4 Political Games

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“The situation is under control!”

“The Games of the 32nd Olympiad in 2020 are awarded to the city of [some fumbling with the big envelope] ... Tokyo!” Every member of the Japanese delegation who had travelled to Buenos Aires in 2013 jumped up from their seats. Prime Minister Abe, head of the ruling Liberal Democrats (LDP) and active part of the campaign, smiled, showing a hint of hugging to his neighbor before being enthusiastically hugged by Japan’s then NOC president Takeda Tsunekazu. After its failed bid for 2016, when Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro led the endeavor, the Japanese capital had now secured the rights to hold the billion-dollar event.

For Abe this victory also meant that he had convinced a sufficient number of IOC members that, as he put it, “the situation is under control.” This referred to Fukushima’s nuclear power plant, which had been a major part of the 2011 triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear melt-down, the latter of which contaminated many rural communities with radioactivity and forced about 160,000 Japanese to leave their homes. It had been one of Abe’s major talking points in front of the IOC assembly that both the destroyed nuclear power plant and earthquakes would pose no threat to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

By far not everyone in Japan shared that sentiment but what else could Abe say? He clearly did not waver: His party had never given up on nuclear energy even though the very close ties of Liberal Democrats to the operators of nuclear power plants had contributed to a momentous lack of oversight and safety measures. Being a country without conventional energy resources to speak of, the LDP argued that in order to maintain a necessary minimum of self-reliance and to keep energy costs low, nuclear energy could not be abandoned. It just needed tighter control. The situation was under control.

Japanese energy companies, which have been enjoying regional monopolies for decades, were by far not the only close business allies of

the LDP. Over its many decades of single-party dominance starting in 1955, the Liberal Democrats had fostered close ties to almost all industries, with the deal being industry-friendly policies in exchange for financial support for the ruling party. The basic philosophy of “convoy capitalism” had assigned the role of guardian and supporter of Japanese business interests to the government while the companies would take care of employees and indirectly their families. Women would not be gainfully employed full time but become homemakers, child and senior care included. Employers on the other side would keep jobs secure even during economic downturns. Like a convoy, society as a whole would benefit from this arrangement and move ahead while companies donated generously to the LDP to keep the system going.

The political situation out of control

From 1955 to 1993, no opposition party was able to seriously challenge the LDP. It took a number of unique factors to end the Liberal Democratic dominance: the end of the Cold War, a number of corruption cases involving leading LDP politicians, second and third generation “dynastic” politicians who wanted change, and the consequential bursting of Japan’s bubble economy. Also relevant was the fact that convoy capitalism did not allow for globalization, equal opportunity and the advancement of women, free market competition, or a government that gives priority to its citizens and not its companies. The impact of these factors, however, grew stronger in Japan and eventually damaged convoy capitalism considerably.

The resulting pessimism among Japanese overshadowed the 1993 general elections. Many reform-oriented Liberal Democrats had left their party to form new ones and campaigned almost exclusively on reform. And they won. As a result, a seven-party coalition took over government including every party except for the LDP and the Communists. The only common mission that united them, next to the chance of experiencing power, was to reform the rules of the political system, an endeavor usually referred to as “political reform.” Then Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro stayed in office for less than a year but during that time managed to have a new electoral system, party financing rules and other new laws passed, all of which were supposed to clean up and renew Japanese politics.

Being out of power paralyzed the LDP for a while because the party only knew how to function with access to state resources. Deprived of the state budgets and the ability to make policy decisions, Liberal Democrats were scared to also lose company donations and even more elections. The party therefore worked frantically to regain power. Its leadership shrewdly convinced its former arch enemy, the Socialist Party, to form a coalition

and in 1994 re-took control of government. Then it did not take much longer to get rid of the Socialists and in 1995 the LDP was back where it had been for so many decades before: ruling alone. A realistic look at voter behavior, however, made it clear to party leadership that there were more challenges to come in the near future and it negotiated another alliance with a former arch enemy. This time it was Komeito, the “Clean Government Party,” established in 1964 by the religious lay organization Soka Gakkai, which for decades had been running on a clear anti-LDP platform. In 1999, both parties formed a coalition, with the declared aim of mutually improving electoral chances.

