

Japanese local elections reveal widespread voter alienation

John Watanabe
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The first round of local elections was held on April 10, with 41 out of Japan's 47 prefectures voting for local assemblies and some governorships. While the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) suffered a serious setback, the outcome reflected broad disenchantment among voters with all the major parties. The second round is due on April 24.

The DPJ failed to win the governorships in Mie—which was the political stronghold of DPJ Secretary General Katsuya Okada—and Hokkaido, where former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had a strong base. Both these races were seen as one-on-one contests with the rival Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and were won by LDP-supported candidates.

In Tokyo, incumbent Shintaro Ishihara, a right-wing “independent” backed by the LDP, won a fourth term as mayor. The DPJ did not even formally endorse a candidate, even though Tokyo is the constituency of Prime Minister Naoto Kan. Instead, DPJ metropolitan assembly members supported Miki Watanabe, the founder of a chain of casual pubs, Watami Inc. The business manager, who compared his campaign with that of billionaire Michael Bloomberg for New York mayor, was quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* as saying he wanted to become “Tokyo’s salesman to the world.”

The DPJ had hoped to increase its presence in the prefectural assemblies, but in the end lost 69 seats and secured just 17.4 percent of the seats contested. The LDP retained its dominant position in 40 out of 41 prefectural assemblies, with 35.5 percent of the total seats. The LDP, however, also lost a significant number of seats, dropping from 1,247 to 1,119.

Political disillusionment with the major parties, and the electoral process as a whole, was indicated in the low voter turnout, which fell below 50 percent for the first time since the end of World War II. The 48.2 percent turnout was part of a long-term trend that saw the rate drop from around 80 percent in the 1950s to under 60 percent in the early 1990s. Alienation among young people, many of whom are working in precarious part-time or temporary jobs with no benefits and no social security, is particularly high.

The DPJ was elected in a landslide in August 2009, after more than half a century of virtually uninterrupted LDP rule. However, the victory reflected broad hostility to the Liberal Democrats rather than positive support for their opponents.

Having taken office, DPJ quickly bowed to pressure from big business to cut government spending and wind back its electoral promises to enact social measures such as child allowances. The government also succumbed to demands from Washington to ditch its pledge to move a key US military base off the island of Okinawa.

The DPJ's broken promises were punished by voters in the July 2010 elections for the parliamentary Upper House, handing control of the house to the LDP. Last weekend's local elections clearly demonstrated that support for the DPJ is still sliding.

Prime Minister Kan's government is being criticised on two main fronts: for its inability to deal with the crises following the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, and for the continued deterioration of the economy.

Over a month after the quake, some 150,000 people, mainly those without means of securing housing on their own, remain in cramped and cold shelters. The Japanese edition of *Mainichi* reported on April 14 that a 102-year-old man, recently evacuated from the town of Iitate due to high radiation levels, committed suicide, unable to cope with the difficulties of shelter life.

There is palpable popular outrage with the way in which the nuclear industry has been permitted to operate with inadequate safety measures. Anti-nuclear demonstrations, while still relatively small, are growing across Japan. Last Sunday saw some 17,500 mostly young people demonstrating in Tokyo. Similar protests took place as far away as Okinawa, and further demonstrations are planned for this weekend in Tokyo and other cities, including Mie, Osaka, Fukuoka and Niigata.

On April 12, Japan's nuclear agencies raised the severity of the nuclear crisis from 5 on an international scale to the highest level of 7. There is now a widespread belief that the government waited until after Sunday's elections in order to minimise the announcement's political impact.

Economic issues and the growing divide between rich and poor are also generating disgust. Government statistics released this month showed that the number of welfare recipients—even before the earthquake—had risen to levels not seen since the end of World War II. The figure for January rose to 1,998,975, just short of the monthly average of about 2.04 million recorded in fiscal 1952. The number of households in which people were receiving welfare benefits in January stood at an all-time high of 1,441,767.

The number of welfare beneficiaries has kept increasing since the onset of the global financial crisis in September 2008. Many working-age people have lost their jobs and now depend on welfare as a result of the ongoing economic slump.

In the wake of the earthquake, the Kan government is making further inroads into living standards. The *Nikkei* business daily reported recently that the DPJ

leadership had decided to cut the monthly child allowance from 13,000 to 10,000 yen (\$US120) from November, supposedly to help pay for disaster reconstruction. This signals a further watering down of the DPJ's 2009 election promise to provide child allowance payments of 26,000 yen. Already the government has cut the allowance in half, citing a lack of funds.

None of the other established parties made any significant gains in last weekend's election. The Stalinist Communist Party of Japan lost prefectural seats, with its overall total falling from 94 to 80. Likewise, the number of seats held by the Social Democratic Party fell from 50 to 30. The New Komeito Party, formerly allied to the LDP, marginally increased its representation.

Some local parties profited from the voter dissatisfaction with the traditional parties, most notably in Osaka and Aichi. However, what emerges overall is a pattern that is familiar internationally: with most people either punishing incumbents by making a protest vote for other parties and candidates, or not voting at all.



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