concerned with the fragmentation of public opinion, *How Democracy Ends* is concerned with the fragmentation and ephemeral nature of public opinion, which does not take a specific form. Political parties are expected to absorb the fragmented public opinion and transform it into a specific form. The filter function and the absorb function. Although the two are not contradictory, the relationship between them is quite delicate. If the filter function is too strong, the effect of the absorb function will be diminished. A "smoke-filled back room" is exactly what it sounds like: a closed-door meeting of smokers. In the past, it would have been a boys' club, and even if it weren't, it's doubtful that there would be any racial or class bias. The filter function could end up entrusting the role of kingmaker to a few privileged and influential people. On the other hand, if the absorb function becomes too strong, the filter loses its relevance. Political parties will degenerate into institutions that merely respond to the populist will of the times.

Japan's problem is not polarization but fragmentation

What about Japanese party politics in this regard?

First, there is the filter function. For example, it is very likely that the LDP's factions have played the role of a "smoke-filled back room" in Japanese democracy. In fact, the effect of the dissolution of factions by former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio was vividly demonstrated in the recent LDP Presidential election. First, the disappearance of the faction's previous coordinating function led to an unprecedented nine candidates, resulting in the creation of many "bubble candidates." These include politicians who would be considered leaders in the traditional factional units. Second, as a result of the disorganization of the candidates and the dispersion of votes among the members, the weight of the so-called "party member / fraternity member" votes increased. In order to make it to the runoff between the top two candidates, it became necessary to secure the votes of party members and fraternity members. A symbolic example is the case of Koizumi Shinjiro[3], who was initially considered the favorite and actually received the most votes from lawmakers, but was defeated without advancing to the runoff election.

[3] Koizumi Shinjiro, the son of former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, was considered as a "next-generation leader candidate." Born in 1981, Shinjiro attracted a lot of attention when he ran for the LDP presidency for the first time. He received the most votes from lawmakers out of the nine candidates, but his radical reform stance meant he did not receive broad support from party members and fraternity members.

On the one hand, this means the democratization of the LDP. The presidential election reflects the will of the grassroots members of the party and the fraternity, rather than the result of collusion between members of the Diet. From another perspective, however, the filter function seems to have been severely damaged. The two candidates [Ishiba and Takaichi] who made it to the runoff were not necessarily well-liked by other lawmakers, and both were lone wolves who did not like "drinking parties." The fact that the LDP Diet members who participated in the runoff election were forced to make the ultimate choice between these two lone wolves may indicate that the dissolution of the factions has increased the LDP's vulnerability to populism. If a more attractive populist emerges in the future, there is no guarantee that the factionless LDP will not repeat the mistakes of the Republican Party, which has been taken over by Trump.

Then there is the absorption function, which is even more serious. Again, taking the LDP as an example, the number of party members has been declining steadily since its peak in 1991, although there are some fluctuations from year to year. It is not just the number of party members. Internal diversity is an even bigger problem. At all levels — party members, party officials, and parliamentarians — men (and probably older men) make up the majority (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office's *Survey on Women's Participation in Policy and Decision-making Position 2023*), and the proportion of women and young people in the party's decision-making process is extremely limited. Although the LDP is probably the most serious in this regard, it cannot be denied that other political parties have more or less the same tendency. It cannot be said that political parties are a good reflection of the diversity that actually exists in Japanese society. This would mean that political parties do not function as an instrument for productively reflecting in the political sphere the divisions and frictions that exist latently in society.

If the threat to Japanese democracy is fragmentation rather than polarization, as in the United States (and the *Nihon no Bundan* we looked at earlier actually seems to support this concern), then the poor absorptive function of Japanese political parties is a more fundamental problem than the loss of their filtering function.

Whether centrist policies work depends on political parties

There is probably no need to be overly pessimistic about Japanese democracy. Our society is still one in which friends with different opinions coexist, not one in which incompatible enemies confront each other. We can be a little proud of the amazing tenacity that our society showed during the "lost 30 years." Rather, the real risk is being consumed by more anxiety than necessary, excessive worry about conflict, and "governing anxiety" in Japanese society. A crew member who boards a lifeboat and becomes pessimistic about the situation and starts to act violently is a direct threat to the lifeboat.

On the other hand, of course, we should not be overly optimistic. In particular, it is important to reconsider the two functions of political parties in democratic politics (i.e., filtering and absorbing).

Public opinion as expressed in the October 27, 2024, Lower House general election — in which the CDPJ made major gains while the LDP teetered on the brink — also seems to indicate an expectation of centrist politics through cooperation between the two major parties. However, whether or not this will be successful will ultimately depend on whether or not political parties can properly fulfill their functions in Japan's democratic system.

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KONO Yuri, Ph.D.
Professor, Hosei University

Born in Tokyo in 1979. Graduated from the University of Tokyo's Faculty of Law in 2003. Completed the M.A. course at the University of Tokyo Graduate Schools for Law and Politics in 2005. Received a Ph.D. (law) from the University of Tokyo in 2008. Specializes in the history of Japanese political thought. Published works include *Meiroku Zasshi no Seijishiso* (The Political Thought in the Journal Meiji Six), *Gishi no Seijigaku* (The Politics of False History), and *Kindai Nihon Seijishisoshi* ((ed.) History of Political Thought in Modern Japan).
