

**Is The Prime Minister Too Weak or Too Strong? – An Institutional Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

The Japanese political system has conventionally been perceived as a parliamentary system, which indicates that executive power depends on the national assembly. Such a parliamentary system could with coherent governing parties show decisive power in the policy-making processes. After the political reforms were implemented since 1994, some prime ministers did indeed show such decisive power in Japan, and presently the prime minister enjoys almost a free hand. At present the problem of Japanese politics arguably lies on an excessively powerful prime minister. Having said that, prime ministers in Japan have changed almost every year between 2006 and 2012; this office had symbolised the instability of the Japanese political system. The mystery of the Japanese political system merely deepens, when these observations are considered. This paper explores the question as to why such an extreme alternation of prime-ministerial power occurs in Japanese politics. By so doing this paper depicts the nature of the political system in Japan.

## **Strong Leadership at Last? – The Abe Premiership**

In December 2012 the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) regained power after a three-year interval. The newly elected prime minister was Shinzo Abe, an ex-prime minister from 2006 to 2007, who had just been elected as LDP president three months prior to the 2012 general election. Abe's first premiership started with high hopes, his own and others, yet ended miserably when he had to face a divided diet in September 2007 and his health deteriorated.

In 2012 the LDP, particularly its membership, were not necessarily enthusiastic about Abe's candidature; he came second in both the diet-members' section and the membership section in the first round of the leadership contest<sup>1</sup>. Abe only gained

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<sup>1</sup> The LDP's 'Rules for election of President' prescribed that there were two types of voters: diet members and party members. Diet-members' votes were counted as one vote each, while party members' votes were summed in each prefecture, which was allocated three votes plus certain number of votes in accordance with the prefecture's party membership. Candidates gained a certain number of votes in each prefecture in accordance with the votes the candidates won in the prefecture. LDP's rule referred to them as 'party members' computed votes'. If there was a candidate who won a majority of the sum of votes of the diet members and the party members' 'computed votes', the party could declare a new leader.

140,668 votes (28.6 percent) from the membership, while Shigeru Ishiba, Abe’s chief rival, won 233,376 votes (47.5 percent)<sup>2</sup>. For the membership Abe was arguably someone from the past, not a happy past, yet the Diet members preferred Abe to Ishiba in the second round of the contest.

**Table 1. The Result of the First Round of the LDP Leadership Election (votes)**

	Total	Diet Members	Party Members
Shinzo Abe	141	54	87
Shigeru Ishiba	199	34	165
Nobutaka Machimura	34	27	7
Nobuteru Ishihara	96	58	38
Yoshimasa Hayashi	27	24	3

Source: LDP HP. [https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12\\_top.html](https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12_top.html), accessed on 23 March 2015.

**Table 2. The Result of the Second Round of the LDP Leadership Election (votes)**

	Diet Members
Shinzo Abe	108
Shigeru Ishiba	89

Source: LDP HP. [https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12\\_top.html](https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12_top.html), accessed on 23 March 2015.

If Abe’s victory in the leadership contest was surprising yet not sensational, the triumph of the LDP was even less exciting in the 2012 general election. The LDP did win 294 seats, an absolute victory without reservation. However, the turnout in 2012 was 59.31 percent, a 9.31 point drop from the previous election in 2009<sup>3</sup>. This figure was the lowest turnout for the House of Representatives since the postwar regime began, and is only comparable with the turnouts of 59.65 percent in 1996 and 59.86 in 2003

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Otherwise, there would be a second ballot. The second ballot was held solely by the LDP diet members in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Heisei 24 nen Sôsei Senkyo, Tôin Tôhyo Kekka [Membership Ballot Result of the 2012 Leadership Election]’ [https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12/pdf/votingresults\\_pdf](https://www.jimin.jp/sousai12/pdf/votingresults_pdf), accessed on 25 February 2015.