Only a month before Tokyo’s bid for the 2016 Olympics failed in 2009, however, a general election had again drastically changed Japan’s political world. The LDP had lost its majority to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), a force that many Japanese apparently voted for to try something different. And that it was. The DPJ ran on the slogan “from concrete to people,” meaning that the government should use its resources not for an endless string of infrastructure projects all over the country but direct it to the country’s families, employees, and consumers.

Fortunately for the LDP, the DPJ did not govern very well. Three different DPJ politicians tried themselves as Prime Ministers until finally, in 2012, the party suffered a crushing defeat and the LDP, again with its junior coalition partner Komeito, won back power. Never mind that the LDP did not win more votes than in 2009 when it lost. The party simply profited from the apparent frustration of many voters who decided to abstain from voting. The 2012 defeat not only made the DPJ implode but also deflated the hopes in opposition parties for many voters. Even in the year of the Olympics the opposition camp has not recovered, leaving Japanese voters hardly any promising alternative to the LDP. Since 2012, almost half of all eligible voters responded to this choice set with absenteeism. Low voter turnout coupled with a particular mechanism of the electoral system have allowed the LDP to command a comfortable majority of more than 60% of the seats, with only about 16% of all eligible voters actually voting for the party.

Olympics and the constitution

For a national government, Olympic Games offer a lot of opportunities to raise its popularity both at home and abroad. In addition, economic resources can be mobilized and secured to create the infrastructure needed for the big event. Quite a few LDP politicians lined up to somehow profit from the new treasure trove, trying to direct some of that money towards their own constituency. But Abe looked beyond the usual pork barrel

dealings, he had a bigger plan. His intention was to make 2020 truly significant for Japan by announcing his intention to reform the country's constitution. Japan's basic law had never been changed since it was written by the US occupational forces after World War II and enacted in 1947. Especially conservatives in Japan repeatedly insist on the need to create a "Japanese" constitution including the traditional values they deem essential for their country. Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, had also been Prime Minister (1957–1960) but was unsuccessful in his attempt to reform the constitution. In 2012, Abe started his own campaign. With his ruling coalition commanding a two thirds majority, one important precondition for constitutional reform was secured. The other existed as Abe managed to have a bill passed that set the rules for how to conduct the necessary popular vote on the issue. But then his own camp caused trouble.

Opinions on what and how to change were so diverse within the LDP itself and its support organizations that Abe found himself quickly between a rock and many hard places. Any concrete suggestions would be rejected by at least one influential group of conservative forces, making it virtually impossible after 2012 to come up with an LDP draft. In addition, Komeito proved reluctant to push the issue. Having been established as a pacifist force, Komeito was especially wary of any change that could lead to a more active role of the Japanese military. Pacifism had been at the core of Komeito's self-conception and its voters would not have it any other way.

Not surprisingly, the most contentious reform issue has been Article 9 of the Japanese constitution which declares that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." The same Article, however, has been interpreted in such a way that self-defense is exempted from this restriction, allowing the Japanese government, with support of the US, to establish the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in 1955, comprising 250,000 "members" and commanding a sophisticated military arsenal. Since the late 1980s, international pressure, especially from the US, has kept Japan on the defensive because of the country's rejection to send troops abroad and participate in military missions. Only slowly did the SDF join UN peacekeeping operations starting in the 1990s – as long as they included no combat.

There is a very vocal pacifist resistance among Japanese who reject any change to – what they call – the "peace constitution," but especially to Article 9. This resistance comprises, among others, political parties on the left, religious organizations, and parts of the liberal political camp. They all share the belief that Abe and his LDP cannot be trusted and that any change of the constitution will be a step on the path to active participation in military aggression. Remember the past, beware the beginnings. Abe,

however, leads those who at least want to put the SDF on a constitutionally sound footing. Even Komeito agreed to add to Article 9 in a way that would do away with any legal doubt regarding the constitutionality of the SDF, but then had second thoughts and readjusted its position to “constitutional reform should be discussed carefully from now on.”

Abe’s term in office ends in 2021. Constitutional reform would by far be the most significant achievement of his long time in power. With the opposition in disarray and a stable parliamentary majority, the year 2020 seems to offer a unique opportunity for the Prime Minister to do something no other Prime Minister has ever achieved before him. In the world of Japanese politics, it may be just this issue that will compete with the Olympics for attention. Let the Games begin.