



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

In Search of an Alternative to the Liberal Democratic Party. The Case of Akai Ohi's Electoral Campaign in 2021 Japanese General Election

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Abstract

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won the Lower House Elections, held on October 31, 2021. The Japanese Party obtained an undisputed victory after a year of harsh criticism addressed to the Suga Cabinet, run by the then LDP party chief, for his ineffective management of the Pandemic crisis. How can the long and almost unchallenged rule of the LDP over Japanese politics, from its foundation in 1955 to the last electoral success, be explained? This paper addresses the topic from an historical perspective, focusing on dr. Akai Ohi's political campaign in the last General elections. Dr. Ohi (1980) is a Japanese political scientist who ran as a candidate for the Constitutional Democratic Party, the main opposition party, in the second constituency of Hiroshima Region, one of the LDP historical strongholds. The cornerstone of his political campaign was the establishment of the electoral alliance with the Communists in his constituency. The dialogue with dr. Ohi reported in this article explores his experience as a candidate and his analysis as a political scientist.

Keywords: Japan – Politics – Liberal Democratic Party – Election Campaigns – Center-left alliance.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. Campaigning in Japan. 3. The Japanese society and politics. 4. 2021 Elections outcome and the LDP regime: changes in continuity. 5. The opposition parties: populism and the center-left. 6. Concluding remarks.

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1. Introduction

2021 was not an easy year for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, *jiyū minshu tō*, 自由民主党), the political formation that dominates the Japanese politics since its formation in 1955. Yoshihide Suga became Prime Minister after his predecessor and main political associate, Shinzō Abe, resigned in September 2020. The new Suga Cabinet had to face tough challenges: effectively addressing the Pandemic crisis, and hosting the Olympics in safety, among others. When Suga announced in October 2021 that he would not seek re-election as a party leader, it became clear to what extent the PM missed these difficult goals. The new Japanese PM, undermined by low approval ratings during all the mandate, has been criticized for his inability to contain the spread of Covid 19, combined with the slow procurement of anti-Covid vaccine. Still another blow has been dealt by the inadequacy of the Government subsidies for domestic travel, which had to be suspended four times as the infection spread progressed. Moreover, the decision to hold the Olympic games became highly contested by Japanese media. Dark perspectives had been cast by the three by-elections held in April, all of which were lost by the LDP, and by the poor results at the Tokyo municipal election in July. However, the LDP managed to preserve the majority in the Lower House in the general elections on the 31st of October, though it did lose 25 seats compared to the outgoing parliament¹.

The victory of the LDP in the last General elections urge to reconsider why a significant political change did not happen even in these difficult circumstances. Short-term considerations are in order, such as the candidates' different input and achievements in the 2021 election campaigning, the credibility and originality of Kishida Fumio and the other candidates running for the premiership, and the soundness of the proposed political platforms. Moreover, since the LDP was the incumbent party, it is important to evaluate how the mixed legacy of the Abe cabinet's long ruling period (2006-2007, 2012-2020) affected voters' decision².

However, considering the impressive persistence of the single-party majority in Japan, medium, and long-term perspectives cannot be avoided, too. In the last thirty

¹ R. Kersten, *Can Suga rise above caretaker?*, in *East Asian Forum*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2021, 3-5; B. Ascione, *Suga's bet on Olympic gold*, in *East Asian Forum*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 7-8. G. McCormack, *The Prospect of Political Change in Japan – Elections 2021*, in *Japan Focus, the Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 19, issue 20, No. 3, 2021 (<https://apjff.org/2021/20/McCormack.html>). G. McCormack, *Tokyo 2020-21: The Troubled Games of the XXXII Olympiad*, in *Japan Focus, the Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 19, issue 6, No. 7, 2021 (<https://apjff.org/2021/6/McCormack.html>).

² For improving aspects in Abe's political profile as Prime Minister, which positively affected the electors, M. Endo, R. Pekkanen, *The LDP: Return to Dominance? Or a Golden Age Built on Sand?*, in R. Pekkanen, R. Scheiner, S. Reed, *Japan Decides 2014 The Japanese General Election*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, 41-54; R. Pekkanen, S. Pekkanen, *Japan in 2015, More about Abe*, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 34-46. For an evaluation in electoral terms of the scandals that characterized the same Abe cabinet, M. Carlson, S. Reed, *Scandals during the Abe administrations*, in R. Pekkanen, S. Reed, E. Scheiner, D. Smith, *Japan Decides 2017, The Japanese General Election*, Springer International Publishing, 2018, 109-126.

years Japan underwent a dramatic process of change which tore apart any stereotypical representation of an unchanging and homogeneous Country³.

The long period of recession due to financial and economic crisis in 1990's and 2000's changed Japanese society and lifestyle in a broad sense. Diverse aspects of the most celebrated Japanese economic model soon became target of blaming. The corporate governance which considered the firm as a community, labor practices as lifetime employment, wage coordination by company labor unions, and company welfare were now considered sources of stagnation⁴. Japanese corporations reconsidered their practices in corporate governance and labor relations. Thus, since the 1990's, layoffs, changes in wage system, increase of "nonregular" workers produced income inequality and poverty⁵. The worsening economic conditions accelerated the already declining trend of population and birth rates, which imposed new solutions for gender workforce composition and welfare system.

Especially in the Nineties, while many Japanese were forced to adjust their life expectations, bureaucrats and politicians became target of increasing dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the LDP lost control of the government only for brief periods in 1993-94 and 2010-12. How did the LDP manage to remain on the same page with a society that changed so dramatically for over 60 years⁶?

Past literature focused on LDP's efficiency in mobilizing votes through large networks of supporters (*kōenkai*). Moreover, the LDP effectively organized client industries and economic sectors, such as agriculture, with a clientelistic distributive politics in exchange of electoral support. Many commentators consider the electoral system in postwar Japan as another important element to understand the long LDP rule. The single, nontransferable vote in multi-member districts favored intraparty electoral competition, which positively affected LDP electoral power⁷.

While economic crisis had become a matter of concern for most of the electorate, in 1994 a coalition government replaced the then electoral system with a mixed member majoritarian electoral system. Reformers expected the formation of a

³ Models depicting Japanese society are presented in chapter 2 of Y. Sugimoto, *An introduction to Japanese society*, Cambridge, 2020.