<sup>3</sup> All numbers of votes are from the proportional representation districts. ‘Todôfuken-betsu Yûkensha-sû, Tôhyôsha-sû, Tôhyo-ritsu (Hirei Daihyô) [Number of Registered Voters, Actual Voters, and Turnout of Individual Prefectures (Proportational Representation)]’, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications HP, [http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/data/shugiin46/](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/data/shugiin46/), accessed on 21 March 2015.

(Ishikawa and Yamaguchi, 2010).

Furthermore, the LDP could only win 16,624,457 votes in the 2012 general election, while it had received 18,810,217 votes in 2009, when it lost the election heavily to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)<sup>4</sup>. The victory in 2012 concealed the fact that the LDP lost 11.62 percent of its support since 2009. The LDP had increased its gain up to 25,887,798 votes in 2005 under the leadership of Jun'ichirô Koizumi, which makes the fall of the number of votes even more obvious.

Nevertheless, Abe launched on numerous policies, which were controversial, to say the least. An unprecedented monetary easing to reverse deflation was the main part of the prime minister's economic strategy, Abenomics. In October 2013 the Bank of Japan (BOJ) announced it would increase purchases of Japanese government bonds at an annual pace of ¥80tn (£447bn) from ¥60-70tn previously. According to one estimate, this pace of purchasing government bonds would eventually lead to the extinction of the government bond markets by 2027<sup>5</sup>.

The government pension investment fund (GPIF) stated it would shift funds to riskier investments, by decreasing its holdings of government bonds from 60 percent to 35 percent and instead purchasing more stocks. This announcement was made simultaneously with the BOJ's expansion of its quantitative easing (QE). Although GPIF is not used to handling riskier assets and the government has not yet sufficiently explained the full risk of what the change of policy implicated, the decision was made so swiftly that there were hardly any serious public debate on this issue.

The Abe government also pushed through controversial legislations such as the act on the protection of specially designated secrets and a Japanese version of a white-colour exemption. It raised the troublesome consumption tax in April 2014, while planning to

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<sup>4</sup> The figures are from Ishikawa and Yamaguchi (2010), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications HP. [http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/data/shugiin46/](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/data/shugiin46/), accessed on 25 February 2015.

<sup>5</sup> 'Kokusai Shijyô ga Shômetsu suru Hi, Kurada Kanwa ga tsuzukeba 27 nen ni Tôrai [The day the government bond markets disappear. If Kurada's QE is maintained, it will happen in 2027]' Bloomberg.co.jp (10 February 2015), <http://www.bloomberg.co.jp/news/123-NJIYXN6JTSEQ01.html#>, accessed on 1 March 2015.

cut corporate tax from 2015. The Abe government is keen on resuming the operations of the nuclear power plants amid strong reservation if not opposition in the country. Furthermore, the government is hoping to take away the auditing and supervising authority from the Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (JA-Zenchu) over the local cooperatives of farmers throughout the country.

The Abe government changed, merely with a cabinet decision, the government interpretation of the postwar Constitution to allow the exercise of the right to collective self-defence, which previous Japanese governments had categorically denied. The ‘Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology’ replaced the ‘Three Principles on Arms Exports and Their Related Policy Guidelines’, the meaning of which was to relax restrictions on arms exports. The government also revised the ‘Official Development Assistance Charter’ to allow the ODA projects to directly provide aid to foreign militaries for the first time.

Presently Japan enjoys strong leadership by the prime minister, who is keen to push through not only his economic policies, his declared priority, but also foreign and security policies and constitutional reform, his pet policies. Previously, ‘One task, one cabinet’ was a well-known phrase to characterise Japanese prime ministers and cabinets. It seems that the political and administrative reforms from the 1990s have at last bore fruit to an arguably dangerous extent.

