

JPRI Working Paper No. 17: March 1996

The Left in Japanese Politics: Is There Movement Toward a Third Pole?

by Lonny E. Carlile

To the extent that the American press has paid any attention at all to developments in Japanese party politics, coverage has tended to focus on the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its neo-conservative rival, the New Frontier Party (Shinshintō) (NFP). This fixation on these two parties is understandable. After all, they are the two largest parties in the Japanese national legislature, and they include those Japanese political figures who are best known overseas and who are likely to continue to be central players in party politics in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, an exclusive focus on the conservative camp does cause one to overlook certain critical developments. These could be very important in determining the future course of both Japanese party politics and Japan's political and economic relationship with the rest of the world. One such potentially significant development largely ignored in the overseas press is the movement to create a "third pole" (*daisankyoku*) in Japanese party politics.

Perhaps the best way to approach an inchoate movement like the "third pole" at present is to look at its most accessible and concrete aspect--namely, its "vision." A number of treatises have been published by individuals and groups associated with the "third pole" movement and these, elaborating as they do a common set of basic perspectives and policy positions, serve as a useful introduction to the movement's goals and strategies.*

The "third pole" (sometimes translated as "third force") refers to a proposed political grouping of social democrats and "liberals" (in the American sense) that is intended to act as a parliamentary counterweight to the larger conservative parties in the Japanese Diet. By controlling the swing vote (as the Free Democratic Party did in former West Germany), the third pole could help steer Japanese government in a more progressive direction than it might otherwise take. In the area of foreign policy, it champions the principles of Japan's pacifist constitution and opposes the pursuit of great power status of the sort advocated by the NFP's Ozawa Ichiro. Domestically, while calling for deregulation and administrative reform, it argues that these should not be pursued to the point that they fail to provide adequate social welfare or that the "weak" continue to be protected from the more severe consequences of change in the political economy.

The strategy of the movement grows out of its belief that the political economy built and sustained over the long years of LDP rule has given rise to major dysfunctions in Japanese social, economic and political life. Specifically, it argues that existing

arrangements in government and politics have consistently favored producers and organized interest groups at the expense of more broadly shared concerns relating to what the Japanese call *seikatsu*, or non-work life. (Incorporated in the term *seikatsu* are activities associated with the household, community, and leisure; its meaning is much broader than the English “livelihood.”) Third pole proponents point to Japan’s excessively high cost of living, inadequate welfare policies, grueling work hours for the “salaryman,” and a variety of the other irrationalities and inconveniences that make the quality of life in Japan substantially lower than what it should be given its nominally high income levels.

This characterization of Japan’s current situation is, of course, by no means unique. What distinguishes the “third pole” advocates from more conservative advocates of reform is their rejection of the notion that these ills can be rectified through policy alone. Instead they argue that these contradictions grow directly out of the closed nature of Japan’s political and governmental system and that fundamental institutional changes are required to make government more accountable to the needs and preferences of the average citizen. Concrete proposals for doing this include a massive devolution of government authority from the central to local governments, the opening up of the administrative process to public scrutiny, and giving greater scope to non-profit and non-governmental organizations.

Finally, third pole proponents see the pursuit of great power status through military means as inimical to their goals for a better society. They insist on a foreign policy in which the pacifist principles embodied in Article 9 of Japan’s constitution would be championed internationally as a positive value. Third pole advocates also call on Japan to “close the books” on World War II by forthrightly recognizing and apologizing for its international misbehavior in the past and, where appropriate, providing compensation. While acknowledging the need to maintain the Japan-US Security Treaty and the US-Japan relationship more generally, third pole advocates stress the importance of Asia in Japan’s foreign policy and advocate a gradual decrease in Japanese defense spending. In short, the third pole vision calls for more thoroughgoing, populist institutional reforms than the more elitist and technocratic deregulation favored by Japan’s neo-conservatives. And in the foreign policy arena, it is the exact antithesis of the “normal country” foreign policy associated with Ozawa Ichiro and other neo-nationalists.

Strategy

“Third pole” strategists emphasize that public opinion polls show that the majority of Japanese voters support neither the LDP or the NFP and that identification with political parties has declined dramatically. This disaffection with politics is reflected in recurring expressions of public disapproval over corruption scandals, rapidly declining voter turnouts in elections of all sorts, and the success of antiparty candidates such as the two ex-comedians--Aoshima Yukio and Yokoyama “Knock”--who were elected to govern Japan’s most populous metropolises.