⁴ R. Dore, *Stock Market Capitalism: Welfare Capitalism, Japan and Germany versus the Anglo-Saxons*, Oxford University Press, 2000. S. Larmount, *Corporate governance: what can be learned from Japan?*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁵ For a synthesis of this argument, see T. Cargill, T. Sakamoto, *Japan Since 1980*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 246-263. The debate on social inequality in contemporary Japan is sketched in chapter three of Y. Sugimoto, *op. cit.* For a historical analysis of the stagnation that is affecting contemporary Japanese society, considered as the result of a major crisis in the traditional employment system, E. Oguma, *Nihon no shikumi, koyō, kyōiku, fukushi no rekishishakaigaku*, Kōdansha, 2019.

⁶ J. Pempel, *Introduction: Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*, in R. Pekkanen, *Critical Readings on the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan*, Vol. 1, Brill, 2018, 357.

⁷ H. Fukui, *Party in Power: The Japanese Liberal Democrats and Policy Making*, University of California Press, 1970; K. Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan*, Princeton University Press, 1988; T. Pempel, *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*, Cornell University Press, 1990; G. Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics: Leaders, Institutions, and the Limits of Change*, Columbia University Press, 1999.

bipolar party system, in which the «two parties would contest elections based on issues, presenting voters a real choice between two mainstream parties»⁸. As it became clear later, the reform did not achieve the expected results, though there is still not consensus over the effects of the reforms on the LDP organization⁹. Indeed, the evolution of the LDP in the last thirty years vis-a-vis the electoral reform is a fundamental issue to consider in any discussion about the present and the future of the Party.

An analysis of the vote-mobilizing capacity of a party should be integrated with the constraints that hinder such an important function¹⁰. In this sense, local values and expectations concerning politics, *i.e.* the political culture, should not be overlooked. In the Japanese case, volatility of the electorate and low voter turnout are well-known issues for the political campaigners. They are usually explained with limited partisan identification and a weak confidence in parliamentary institutions of the Japanese voters, due to the chaotic process of democratization that characterized the Country¹¹. Additional constraints to tackle with are represented by campaign practices and regulations, which were left untouched by the 1990's electoral reform¹².

The success of the LPD is often explained as the product of a weak opposition. A strong evidence indicating the limits of the 1994 electoral reform is the proliferation of opposition parties in the last twenty years, both on the left and the right side of the political spectrum. The main party among the liberal opposition, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP, *rikken minshu tō*, 立憲民主党), has a quite complex, though short, history¹³. After the debacle of 2021 and 2014 elections, the Democratic Party of Japan in 2016 merged with other minor parties to form the Democratic Party. The CDP was formed the next year, as the result of the party split among the Democrats. The CDP in turn absorbed the ex-comrades in 2020. On the left of the CDP, curiosity has recently converged towards the left-wing populist

⁸ R. Christensen, *The Effect of Electoral Reforms on Campaign Practices in Japan: Putting New Wine into Old Bottles*, in R. Pekkanen, *Critical Readings on the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan*, Vol. 2, Brill, 2018, 532. S. Reed, M. Thies, *The Consequences of Electoral Reform in Japan*, in M. Shugart and M. Wattenberg, *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 381-403.

⁹ Emphasis on continuities in LDP before and after the electoral reform is in S. Krauss, R. Pekkanen, *The Rise and Fall of Japan's LDP, Political Party Organizations as Historical Institutions*, Cornell University Press; for an opposite account which stresses change in post-reform LDP, see K. Nakakita, *The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, The Realities of 'Power'*, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁰ J. Bouissou, *Organizing One's Support Base under the snv: The Case of Japanese Koenkai*, in R. Pekkanen, *Critical Readings*, cit., Vol. 2, 501-502.

¹¹ S. Flanagan, K. Shinsaku, I. Miyake, B. Richardson, J. Watanuki, *The Japanese Voter*, Yale University Press, 1991; C. Martin, B. Stronach, *Politics East and West: A comparison of Japanese and British political culture*, Sharpe, 1992.

¹² R. Christensen, *The Effect of Electoral Reforms on Campaign Practices in Japan: Putting New Wine into Old Bottles*, in R. Pekkanen, *Critical Readings*, cit., Vol. 2, 535-538.

¹³ R. Pekkanen, S. Reed, *The Opposition: From Third Party Back to Third Force*, in R. Pekkanen, S. Reed, E. Scheiner, D. Smith, *Japan Decides 2017*, cit., 77-92.

formation *Reiwa Shinsengumi* (れいわ新選組), formed in 2019 by the former TV comedian Tarō Yamamoto. The current representative of the right-wing opposition is *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Innovation Party, 日本維新の会), whose stronghold is the city of Osaka. *Ishin*'s originality resides in the fact of being a regional political party¹⁴.

Japanese opposition parties are often blamed for radicalism, fragmentation, and inaptitude to gather the votes from those dissatisfied with the government¹⁵. However, studies on the Japanese center-left and the opposition parties are by far less numerous comparing to the studies on the LPD. Why do the opposition fail to be competitive in the vote-seeking process? How do the opposition's electoral organizations work? What is the role of social movements, lobbies, interest groups in electoral campaign and policy-making process?

This article analyses the results of the 2021 general elections in a broader historical context. The main source of this study is the oral account of a particularly interesting Japanese voice, Akai Ohi, a young political scientist who run in the last general elections as a candidate for the main opposition party, the CDP.

Dr. Ohi's thoughtful narrative on the LDP is based on serious scientific activity. Born in 1980 in Tokyo but raised in Hiroshima, he gained a Ph.D. in Political Science with a specialization in political thought and contemporary Japanese politics at the University of Tokyo, the most prestigious academic institution in the Country. Before engaging actively in parliamentary politics, he published both scientific and divulgatory texts. While working as lecturer in different Universities in the capital, he hosted an open seminar on Japanese politics in the community space *Waseda Akane*, a glorious outpost of Tokyo underground culture since the 1990's, just in front of Waseda University. Still, the reflections of dr. Ohi are not simply scientifically grounded considerations of a political scientist. They provide also compelling insights on how the liberal opposition perceive itself in relation to the LDP's long rule.