### **Didn’t We Have an Instable Leadership?<sup>6</sup>**

Interestingly, Japanese politics was famous for its lack of leadership. Comparison between Japanese politics and its British counterpart is popular in Japan, as they are seen as sharing the same parliamentary system, although they show rather different leadership performance. While Britain had twelve prime ministers between 1955 and 2015, Japan had 29 prime ministers in the same period. There were eight Japanese premiers in the last ten years; Japan has even started recycling its prime ministers<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This section is based on Takayasu (2010, 2013b) with minor revisions.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson and Abe’s premierships are counted as two each.

The reasons for the resignation of the prime ministers show the background of the instability of the leadership in Japan (see table 3). Let us compare the Japanese prime ministers with their British counterparts. The period we look into is after 1955 onwards. Prime ministers' resignations have multiple causes and it could be argued that one might not even get near to the truth. Therefore, pinning down a cause of a prime minister's resignation is risky by nature. Yet this comparison should reveal an important difference of the prime ministerships in the two systems.

[Table 3 Here]

To start with the British prime ministers' resignations, the pattern is rather straightforward. Six prime ministers resigned after losing a general election. Other major reasons are voluntary retirement and health reasons. However, resignations with health reasons, namely Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan's cases, and one voluntary retirement, Tony Blair's case, had other sides of their stories. They had all lost their support from their governing parties to a certain extent. The most dramatic fall of a British prime minister in modern times must be that of Margaret Thatcher: an incumbent prime minister forced to resign after a failure to secure a straight victory at a Conservative party leadership contest. Losing support from the governing party was also a crucial element in triggering leaders' resignations.

As for Macmillan and Thatcher's cases, their resignations were in their third year of that parliament; general elections were approaching within a year and half in both cases. By affecting the relationship between the prime minister/party leader and the governing party, the general election was again a key factor for a leadership change. General elections have without doubt created the basic political cycle of leadership in British politics.

Japanese politics showed different and more diverse reasons for leadership change. Amongst the 27 prime ministers, only three resigned after a defeat in a general election.

One prime minister left office, when he<sup>8</sup> recognised that a no-confidence vote was to pass the House of Representatives. Physical conditions of the prime ministers, such as health problems and death, were noticeable as well.

The governing party was also a major cause for prime ministers' resignations in Japan, which was the reason for eleven cases. The eleven cases included Nobusuke Kishi and Kakuei Tanaka; they resigned amid public outcries in relation to the revision of the Japan-US security treaty and various personal scandals, respectively, yet they had also lost their support from their own parties, which gave them critical blows.

Although governing parties were crucial for the survival of the prime minister in both Japanese and British politics, there was one difference in the way they were significant. Six prime ministers left office at the end of their terms as party leader in Japan. The long ruling LDP had strict rules for the tenure of its president, which were two to three years. Reelection was prohibited after 1980 with one exception in 1986, when the LDP extended Yasuhiro Nakasone's tenure for one year, owing to his contribution to a landslide victory in the same year. The tenure of the LDP president put an end to some of its popular leaders, including Nakasone, Toshiki Kaifu and Jun'ichirô Koizumi.

Other unique reasons for the prime ministers' resignations were related to the House of Councillors, the upper house. One reason was the defeat at the upper-house election, and the other was the divided diet. Although defeat at an upper-house election would not lead to a prime minister's resignation or a government's collapse constitutionally, two prime ministers, Sôsuke Uno and Ryûtârô Hashimoto, have resigned after an upper-house election defeat. The LDP did not allow the prime minister to stay, and could get rid of them in these cases.

Divided diet indicated that the prime minister, supported by the majority of the House of Representatives, the lower house, did not command a majority in the House of Councillors. Divided diet was the primary reason for four prime ministers' resignations. In addition to these resignations, Yoshirô Mori and Yukio Hatoyama resigned just

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<sup>8</sup> Japan has never seen a female prime minister as yet.

before an upper-house election, when they lost the support from their own parties. Naoto Kan also resigned facing a divided diet, although Kan basically lost the support of both houses and his own party.

Comparison with their British counterparts sheds light on the variety of reasons, for which Japanese prime ministers resigned.