Strategists see a crying need for a new political vehicle to represent the needs and preferences of the mass of disaffected voters. There is even, among those associated with

the movement, a widely shared understanding of how such a political vehicle might be created. Specifically, they envision a melding of three groups: the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ), “liberal” elements formally associated with the LDP (and possibly the NFP), and locally-based political organizations based on “citizen’s movements” or peculiar local circumstances.

These are rather heterogeneous groups, and precisely for that reason any future unified entity would have to be either a network of sympathetic but formally independent organizations or else a political party with a highly decentralized structure in which party discipline would be deliberately circumscribed. This conception, of course, also explains the use of the term “pole.”

The SDPJ is central to the creation of a third pole for several reasons. Its current platform (the 1995 declaration), is a product of a long and painful process of party reform and coincides with the third pole agenda. Serious internal differences continue to divide the party, but, as reflected in a variety of formal party documents adopted over the past two years or so, there is today a consensus that the creation of a “third pole” is essential to the survival of the party’s Diet members and its vision for Japanese society. Current intraparty divisions rest not so much on differences in policy or strategy as on matters of timing and tactics.

The SDPJ is also critical to the third pole because of resources it controls. The party remains, by a wide margin, the single largest party in terms of Diet seats outside of the LDP and NFP. Furthermore, as a result of recent legislation creating public subsidies for political parties, the SDPJ is in a position to receive a substantial amount of money (estimated at \$60 million in the current fiscal year). This could be mobilized on behalf of a third pole movement, whereas any newly created party--that is, one without the formal participation of the SDPJ--would not be eligible to “inherit” the SDPJ’s share of assets. In addition, the SDPJ still receives considerable financial and organizational support from Japan’s largest unions and has an extensive network of committed local activists in areas such as human rights and the antinuclear movement.

As for potential defectors from the LDP, it is useful to recall that policies such as the protection of the weak, social welfare, and maintenance of the letter of Article Nine of Japan’s constitution have always generated strong support within the LDP. In fact, successive LDP governments supported these policies over objections from more hawkish and neo-conservative elements within the party. In many ways, aside from its stress on direct citizen participation, the third pole movement represents a defense of core aspects of pre-1993 LDP policy, and it is the neo-conservative current that marks a departure. In this context, it would not be unnatural for some former LDP politicians to join the third pole. A potential example is the small new party Sakigake under Takemura Masayoshi, which broke away from the LDP in the summer of 1993 and is currently a coalition partner in the Hashimoto government. Proponents of the third pole movement argue that there are potential “third polers” even in the NFP. Possible recruits could also be found among “dovish” former LDPers and a handful of Diet members who were formerly associated

with the labor-backed Democratic Socialist Party, whose rank and file activists continue to show a strong ambivalence toward their leadership's support of the Ozawa-Komeito line. Finally, with regard to local citizens' organizations, it is noteworthy that in contrast to Western media reports that tend to stress voter apathy and lack of public involvement on the part of Japanese citizens, third pole proponents regularly comment on the mushrooming of voluntary groups and local activism. It could well be that the discrepancy of interpretation is the product of different baselines being used to assess levels of activism, but third pole strategists find this energy both widespread and significant enough to consider it one of the three pillars of any future third pole.

Examples of "local parties" created by citizen activists include Tokyo Shimin 21 (Tokyo Citizens 21), Rengo Kinki (Kinki Alliance) and the New Wind Hokkaido Congress (Atarashii Kaze Hokkaido Kaigi). Each of these groups is a local-level political organization created in the past year or so with the help of politicians who have parted company with the established national parties, and each illustrates the way in which partisan boundaries at the national level do not necessarily hold sway at the local level. Kaieda Banri, of Tokyo Citizens 21, for instance, was a prominent member of the New Japan Party (Nihon Shinto) who left that party upon the creation of the NFP. Tokyo Citizens 21 was established with the help of a former SDPJ Diet member and two Tokyo prefectural assembly members.

Yamahana Sadao of Rengo Kinki was a former chairman of the SDPJ, and the organization itself was created, with the assistance of local union officials, by linking several SDPJ and former DSP affiliates.

In the case of New Hokkaido, the central figure is Yokomichi Takahiro, former Socialist governor of Hokkaido, who was successful in creating an organization that spanned across the spectrum of the established political parties in the prefecture. Each of these new political groupings stresses its devotion to representing local interests in the National Diet over subservience to the platforms and maneuverings of national parties.