Moreover, dr. Ohi's account provides the unique chance to gather fresh details of an opposition candidate electoral campaign. The district n. 2 in which Dr. Ohi run for the CDP is one of the seven single-seat constituencies of Hiroshima Prefecture. It counts more than 400 thousand voters, both in urban and countryside areas. With the 65.2% of the voters' preferences, the seat was conquered by the incumbent LDP candidate Hiroshi Hiraguchi, 70 years-old, an experienced

¹⁴ For general considerations on the recent formation of regional parties in Japan, K. Hijino, *Delinking National and Local Party Systems: New Parties in Japanese Local Elections*, in *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No.1, 2013, 107-135; W. Jou, *A Regional Party in a Centralized Country: The Case of One Osaka in Japan*, in *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2015, 145-163. For the political debate on devolution policies in Japan, see K. Nakano, *Party Politics and Decentralization in Japan and France. When the opposition governs*, Routledge, 2010.

¹⁵ R. Pekkanen, S. Reed, *The Opposition: From Third Party Back to Third Force*, in Robert J. Pekkanen et. al., *Japan Decides 2017*, cit., 77. E. Scheiner, *Democracy without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-Party Dominant State*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 31-63.

politician with a long experience in the Ministry of Constructions (*kokudō kōtsū shō*, 国道交通省) and in the House of Representatives. Dr. Ohi collected the respectable amount of 70 thousand votes (the 34% of the voters in district n. 2), the highest number of votes acquired by a CDP candidate in the single constituencies of Hiroshima Prefecture. This honorable result can be partly explained as the effect of the alliance plan between the CDP and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP, *Nihon kyōsan tō*, 日本共産党), which Dr. Ohi contributed to fully implement in this district: the JCP indeed decided to retire its candidate to promote Dr. Ohi's candidacy.

The exceptional profile of Dr. Ohi, both a profound analyst and a fresh newcomer in the Japanese parliamentary politics, will provide the reader with useful insights into the inner mechanisms of contemporary Japanese politics, as the new LDP Cabinet lead by PM Fumio Kishida approaches its first months of government.

2. Campaigning in Japan.

Q: Election campaigns are important means for observing how democracy works in a Country. In principle, during elections government officials are accountable, and citizens can engage directly in political processes, expressing to the candidates their priority issues and discussing platforms of political parties. You have participated to the general elections as a candidate for the CDP, it was your first experience: could you describe us your typical day during campaign?

A: Election campaigns have a defined length in Japan: 12 days. During this period the candidate has a very tight schedule: wake up 5:30 am, standing and delivering speech to commuters at the main stations from 6:30-8:00 am, delivering one-phrase speech from the inside of campaigning trucks (*gaisensha*, 街宣車) all day, sometimes walking shopping streets with supporters and staff, and again standing at the main railway stations from 18:00-20:00.

Q: Foreign commentators¹⁶ refer to the strictness of Japanese regulations on political campaigning: did you feel such regulations were too strict, or that they hindered your ability to express your ideas to the voters?

A: Legal regulations on political campaign (*kōshoku senkyo hō*, 公職選挙法) are indeed very strict here in Japan: legislators made ironically their best to make a campaign the least exciting! Anyway, yes, these regulations diminished the chance to make my voice heard; candidates are not allowed to distribute flyers except of

¹⁶ L. Beer, *Freedom of Expression in Japan: A Study in Comparative Law, Politics, and Society*, Kodansha International, 1984.

designated area and designated manner, are not allowed to show the banners of his/her name except for designated place. Candidates are not allowed to send Christmas cards (*nengajō*, 年賀状) or to undertake door-to-door campaigning, to avoid corruption. I think that in the U.S.A. presidential elections, campaigners can knock the door and talk to the voters at the entrance of the houses for propaganda, but in Japan it is forbidden. I agree that political campaign regulations must be revised. But we have to remember that these restrictions are made to ensure fair campaign circumstances regardless of how rich each candidate is.

Q: Do you think that these regulations are effective in providing each party's candidates the same opportunity to express their ideas?

A: I don't think that every candidate has the same opportunity to make his voice heard. In my case, the incumbent LDP candidate Hiroshi Hiraguchi, had spent much more money than me, he is much more famous, he had more paid staff and volunteer supporters. I don't think that there is equal opportunity between ruling party and opposition party. But if there were not any restrictions the gap between the incumbent candidate and the other candidates would have been wider.

Q: Mass media has a huge impact in election campaigning, in Japan as elsewhere¹⁷: what has been the role of social media in your campaign (in Italy parties started to campaign massively on social media in 2018¹⁸)?

A: Social media is said to play a very important role in contemporary politics, and it is a fact that during the election campaign the use of these media was wide and shallow, nationwide. However, as long as my own election campaign, their impact on the voters was dubious. Twitter and Facebook were my main social media and we made the most of these devices: note that, during the campaign, my Twitter followers were 3400, while the incumbent candidate had less than 400 followers. However, in my opinion, what matters to win in single seat constituency is the ability of a candidate to earn most of the votes in that specific constituency. In this case, door-to-door campaigning (*dobu ita senkyo*, どぶ板選挙) is more efficient than social media.

Q: Tell me about the volunteers in your campaigning staff.

¹⁷ H. Akuto, *Media in Electoral Campaigning in Japan and the United States*, in E. S. Krauss, S. Pharr, (Eds.), *Media and Politics in Japan*. University of Hawaii Press, 1996, 317.

¹⁸ S. Scherer, *In Italian election campaign, Facebook, Twitter replace posters, piazzas*, in *Reuters*, 1/3/2018 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-election-socialmedia-idUSKCN1GD4X6>). S. Verza, *The regulation of political communication during electoral campaigns in Italy*, in *Centro per la Cooperazione Internazionale*, 22/2/2019 (<https://www.cci.tn.it/eng/Projects2/ESVEI-social-media-and-disinformation/ESVEI-social-media-and-disinformation/The-regulation-of-political-communication-during-electoral-campaigns-in-Italy-195762>).

