

*To maintain its identity Japan must contend with the USSR
on one flank and the United Auto Workers on the other*

Japan's Passionate Fight for the Status Quo

By DONALD KIRK

One could argue that at the dawn of the 1980s Japan had reached a higher level of civilization than any mass society on earth. Most Japanese could aspire to higher education and a well-paying job, obtain medical, welfare, and pension benefits, live in comfort and safety, and still expect the freedom to write and talk more or less as they pleased. Inbred social constraints, the perpetual search for a near-mythical "consensus," not to mention the legendary "homogeneity" of Japanese society—all no doubt placed inhibitions on the Japanese. But these were hardly comparable to the political terror, abject poverty, and economic and social inequities prevalent in one form or another in many other industrial nations.

The Japanese themselves, though bitterly critical of their own shortcomings and failures wherever they perceive them, continue to believe they can do no better than retain the system and set of rulers under which they have lived for the past generation. The voters on June 22 gave the deeply conservative Liberal-Democratic party (LDP) its greatest leverage in a decade. In elections for all members of the powerful lower house and half the upper house, the LDP increased its slim majorities so that it now controls every key committee and can all but ignore the pro forma objections raised by the distant second-ranking Japanese Socialist party, which barely managed to hold its own. As for the Communists, the far left of the "established" political spectrum, they lost so badly as to fall behind both the Buddhist-backed Komeito and the Democratic Socialist party, essentially conservative groupings that the Socialist leaders had once envisioned as buttressing their scheme for coalition.

The LDP—and Japan—achieved such stunning unity at the expense of the life of an extraordinarily dull prime minister, Masayoshi Ohira, who died of a heart attack brought on by overwork and exhaustion two weeks before the elections. So bored were the voters with the repeated LDP victories that on a rainy election day the previous October many of them had stayed home, causing the worst setback for the LDP since its founding in 1955 and precipitating a prolonged political "crisis" amid predictions of the party's "break-up." Like

most other Japanese leaders a colorless bureaucrat with a background in senior economic posts, Ohira had misjudged the national mood in calling those October, 1979, elections. Perhaps, as is widely claimed, he had erred in suggesting a tax increase to relieve the government of its huge budget deficit. But more likely Ohira's problem was simply that almost everyone took his winning for granted.

Ohira raised the potential for disaster by his stubborn resistance during an intraparty revolt led by two former prime ministers, both in their seventies, who were furious that he could have become prime minister at all. One of them, Takeo Miki, had himself felt compelled to resign after the LDP's poor showing in the 1976 elections and believed Ohira was obliged to follow his example. The other, the brilliant if acerbic Takeo Fukuda, had even more reason to want to drive Ohira from power. Ohira had forced his resignation in December, 1978, by winning an election in which all the party's million or so members had been eligible—for the first, and possibly last, time—to vote for party president. For this victory the seemingly honest and trustworthy Ohira could thank one of the most ill-reputed figures in modern Japanese history: Kakuei Tanaka, who had had to resign as prime minister in 1974 after his implication in a real estate scandal and to quit the LDP two years later after his indictment on charges of accepting huge bribes for the purchase of Lockheed aircraft.

The mysterious role of Tanaka in the evolution of Japanese politics through the '70s reveals a side of Japanese life that often escapes foreigners. Just as political leaders from Tokyo University carry on the nation's élitist tradition, so Tanaka, a construction magnate who never went to college, represents the aspirations of upwardly mobile, newly rich Japanese restless with a system that seems to discriminate against them. The greatest secret in Japanese politics is the movement of money—how much which business or interest provides, through what channels, to whom. No one questions the fact that Tanaka plays a central role in expediting the flow. Reelected as an independent after leaving the LDP, he remained at the helm of his party faction and in close alliance with Ohira. It was his support that accounted first for Ohira's success in grassroots stumping in 1978 and then for Ohira's survival in November, 1979, after Fukuda, Miki, and their allies

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broke with tradition and refused to vote for Ohira as prime minister in the election in the Diet. (Thus deprived of the requisite majority on the first ballot, Ohira won in an unprecedented run-off.)