Abortive Start

The emergence of local parties as a component of a future third pole is a recent phenomenon and serves to highlight the shifting currents that have so far frustrated efforts to create a viable political alternative to the conservatives. The notion of a "third pole" itself dates back to the summer of 1993, following the collapse of the LDP's single-party majority in the Diet. It was at this time that Yamagishi Akira, president of the national labor center Rengo, began pushing for a remerger of the labor-backed SDPJ and DSP to form a political counterweight to the conservatives. (See my "Party Politics and the Japanese Labor Movement: Rengo's New Political Force," *Asian Survey* 34-7 (July 1994): 301-316, for an analysis of labor's activities in the period leading up to this.)

As it turned out, this Social Democrat-led consolidation of a third pole proved a failure. Despite what was apparently considerable behind-the-scenes pressure from union organizations, rivalry and enmity between SDPJ and DSP politicians proved impossible to

bridge. Another reason for the failure may have been the fact that many key leaders in the labor movement also pushed for a new system of union-party relations. They wanted to abandon labor's support of a particular party in favor of an "arm's length" relationship based on a case-by-case review of a candidate's record, regardless of political party affiliation.

Meanwhile during the latter part of 1993 and early 1994, the Shinseito-Komeito alliance consolidated its dominance over the non-LDP Hosokawa coalition. This led to a growing uneasiness within the SDPJ over the increasingly neo-conservative direction that the Hosokawa government appeared to be taking. The upshot was that the SDPJ quit the Hosokawa coalition and joined in a "marriage of convenience" with the LDP, culminating in June of 1994 with the election of the first Socialist prime minister (Murayama Tomiichi) since 1947. The establishment of the Murayama coalition succeeded in blocking the feared conservative-conservative (so-called *ho-ho-rengo*) LDP-NFP coalition, but it also wreaked havoc on the effort to create a political alternative to the conservatives by setting the stage for a clash within the SDPJ between those who placed top priority on sustaining the Murayama government and others whose priority was to create a third pole as soon as possible.

For the former group this "pact with the devil" was absolutely essential in order to prevent the emergence of a potentially irreversible neo-conservative hegemony. The maintenance of the party as a unit, in turn, was a prerequisite for sustaining the Murayama coalition since, at the time of its formation, the LDP-SDPJ-Sakigake coalition controlled fewer than 40 seats above a simple majority in the lower house. Thus, a major departure from among the 70 members of the SDPJ (and pro-realignment forces were believed to be in the majority within the party) could easily bring down the government.

To those who placed high priority on establishing a third force as soon as possible, the Murayama government appeared to be diverting the party's attention away from the pressing task of creating a viable political organization that could survive a general election. In this view, the Murayama government was, if anything, counter-productive. Not only was the party failing to jettison its unpopular ultra leftist image by not parting company with the hard-line leftists in its midst, but its alliance with the LDP was undermining any shred of ideological credibility the party might have had. Needless to say, the byzantine maneuvering precipitated by this situation fostered an atmosphere of mistrust and recrimination.

Matters came to a head within the party during the latter part of 1994 with the formation of an intraparty group led by Yamahana known as the Shinminren (New Democratic League). Shinminren was to devote itself to the formation of a new, social democratic-liberal party that would champion third pole principles and that would exclude the SDPJ's remaining hard-line leftists. The latter, it might be noted, was seen as a prerequisite for attracting members from outside the SDPJ. In moves designed to keep pro-Shinminren Diet members in the party, Murayama supporters responded by pushing through a wholesale revamping of the party's policies along lines favored by new party advocates. They also promised (while at the same time delaying) the creation of a "new party." Out of this process there

emerged a reversal of a number of long-standing socialist tenets: Murayama announced the party's unequivocal recognition of the constitutionality of the Self-Defense Forces and came out in favor of maintaining the Japan-US Security Treaty. In the face of this upping of the ante, Yamahana in early January 1995 decided to force the issue by preparing to submit the resignations from the SDPJ of all members of the Shinminren. Ironically, the day that the resignations were to be acted upon the Kansai Earthquake occurred. Yamahana announced a cancellation of the *en masse* resignation, and a moratorium was placed on further efforts to form a new party until the crisis was over.