A: Actually, in the election campaign there were relatively many supporters that backed me. They were organized in 3 teams: accountant team, propaganda team and social media team. As I said, elections campaign lasted 12 days, and in those days, there were 20 persons in my office engaging in the management of election campaign. Basically, the number of staff members is not regulated; restrictions are limited only to some paid professional campaigners, as the announcers broadcasting from campaigning trucks (in Japanese *uguisu jō*, ウグイス嬢). Half of the staff members, roughly speaking 10 people, were unpaid volunteers that supported me because they shared my own political passion. They started to collaborate with me before the election campaign began.

Q: What about the relations with the party: was the campaign something that you planned completely by yourself or did the party give you some directions?

A: Speaking of the Japanese election campaigns run by opposition parties, it is quite important to know something about the main Japanese trade union *Rengō* (*Nihon rōdō kumiai sōrengō*, 日本労働組合総連合). The 7 million members of *Rengō* are supporters of the opposition parties, the center-left. Usually, when the elections begin, the *Rengō* members supporting the CDP come to the campaign offices of the Party and become responsible of all the management. Also in my case, *Rengō* members collaborated with me during the 12 days of campaigning, but none of them came to help me before the campaign started. Still, my case is rather exceptional, because, as I said, I could gather 10 unpaid volunteers who supported me relatively enthusiastically also before the official campaign period.

Q: Your campaign was based in Hiroshima: in the Assembly of Hiroshima Prefecture served also Katsuyuki and Anri Kawai, recently involved in a vote-buying scandal. Did this scandal influence the general election campaign, in your opinion?

A: The answer is yes and no. Kawai scandal had been a very widespread and hotly debated controversy here in Hiroshima. Local newspapers had done a good job in covering this issue. But the thing is, the election for the House of Senate replacing Kawai Anri took place in July 2021, and an unknown female opposition candidate, Haruko Miyaguchi, marvelously won, thanks to her sharp criticism against the LDP. In my view, people felt a certain satisfaction, having “punished” the LDP in that occasion. Consequently, strong discontent on the LDP declined after the House of Senate election.

3. The Japanese society and politics

Q: Voter turnout was particularly low in these last Elections: «Voter turnout for single-seat constituencies in Sunday's election for the House of Representatives stood at 55.93%, the third-lowest figure in post-World War II history». The low voter turnout «reflected people's caution about the coronavirus crisis and a lack of clear differences in policy pledges between political parties, which failed to draw public interest to the election»¹⁹. Let's consider the low participation to the elections: was it just a matter of covid, or is it a symptom of a deeper crisis of politics?

A: This is a difficult question that all the politicians must face, including myself. Low voters' turnout is a problem not only for Japan, but also for other industrialized Countries. There are many reasons to explain this phenomenon. My view is that, in Japan, especially older people are prone to vote in relatively high number: in the 2017 General Elections, as far as I can remember, the voters' turnout was around 60% for people in their sixties, whereas only the 30% of the people in their twenties went to vote. Hence, there is quite a strict generational gap in voting behavior. The reason why younger people are reluctant to go to vote is that they are somehow strangely satisfied with their current lives. And also, because they do not expect a lot from the politicians if they become dissatisfied with their lives.

Q: 15 years ago, Robert Pekkanen pointed out that Japanese civil society was unable to influence formal political system. According to Pekkanen, even though there are many NGOs, citizen associations, grassroot politics is not influent in Japan, because the civil society groups are too small, and it is difficult for them to evolve in large, professionalized organizations that can effectively lobbying formal politics²⁰. Maybe the term of comparison is the U.S.A., where there are very strong and influential lobbies and interest groups that can actively impact U.S. politics. Do you agree with this vision?

A: Actually, if I become academically honest, my answer is yes and no. It is yes to an extent, probably the idea of Pekkanen is something that European scholars can agree with: in Japanese society there are few active citizen movements, and I think that is true, in Japan there are less citizen associations that exist comparing to the U.S.A. Hence, candidates of opposition parties cannot heavily rely on these associations during election campaign. However, we have also to consider the neighborhood associations (*chōnaikai*, 町内会), which are relatively strong in rural areas. Although their members are getting older, they still have solid bonds in Japanese local society. More importantly, almost all the *chōnaikai* are supporters

¹⁹ Voter turnout stands at 55.93 % in Japan General Election, in *The Japan News*, 1/11/2021 (<https://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0007942783>).

²⁰ R. Pekkanen, *Japan's Dual Civic Society, members without advocates*, Stanford Univ. Press, 2006.

of the LDP. If we think about the role of these associations in election campaigns, Pekkanen might not be completely right.

Q: Let's go back to *Rengō* again. This trade union can be considered as an interest group: do you think that *Rengō* has the force to influence the opposition parties?

A: That is a very good and controversial question at this moment, considering the latest elections. The relationship between *Rengō* and the opposition parties has been quite controversial over the past 30 years. Let me explain very briefly the organization of *Rengō*.

During the '55 system (see below) there were three union groups: *Sōhyō* (*Nihon rōdō kumiai sōhyō gikai*, 日本労働組合総評議会), which was a trade union movement run by public sector employers who supported the Socialist Party (*Shakaitō*, 社会党); the second was *Dōmei* (*Zen Nihon rōdō sōdōmei*, 全日本労働総同盟), established for private sector, which supported Democratic Socialist Party (DMP, *Minshu shakaitō*, 民主社会党), founded in 1955 by right-wing members of the Socialist Party after the party split. "Democratic" in this context means anti-communist, so the identity of this party is anticommunist. *Dōmei* was a stronghold of the DSP and shared the same ideological view. The third trade union is the organization affiliated to the JCP. In 1989 things changed: *Sōhyō* and *Dōmei* merged and made one group: *Rengō*, which is the result of the two, but the old gap between *Sōhyō* and *Rengō* still remains in *Rengō*, and now formal *Sōhyō* groups in *Rengō* support CDP, and they are not so reluctant to create alliance with the Communists, while the right faction, the formerly *Dōmei* members, support the Democratic Party for the People (*Kokumin minshutō*, 国民民主党), still an opposition party, but more conservative than the CDP. The CDP was prone to make an alliance with JPC, the so-called opposition parties alliance. The content of the alliance was to express one candidate in the single constituency. But the right faction of *Rengō* still has a quite strong anticommunist sentiment, so they opposed to this alliance.