COMING UNSTUCK

An underlying irony about the struggle within the LDP was that it took place behind the scenes, far from the daily concerns of most of the people. Though Japanese can vote for Diet members, most of whom have relatively "safe" seats, rarely have they complained about the essentially authoritarian process of selecting their leaders. A kind of delicate bargain exists in which the government discharges its responsibilities in return for the loyalty of the people whom it serves. National leaders clearly welched on that bargain when they persisted in an egotistical power game that threatened the common good. Ohira's enemies, by this logic, betrayed their trust the following May when they refused to vote against a routine Socialist-sponsored motion of no confidence. No one, least of all Socialist party Chairman Ichio Asulata, had the slightest notion the motion would carry until Fukuda, Miki, and leaders of lesser LDP factions ordered their followers to abstain from the normally monolithic LDP bloc vote that would have defeated it.

Any notion that the Socialists were about to realize their dream—that is, if they really dreamed of playing any part but that of honorable opposition in an unending set-piece—was quite unfounded. In fact, to the mass of voters in the spring of 1980 the specter of the Japanese establishment coming unstuck was far more disturbing than the prospect of predictable if mediocre LDP rule. The oil crisis, bringing with it a slowdown in economic growth, a huge deficit in the current accounts balance, and a fast-narrowing foreign trade surplus, heightened the sense of urgency. The Socialist motion, then, backfired. Had Ohira not died after being forced

afford to attack him in a period of mourning.

That former Prime Ministers Fukuda, Miki, and Tanaka were seated beside each other and in the same row as members of Ohira's family at an elaborate party funeral seventeen days after the elections might appear supremely hypocritical. On another level, though, it demonstrates the overwhelming force for unity among Japanese, especially in confronting the rest of the world. Appropriately, the most celebrated guests at the funeral (in the cavernous Japan Martial Arts Hall—ordinarily used for pop-music concerts) were not the deliberately low-keyed Japanese leaders but President Carter and China's Hua Guofeng. It was on them that reporters focused during what the Japanese press had dubbed the "funeral summit." The LDP chieftains did not wish to risk embarrassing Japan before foreigners. The funeral, with its international significance, had become the deadline by which to settle internal affairs as an obligation to society.

SUZUKI WHO?

After the threat of division the search for consensus went to rather absurd lengths in finally lighting upon a thoroughly commonplace political hack named Zenko Suzuki for LDP president and prime minister. Alone among the conceivable candidates, Suzuki, in a long career in which he had slowly risen to senior if largely anonymous posts in the Diet and party bureaucracy, had been cautious enough not to make a single serious enemy. A top aide in Ohira's faction, he was still on friendly terms with Fukuda and Miki.

More than any other postwar Japanese leader Suzuki epitomizes the rule among Japanese that success comes to the least conspicuous. Two months after his election as prime minister, Japanese joked that they still would not recognize him if they saw him on the street. His emergence, in meetings attended by just a handful of party elders, confirmed the bargain the LDP had made with the voters before the elections: There would be no more enervating in-fighting, no more time lost in mollifying the power drives of selfish politicians. Suzuki in turn won a degree of genuine acceptance, as shown in polls reporting that a majority of Japanese approved of his leadership. An era of bland conservatism seemed to have settled on a nation that only one or two decades before had appeared divided, sometimes violently, between forces of the Right and the Left. In truth, the Left, which had fomented riots against the U.S.-Japan security treaty throughout the '60s, had lost its last real issue with the reversion of Okinawa and then, in 1975, the fall of the Saigon regime to which the U.S. had shipped men and matériel from bases in Japan.

Now the central challenge was to keep up American military support in the midst of a trade war that showed no signs of ending. The conservatism of Suzuki, a well-to-do fisherman's son who owed much of his success to the financial backing of enormous fishing and farming interests that are wellsprings of LDP power, was well suited to meeting what Japanese had come to view as the American threat. He would soon prove as unyielding as his predecessors on such critical issues as the export of Japanese cars to the U.S. or open competitive bidding for purchase of equipment by Nihon Denshin

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to call the lower house elections, chances are the LDP would have rebounded sufficiently from the humiliation of the previous October. In one of his last acts Ohira helped ensure victory by scheduling the voting for lower house seats on the same day as regular elections for the upper house, thus guaranteeing a larger turnout of the LDP faithful. His death, to be sure, was still his greatest contribution. It induced a "sympathy" vote and utterly silenced the critics, who could hardly

Denwa, the enormous quasi-governmental telephone and telegraph company known among foreigners as "NTT." For all the personal pleas by American officials and labor leaders—notably, United Auto Workers President Douglas Fraser—Japanese manufacturers were in no mood to cut down on shipments of compact cars to the hungry American market. On the day that U.S. Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall wound up a quick trip to Tokyo with another demand for "voluntary restraints," the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association revealed that production of four-wheeled vehicles in July had shot past the million mark for the first time in a single-month period. Japan's "big two," Toyota and Nissan, anticipated huge increases in American sales, already 25 per cent Japanese by 1980.