While the earthquake was the precipitating factor in the moratorium, it has also been reported that during the spring of 1995 two key unions--Zentei, the postal workers' union, and Zendentsu, the NTT union--withdrew their support for Shinminren, explaining the lack of any subsequent rejuvenation of the movement. Motivating this withdrawal of support, apparently, were behind-the-scenes hints from the LDP that it might push through the privatization of the postal service and the breakup of NTT should these unions continue to back the Shinminren drive. (See Shiota Ushio, "'Daisankyoku' wa honto ni dekiruka," *Shokun* (November 1995): 48-58.)

It was also during the moratorium period that it first became clear that under the provisions of the new party-funding legislation, SDPJ participation would be required if any new party was to "inherit" the SDPJ's public subsidy. This, of course, shifted the advantage to the pro-Murayama group since no financially viable new party could be created without the formal approval of the party.

It was hardly coincidental that it was precisely around this time that a handful of politicians who had bolted from the SDPJ and other national parties began actively to organize local political parties as the focal point of their effort to build a third pole.

Future Prospects

There is no denying that the record of the third pole movement so far has done little to inspire confidence in its chances of success. How likely, then, is it that a third pole might actually come into being in Japanese politics?

Despite the movement's less than sterling track record, there are good reasons to believe that a third pole may yet come into being. To begin with, non-LDP, non-NFP supporters continue to make up a major proportion of the electorate and there are districts, particularly in urban areas, where they constitute the majority. Despite the clear advantage that the LDP and NFP have in the new 300 winner-take-all districts, non-LDP, non-NFP candidates are likely to win at least some of these seats. Should the LDP and NFP stumble as the result of internal struggles, a scandal or political crisis (certainly not unthinkable), potential third pole candidates are in a position to do even better. There is also an incentive for these candidates to create some kind of structure for coordinating their electoral efforts since running multiple candidates would undercut their chances.

Similar incentives are at work, with somewhat less urgency, in the remaining 200 lower house seats that will be filled on the basis of proportional representation (PR) lists for eleven regional districts. The new electoral system in fact provides a mechanism for encouraging candidates to run against conservative candidates. Under the new legislation, it is possible for a registered “party” to list all its candidates in the small districts of a PR region at the top of the PR list and then distribute its share of seats in accordance with how well its candidates perform against competing candidates in the small districts. Thus electoral cooperation will be essential to the survival of all the non-LDP, non-NFP parties. Once established, such an organization could serve as the kernel for consolidating the third pole. There is currently talk in Tokyo and elsewhere of a pre-election “summit” to be held sometime in the spring of 1996 in which the heads of all potential third pole groups would attempt to reach an accord on such matters.

In the long run, however, the viability of a third pole will probably rest less on what happens before the next general election than on what will happen afterward. As reported in the 5 January 1996 *Asahi Shimbun*, a recent poll of Diet members revealed that both the LDP and the NFP remain internally divided between candidates who support a neo-conservative line and those who indicate more “liberal” values stressing assistance to the old and poor and the maintenance of Japan’s pacifist foreign policy principles. The latter are, of course, core elements of the third pole stance. Interestingly, the SDPJ showed the least internal division over fundamental values. There are good reasons why such Diet members, ensconced as they are in parties that at the moment possess a clear electoral advantage, would not want to abandon their current affiliations prior to the election. Once the election is over, however, it may well be that these values will become an important variable in shaping Diet member behavior. If so, then post-election party realignment may become the critical determinant of the viability of a third pole.

Under such circumstances, the biggest threat to formation of a third pole may be the co-optation of third pole positions by the LDP or (less likely) the NFP. Even if that should happen, the ultimate policy outcome--a leavening of neo-conservatism with a dose of social democratic-liberalism--might well resemble the conception that led to the creation of a third pole in the first place.

*For instance, Heiwa Keizai Keikaku Kaigi, ed., *Shamin riberaru no seisaku kozo* (Tokyo: Nihon Hyoronsha, 1994); Yokomichi Takahiro, *Daisan no kyoku* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1995); Takemura Masayoshi, *Chiisaku tomo kirari to hikaru kuni Nihon* (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1994), and Nihon Shakaito Atarashii Seito Zukuri Suishin Honbu, ed., *Shinto undo no shiori* (SDPJ, 1995).

LONNY E. CARLILE is Assistant Professor at the Center for Japanese Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and translator of Masumi Junnosuke’s *Contemporary Politics in Japan*, University of California Press, 1995. The author would like to thank Professor Takagi Ikuro of Japan Women’s University, Tokyo, for his assistance during the process of researching this paper.