Q: Can we say that the internal gap inside *Rengō* over the alliance negatively affected the campaign of the center-left party?

A: Basically, the leading positions of *Rengō* have been occupied by former *Dōmei* members, so the top of *Rengō* has been hostile to the opposition parties' alliance for long time, while the CDP worked hardly for an election alliance. Hence, the then-Party secretary Yukio Edano, and me as well, were in a difficult position: in the right side, *Rengō* leaders opposed to the alliance, on the left side the Communists were in favor of the alliance, and Edano had to balance between these positions.

Q: As a conclusion of this part, can we say that *Rengō* as interest group was influential in these elections because it hindered the center-left alliance project?

A: You may well say so. But remember that *Rengō* has been the unshaken supporting base for center (-left) opposition bloc. In this regard, it is fair to say that interest groups matter also in Japan, but in a different form in respect to the U.S.A.

Q: The 2021 Lower Chamber Elections did not bring a LDP regime change (*Seiken kōtai*, 政権交代), even though the Suga Cabinet (LDP) became target of widespread criticism for unfocused policies for recovery from Pandemic. Some experts in comparative politics have considered this issue. For example, Louis D. Hayes maintains that Japan is without doubt a free and fully democratic Country, but still it «differs in many ways in democratic mechanisms» from «democracies found elsewhere in the world», especially for its «non-competitive... party system». Different reasons have been provided to explain the difficulty of regime change in Japan: an inefficient electoral system, or the inability of the opposition parties to challenge the LDP²¹. Others explain this issue in terms of values embedded in East Asian «culture» or «civilization». A. Heywood compares «Western polyarchies» to the «East Asia Regimes»²². According to the author, Countries in the first group are characterized by liberal and emancipatory values, like openness to popular participation, that evolved in fully democratic regimes, while in the East Asian Countries, where Confucianist values seem to be still influent, citizens are oriented to traditional, family values and «economic goals rather than individual freedom». According to this model Asian citizens have the tendency to support strong governments and the political establishment. Do you think that Confucian values represent an important element to explain Japanese aversion to a regime change? Why is a majority change so difficult to happen in Japan?

A: Difficult questions. I think each scholar mentioned above says a certain truth. On Confucianist values, I do not have confidence to give any assertive comment. It is true that in postwar history the Japanese experienced regime changes only twice: firstly, the Hosokawa coalition Cabinet, lasted a very short period, from the August 1993 to the April 1994; secondly, the coalition Cabinet in 2008, ended with a dramatic collapse of the Democratic Party (*Minshutō*, 民主党). Consequently, there was no successful political change in Japan.

The reason why there is no political regime change is, I guess, because: firstly, historically speaking, the Japanese did not experience a civil/bourgeois revolution, like the French revolution or the American independency revolution. Therefore, the Japanese are obedient to the institutions in general, and do not manifest a strong

²¹ L. D. Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese politics*, M. E. Sharpe, 2009, 118.

²² A. Heywood, *Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 30-37. R. J. Dalton, N.-N. T. Ong, *Authority Orientations and Democratic Attitudes: A Test of the 'Asian Values' Hypothesis*, in *Japanese journal of political science*, Vol.6, No. 2, 2005, 211–231.

necessity of radical political change. This is, very succinctly, Maruyama Masao and the modernist political scientists' view upon Japanese political history, and I think it is partly correct. Secondly, the governing by the LDP has been relatively effective, the LDP is a very comprehensive party in terms of ideology and policies. In other words, LDP has been successful at bureaucratic management, and its members are rather variegated in respect of values, concerns and policy planning (see LDP factionalism below), so the party is good at absorbing a wide range of interests and values in the Japanese society. Lastly, we have to consider the inaptitude of the opposition. Postwar Socialist parties used to be too leftist, and the Democrats after 2010 have been held back by continuous fragmentation.

4. 2021 Elections outcome and the LDP regime: changes in continuity.

Q: Japan is well known for the long domination of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for almost the entire period from 1955. In your last two books²³, you traced the historical development of Japanese politics through the period of the «'55 system»²⁴ (*55 nen Taisei*, 55 年体制) (1955-1989) and the period of the «reformist politics» (*kaikaku no seiji*, 改革の政治) (1990-present). Your main argument is that the LDP changed drastically in the last 30 years. What are the main features of the LDP in these two periods?

A: The basic framework of Japanese politics has changed after 1989: before '89 there were parties supporting either capitalist or socialist view, but after '89 only conservative parties remained. The conservatives were divided in two: neo-liberal, reformist conservatives on one side, as Jun'ichirō Koizumi or Tōru Hashimoto, and on the other side conventional conservatives, who tried to protect relatively weak, less competitive industrial sections and rural agricultural area. Politicians who are part of this last group are by no means socialists, but they pay attention to people's life. I might define them as compassionate conservatives.

Q: How did the decision-making process change inside the LDP?

A: During the '55 system, the old LDP politicians preferred a sort of bottom-up decision making based on consensus building inside the party. It was not necessarily democratic, because it did not include all the Japanese people, while it was to some extent democratic inside the LDP party and in the relation between the party and the bureaucrats. But after the political system reform (*seiji kaikaku*, 政治改革) of

²³ A. Ohi, *Buki toshite no seiji shisō, iberaru saha popyurizumu, kōseina gurobarizumu*, (Political thought as a weapon: left-wing populism, fair globalism), Aodosha, 2020. A. Ohi, *Gendai Nihon seijishi* (Contemporary history of Japanese politics), Chikuma shinsho, 2021.

²⁴ E. Krauss, R. Pekkanen, *The Rise and Fall of Japan's LDP Political Party Organizations as Historical Institutions*, cit., 15-17.

1993, more charismatic leadership and top-down decision making was preferred in the Japanese politics. I think that Koizumi, Hashimoto, some city mayors in Osaka area from the Party called *Nippon ishin no kai* (Japanese Innovation Party, 日本維新の会), are trying to make the most of this top-down decision making.