The great fear, of course, was that the U.S. Congress would succumb to mounting pressure from business and labor and inflict protective tariffs. "I do hope," said Suzuki's minister of international trade and industry in an interview after Marshall's visit, "the American people will uphold the tradition of free trade." "We are asking auto manufacturers to be prudent in their behavior," he stated, but his government could not require "voluntary" controls—which, he observed, would then not be "voluntary" at all.

Nor could Japan afford to act charitably in this matter, according to the country's leaders and the businessmen who supported them. Dependent upon imports of oil, along with most other natural resources, Japan in 1979 had a surplus of barely \$2 billion in a total foreign trade of more than \$200 billion, and by 1980 Japan was running its first trade deficit since the early '60s. Although still below that of the U.S., inflation was rising steadily at nearly 8 per cent, while the gross national product was creeping up at less than the projected rate of 4.8 per cent. Japanese leaders might pay lip service to the ideal of removing nontariff barriers on imports and of reducing exports, but they had to encourage their own interests first. Thus the Japanese surplus on trade with the U.S., down somewhat in 1979 after intense American pressure, was up again in 1980, well on its way to the 1978 record of more than \$11.5 billion.

THE 1 PER CENT HURDLE

Ultimately, of course, the Japanese yearn for the security of their own tight little islands, much as America's neoisolationists dream of a Fortress America. The catch, though, is Japan's reliance on the U.S. for strategic defensive needs. In an atmosphere of rising concern about Soviet aims, Suzuki and the bureaucrats around him could doubtless increase Japan's own military spending without fear of damaging opposition from those who urge adherence to the letter of the postwar constitution banning all such activity. Several days after the June elections a "national security study group," originally authorized by Ohira, urged the government to do away with its policy of limiting defense spending to 1 per cent of GNP—approximately \$10 billion for fiscal 1980. "We don't want to set any new ceilings," said Masataka Kosaka, a Kyoto University professor and leading member of the group. "We want to be free from the past."

It was not mere coincidence that Ohira had ordered the group to report on military problems at a time when there were incessant "suggestions" from America that Japan pick up what was invariably described as its "share of the defense burden." On his last visit to the White House on May 1, Ohira reportedly told Carter he would do his best to see that Japan carried out its five-year defense build-up in just three years. Finally, the defense agency's annual report in August described the Soviet arms race in the strongest terms used by any branch of the Japanese Government since World War II. Declaring the USSR "strong enough to compete with the U.S." in both nuclear and conventional war, the report saw an urgent need for Japan to modernize and expand its forces. Americans believed Japan was on the verge of a major shift in policy.

In fact, there would be nothing of the sort. With customary acumen Suzuki weighed defense agency demands for a 15 per cent budget increase against finance ministry insistence on trimming the budget. Privately, Japanese officials accused the U.S. of "interference" and said the size of the military outlay was "for us, not another country, to decide." With a firm grip over the Diet, the government had never been in a better position to break the 1 per cent barrier. In the end, however, the finance ministry, the real center of power, easily convinced Suzuki of the priorities. For all the fuss about a division of Soviet troops on the four small "northern islands" overrun by the Russians at the end of the war and still claimed by Japan, few Japanese seriously believed the Russians were coming. Tokyo provoked anguished expressions of "disappointment" from Washington by proposing, on the last day of 1980, an increase in defense spending of only 7.6 per cent, well within the norm of 1 per cent of the GNP. The decision was a slap in the face of U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, who had pleaded for a minimum increase of 9.7 per cent when he called on Japanese leaders earlier in December.

Could it be that nothing much was changing in Japan? Certainly most Japanese would agree with Ohira's remark that "the days are gone when we can count on the American deterrent." Beneath their polite responses to American entreaties, however, Japanese are angered by what appear as unremitting attempts to persuade them to fall into line behind U.S. policy. Whatever Japanese leaders might tell visiting American officials, they want nothing less than an equilibrium in which they can manage to appease the Americans without really settling disputes on trade or defense on any terms other than their own. Thus they are carrying out the mandate of the voters, eager to preserve and build on the postwar record by adhering to the policies that have accounted for their success.

Japanese are indeed concerned about the future. For that very reason they are dedicated most passionately to fighting for the status quo in a popular renewal of the conservative spirit that historically has been the nation's greatest strength in competing against an often hostile world. [VVV]