Q: In your book²⁵ you refer to one of the main features of the «reformist politics» period, which is the 1990's ambitious project of administration reform. Accordingly, during the '55 system period, the «developmental state»²⁶ was characterized by a powerful bureaucracy that had a de-facto dominant position in the national politics as well as in the economy of the Country. The 1990's administrative reforms were undertaken, as the bureaucracy became target of harsh criticism. Consequently, the leading role of the bureaucracy was replaced by a new «politician-oriented decision making» (*seiji shudō*, 政治主導). According to some commentators, the reforms conferred a preeminent role to the politicians in respect to the bureaucracy. Could you explain better this evolution of the Japanese politics? The executive has certainly developed its power, but what about the Diet? Did the administrative reforms open opportunities to the Diet for new legislative action?

A: During the '55 system, Japan might rightly be defined as a «developmental state», in the sense that the bureaucrats and especially the MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Industry, *Tsūshō sangyō shō*, 通商産業省) had a strong power over civil society and the market; at the time the MITI instructed how the Japanese economy should be managed and especially the public sector collaborated with the Ministry. In that process bureaucrats had quite strong power whereas the Diet, and the politicians played a minor role. At that time, during the '55 system, someone defined ironically the Diet (*Rippōfu*, literally, the place to make laws, 立法府) as *Tsūhōfu* (literally, the place to pass laws, 通法府), bureaucrats made laws and the Diet just make them through. But after the 1990's a reform of the decision making took place, and the politician-oriented decision making has been introduced. To be honest I don't know how *seiji shudō* works, whether it has been successful or not over the past 30 years, because I don't have statistical data about the number of laws the politicians have made in the Diet, compared to the political initiative of the bureaucrats. The dichotomy between the Diet and the executive might be misleading, because the majority of the Diet forms the executive sector, the cabinet, since the Diet elects the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister shapes the cabinet. Hence, the cabinet and the Diet are likely to be synonymous. At the moment, legislative power restriction is not a political issue in the Diet in Japan.

²⁵ A. Ohi, *Gendai Nihon seijishi*, cit., 22-43.

²⁶ C. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, Stanford University Press, 1982.

Q: In your book you examined the long Abe's premiership, which, after a short Cabinet in 2006-2007, lasted from 2012 to 2020. You mentioned the fact that Abe's government seems to represent a rapprochement to the conventional conservatism, after a period in which reformist conservatism ruled in LDP²⁷. Why?

A: Actually, Abe administration is a mixture of both reformist and conventional conservatism, it is a kind of amalgama. Let's consider briefly, for example, Abe's economic policies, the so-called Abenomics: the famous «three arrows» (*sanbon no ya*, 三本の矢) of Abenomics were monetary, fiscal and deregulation policies. As I wrote in my book²⁸, the first two were conventional compassionate policies, whereas the third one was a typical measure of the reformist neoliberal conservatism. Abe and his administration merged mutually contradictory economic policies without any hesitation, partly because Abe himself had little interest in economic policies.

Q: Let's turn to the main outcome of 2021 General Elections, the rise of the new Prime Minister Kishida: what is the real political character of this new leader? As Minister of Foreign Affairs in second and third term of Abe's premiership (2012-2017), he was a close collaborator of Abe, but he is also part of a different LDP faction, the *Kōchikai* (宏池会) faction. First of all, could you tell us about factionalism inside the LDP?

A: Very crudely speaking, the history of the LDP consists of the competition of three main factions: *Kōchikai*, *Keiseikai* (経世会), and *Seiwakai* (清和会). The typical member of *Kōchikai* is a technocrat, part of an educational elite (for example, graduated from Tokyo University), often a politician recruited especially from the Ministry of Finance. He is a supporter of Keynesian policies, and he is relatively pacifist: a defender of article n. 9 of the Constitution, not because he is an ideological pacifist, but for the sake of the East Asian regional stability and the economic trade. Historically, the main representants of this faction are Hayato Ikeda, Masayoshi Ohira, Kiichi Miyazawa, Koichi Katō, and today's PM Kishida. *Kōchikai* has a strong link with Hiroshima Prefecture, as Ikeda, Miyazawa and Kishida are all from Hiroshima.

Conversely, the *Keiseikai* has raised its members inside the LDP party, i.e. there are few technocrats in this group. The typical *Keiseikai* politicians have a long career in local administration: an experience in rural councils during the young age, subsequently evolved to Prefecture council, and then to the national Diet. Hence, the *Keiseikai* politicians are very rooted in local communities, respected locally, good at coordinating different interests in the local area. They use their local reputation for creating clientelary networks, which might evolve in corruption.

²⁷ A. Ohi, *Gendai Nihon seijishi*, cit., 220-221.

²⁸ *Idem*, 206-233.

Many of them are elected in the local rural constituencies from the coastal regions along the Sea of Japan. They are very tactical and effective at power seeking. The main leaders of this group were Kakuei Tanaka, Noboru Takeshita, Ichirō Ozawa etc.

This group used to be the biggest faction in the LDP, but it lost its hegemony over the party after the split of this faction in 1993, as Ozawa joined the Democratic Party. After some years, in 2001, *Kōchikai* split, too. The history of LDP under '55 system is the history of the collaboration between *Kōchikai* and *Keiseikai*. At the beginning of the 21st century a new faction emerged as the ruling faction after the 2000's-2010's, the *Seiwakai*.

This third LDP faction, the *Seiwakai*, from which emerged former PM Abe, is characterized by right-wing ideology: its members are against the article 9 of the Constitution, they are pro-Taiwan because they hate the Chinese Communist Party. It was often isolated from important decisions during the '55 system, as it was not a mainstream faction. However, it is fair to say that after the 2000's the history of LDP became the history of *Seiwakai*. The main representants of this group are Nobusuke Kishi, Takeo Fukuda, Shintarō Abe (father), Yoshirō Mori, Jun'ichirō Koizumi, Shinzō Abe (son).

Q: From the Seventies the visits to the Yasukuni shrine by numerous Japanese Prime Ministers have been criticized by South Korea and China. These Countries, as former Japanese colonies, condemn the official visits to the shrine, which commemorates Japanese war dead, including convicted war criminals. They consider these visits as evidence of a lack of remorse over Japan's colonial past. Do you think that the Yasukuni shrine issue is linked in some ways to the rise of *Seiwakai* faction?

A: Yes, the controversy over the Yasukuni shrine visits is related to the dominance of *Seiwakai*: as a matter of fact, Koizumi and Abe, both members of this faction, were quite stubborn concerning the Yasukuni shrine. But I have to point out that the visits to Yasukuni shrine became internationally controversial in the Seventies, when it became clear that A-rank war criminals were enshrined in the Yasukuni shrine. As far as I can remember, before the Seventies, members of *Kōchikai*, too, visited Yasukuni shrine, without any controversy. In the Seventies, even the emperor refrained in visiting this shrine, but right-wing *Seiwakai* members continued to visit the shrine.

Q: Kishida seems to have criticized Abenomics when he presented the project of the *atarashii shihonshugi wo tsukuru giin renmei* (league of the Diet members for constructing a new capitalism, 新しい資本主義を作る議員連盟) in October 2021²⁹. Is he going to be in continuity with Abe politics, or not? Does Kishida represent the

²⁹ T. Sasai, T. Izawa, 'Bunpai' ni kodawaru Kishida karā, Shibusawa Eiichi ni kyōkan? *Shijō no keikai kibishiku*, in *Asahi Shinbun*, 18/10/2021.

end of the post-cold war “reform politics era”? Is he inaugurating a new era, considered his stress on the necessity of redistribution policies?

A: In my view, Kishida can be defined as a “Kōchikai unlike son” (*Kōchikai fushō no musuko*, 宏池会不肖の息子). His father was a very respected politician inside the LDP, while Kishida himself is not. Kishida is a mild politician: his personality is very docile, moderate. His reputation is good here in Hiroshima. He is not ideological; he also has no strong commitment on any ideology. But he built a solid bond with Abe, and he tried to improve the collaboration with the right-wing faction of the party, probably because he is a realist and he thought it was a necessary means to survive politically. It is too soon to judge the characteristics of his administration, his project of *atarashii shihonshugi* is not so clear yet, but it is true it becomes difficult for the opposition to differentiate themselves from Kishida, because he already has absorbed some of the proposals of the opposition parties. For example, he showed positive attitude on issues as husband and wife retaining separate family names, or taxation on financial income.

Q: How do you evaluate political communication of Kishida? Has it a populist flavor?

A: Kishida seems more serious than Abe, in the sense that Kishida so far has made no secrets about the decision-making process inside the Cabinet, the role of the bureaucrats in his administration, and how he wants to address the corona crisis. Conversely, Abe declined to explain what was going on in the bureaucracy under the pandemic crisis, as he never felt the issue of being accountable to the Japanese citizens. Whereas Kishida so far is trying to be accountable as much as he can. His style is not populist, he is a relatively serious bureaucratic politician.

5. The opposition parties: populism and the center-left

Q: Some consider Abe politics as right-wing populism that emerged inside the establishment, i.e., the majority government³⁰. In your book³¹, you seem to identify different anti-establishment populist parties, outside the majority, both on the right wing and on the left wing. Could you tell us about them? What is their reception by

³⁰ I. Buruma, *Why is Japan Populist Free?*, in *Japan Times*, 22/1/2018 (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/japan-no-populism-reasons-by-ian-buruma-2018-01>). T. Morris-Suzuki, *Japan's living politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 8. M. Zappa, *Da Abenomics ad Abeism. Discorso politico e riforme istituzionali nel Giappone di Abe*, in M. Cestari, G. Coci, D. Moro, A. Specchio (a cura di), *Orizzonti giapponesi, Ricerche, idee, prospettive*, Aracne, 2018, 211-234. For a recent theoretical discussion on populism, see N. Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019.

³¹ A. Ohi, *Buki toshite no seiji shisō*, cit., 21-47; 78-87.

the Japanese electorate and the “traditional parties”? Should “traditional parties” fight them, or approach them, in your opinion?

A: First of all, it is important to make clear how we define populism. Actually, the word populism is used in rather confused way in Japanese media: for example, sometimes the Japanese economic newspaper Nikkei Shinbun uses this word as a synonym of “demagogic” (“I will abolish consumption tax, I will introduce tuition tax free” etc.). In my definition, populism has four characteristics: (1) politician’s identification with the people; (2) appealing to the emotions; (3) dichotomy between good and evil (*zen’aku nigenron*, 善悪二元論); (4) panacea (*ban’nōyaku*, 万能薬). Firstly, etymologically populism comes from the Latin word *populus* for “people”: as the etymology suggests, populist politicians try to identify themselves not with a specific class or a group, but with the people taken as a whole. Secondly, liberal and conservatives respect reason, and their explanations are usually quite reasonable, whereas populist politicians like to appeal to emotions, they put high value on emotions. Thirdly, in the populist rhetoric a clear dichotomy between good and evil can be frequently detected. Lastly, the populists usually identify “the one and only solution” that, as a panacea, can solve every problem. However, current advanced societies, whether Europeans or Japanese, are very complex, so there is no simple solution to solve all the problems: every solution tends to become inevitably rather complex.

Former LPD leader Jun’ichirō Koizumi was a typical populist, he identified himself with the people, especially with private sector white collars, private businessmen; moreover, he was very good at appealing to people’s emotions. His panacea was the privatization of the Japanese Post service. He used to repeat that if he could privatize the Japanese Post, all the problems would have been cleared; moreover, in his words, all the politicians had to decide “whether you join me in my army, or my enemy”. He successfully made a political drama between his allies, which gained the attention of many Japanese citizens: that is the reason why the voter turnout in the general elections in 2005 was relatively very high. Meanwhile, I don’t think Abe and his political management is populist, because Abe is not so good at making speeches, at improvising discourses: in fact, he always read drafts that are written by bureaucrats. It is right to say that he lacks political appealing, as he totally fails in making people excited on politics. I imagine he tried to imitate Koizumi at first, then soon he realized it is impossible for him to be a second Koizumi, so he changed his strategy.

Q: Tell me about right-wing and left-wing populism in Japan: do you think that they can be defined as anti-establishment?

A: Actually, the anti-establishment feeling is shared by both the right-wing party *Nippon Ishin no kai* and the left-wing group of *Reiwa shinsengumi* (れいわ新選組

), headed by Tarō Yamamoto. *Nippon Ishin no kai* is located in Osaka, which is its main stronghold. It is anti-establishment, because according to Osaka people Tokyo is the establishment.

Q: Are they using a territorial political cleavage, as the Italian North League in the Nineties?

A: I am not sure if a comparison with Italian North League and *Nippon Ishin no kai* is good or not, but to some extent they are probably comparable in terms of a strong territorial characterization: however, *Ishin* never ever tried to make Osaka independent from the rest of Japan. They started from Osaka, but from the beginning they tried to permeate into Tokyo and other urban cities. Now their stronghold is still in Osaka: they are not rooted yet in Tokyo or Hiroshima. Their characteristics are as follow: Osaka-oriented policies, criticism on bureaucracy, liberal media and intellectuals. They are quite popular locally because they make a point in asking more transparency in bureaucracy; moreover, their decision making is quite speedy. Lastly, *Nippon ish in no kai* politicians demand cutting of bureaucrats' salary.

Q: Let's turn to Yamamoto Taro and *Reiwa shinsengumi*.

A: Yamamoto and *Reiwa* can be defined left-wing populism: their policies were similar to the ones proposed by the former U.S. presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, as free university tuition, minimum wage raising. Yamamoto used to be a comedian, famous for his bizarre dances and hilarious performances: nobody could imagine that he would have become a politician. The panacea for Yamamoto is the abolition of consumption tax: it is a strong agenda for him, and he is appealing the audience especially on this point.

Q: Let's turn to the Japanese center-left. Today the Constitutional Democratic Party, for which you run as a candidate in the last general elections, is the main opposition party in Japan. How do you evaluate the performance of the party in the last elections, what does the party should do in the near future? Are you going to collaborate again with the party?

A: This is a very serious question for me. Over the past 30 years, Japanese opposition parties struggled to create a clear political cleavage against the leading party. The LDP has been very strong and stable: in terms of policies, the opposition parties faced two choices to tackle with the ruling party: surpassing the LDP in deregulation policies and in the reinforcement of the Japan-USA alliance, or, in contrast to LDP, focusing on equality issues, and welfare state policies. Japanese electors also struggled over this two-alternative set of policies.

In terms of political forces, the question is whether we replace LDP with *Nippon ish in no kai* or with an alliance of the left-wing opposition parties, *i.e.* CDP and the

JCP. In this context, while I was campaigning for the general elections, my personal commitment was very simple: I thought that the only way to replace LDP was to create a broader coalition between CDP and the JCP. That was also the reason why I decided to run for the Lower House elections 2021. Quite fortunately in the 2nd constituency of Hiroshima, where I run as a candidate, the alliance overmentioned was successfully convened, as the JCP decided to retire its candidate to support my candidacy. I was so happy when I first realized that the alliance became a reality in my constituency. However, the result was not so good, nation-wide, both for CDP and for JCP, as both of them lost seats in these last elections. It has been a rather unexpected and sad result for me, and after the election I faced an identity crisis.

I guess that the center-left will have to face a rather gloomy and dark period now, because there is no panacea for this situation. There are just few options that the center-left party block can choose for the near future. After the disappointing results of the elections, the CDP elected the new party leader, Kenta Izumi, who is rather centrist and conservative, but even for him the center-left alliance is an opportunity that cannot be dismissed. The CDP must continue a mild collaboration with the JCP, despite the party's deep aversion against the communists. Although the alliance failed in the last elections, I think there are no other ways.

Q: How can the center-left manage the relationship with its electorate?

A: I think that most of the Japanese electorates are politically disengaged conservatives. There are just very few urban educated liberals, they can assure less votes than the LDP requires to win the elections. In the past, the CDP has been criticized after the elections for paying too much attention to its liberal voters, and not enough to the massive non-political people, the ordinary people, who are, in my opinion, conservative, even if they are not aware of it. Hence, the party should shift its ideological stance to the center, to permeate into the ordinary people, who live in urban local area.

6. Concluding remarks

From an historical point of view, the LDP success in the 2021 General elections, after general reproach for having hosted the Olympic games during the Covid-19 Pandemic, is not a surprise. In more than 60 years of activity, the Party has overcome different crisis maintaining almost permanently the control on the executive. This article reflected on the uncommon persistency of the Japanese ruling party, making the most of the analysis and electoral experience offered by dr. Akai Ohi.

The secret of LDP's long predominance seems to reside in its capacity to adapt to new challenges. The LDP indeed changed face in the last 30 years: emerged as a typical clientelist party which directed government spending to electoral districts through a bottom-up decision making, the Party evolved into a neoliberal formation acclaiming strong premiership and deregulation. As Ohi suggests, the Party's

dynamism was in part a necessity dictated by the new electoral system introduced in the 1993, in part is the product of the changing balance among the Party factions. In the success of the LDP not a secondary role is played by the support of citizen associations, which are traditionally conservative, and the ability of some of LDP leaders to innovate political communication, as Koizumi, who introduced strong populist flavor in the relationship with the electorate.

The inadequacy of opposition parties to challenge the LDP does not necessarily mean lack of vitality. Akai Ohi's electoral candidacy for the Constitutional democratic party in the second constituency of Hiroshima Prefecture is an example of vivacious political action. Ohi has been able to break through traditional democratic voters' resistance in establishing electoral alliance with the Communists. This political achievement was made possible by the loyal support of dynamic volunteers who shared his views. The case of Ohi's electoral campaign reveals that Japanese politics still have the capacity of stirring up energetic engagement among the citizens. On the other hand, populist formations, both on the left and on the right side of the Diet, did gather part of the anti-establishment discontent which has been feeding the increasing abstentionism.

However, the opposition parties are still far from affecting in a substantial way the cleavage structure of the Country, as the LDP and its diverse embodiments remain the major Japanese political arena. The present PM Kishida's light criticism toward his predecessor Abe's economic policies is an illustrative example.