### **A Parliamentary System or a Semi-parliamentary System?**

The fact that Japanese prime ministers resigned for various reasons implied that they were effectively responsible to multiple actors and institutions in the system. To put it bluntly, the system was confusing as to whom the prime minister was primarily responsible. It is not unusual, if not typical, for a textbook on Japanese politics and Constitution to describe its system as a parliamentary system (ck. Hasebe, 2011: 357-8; Shinoda, 2013: 12). The question is whether in fact Japan had a parliamentary system. The point at issue was the House of Councillors and bicameralism in the Japanese political system.

The key features of a parliamentary system, compared with a presidential system, concern the generation and accountability of the executive; parliamentary government was defined as ‘the form of constitutional democracy in which executive authority emerges from, and is responsible to, legislative authority’ (cited in Lijphart, 1984: 68; see also, Linz and Valenzuela, 1994: x; Müller, *et.al.*, 2003: 12-3). A parliamentary system is a system, in which the executive relies for its existence solely on the national assembly. With the support from the national assembly, the executive comes into office, and should be forced to resign if and when it loses this support.

When political scientists and constitutional experts of the Japanese political system focused on the relationship between the House of Representatives and the cabinet, they found a typical parliamentary system. Although Japan had a bicameral system, the LDP dominated Japanese politics and commanded a majority in both houses between 1956 and 1989. This fact led observers to underestimate the significance of bicameralism in

Japanese politics. Even after 1989 until 2007 the LDP managed to gain either explicit or implicit (by which I mean case-by-case) support from other parties, except the brief period of 1993 to 1994. Japanese politics long performed like a parliamentary system, when the majority force in the lower house secured majority in the upper house. The governing parties were the key to the understanding of political power in Japanese politics, as was in other parliamentary systems.

However, when the House of Councillors was fully put into the picture, Japanese politics looked differently. Harukata Takenaka observed that the Japanese political system could perform as a divided government, as seen in the United States (Takenaka, 2004). Sadafumi Kawato argued that the Constitution of postwar Japan incorporated both the parliamentary system and the division of power as its basic governing principles, and that the development of the political system in the postwar years was to harmonise these two principles, which could contradict with each other (Kawato, 2005).

It was after 2007 when the divided diet won public attention, although the LDP had lost the majority of the House of Councillors ever since 1989. Michael Thies and Yuki Yanai (2014) classified three types of diets in Japanese politics; the focal point was whether the government possessed or lacked the majority of the upper house. The three types were ‘unified’ diets, ‘Majority-Minority’ diets, and ‘Divided’ diets. When the parties in government controlled the majority in both houses, they called a diet ‘unified’. When they did not, the diet was either a majority-minority diet or a divided diet.

Thies and Yanai explained the difference between a majority-minority diet and a divided diet as follows;

We refer to the simple absence of an HC [House of Councillors] majority for the government as ‘Majority-Minority’ Diets. We call a Diet ‘Divided’ when an opposition party or stable opposition coalition effectively controls upper house business. ... In a Maj-Min Diet, the government is technically outnumbered in the HC, but it generally remains the largest coherent group, and should be able to manipulate the legislative agenda in such a way as to dominate any would-be opposition coalition in the competition for the small parties holding the casting vote. ... In a Divided Diet, by contrast, the government faces a stable opposition majority in the HC. It is in this

scenario that the effect on governance should be the most profound (Thies and Yanai, 2014: 62-3).

Thies and Yanai argued that the pattern of party competition in the diet changed the relationship between the government and the House of Councillors.

A unique analysis by Steffen Ganghof presented an interesting typology of forms of government, which classified a certain type of bicameralism as chamber-independent government. This attempt was to understand bicameralism not only as a form of legislative organisation but also as a form of government. Ganghof argued that chamber-independent government was a distinct form of government, a hybrid of parliamentarism and presidentialism, which had the potential to combine different visions of democracy.

**Table 4. Forms of Government**

		Executive survival		
		Fully dependent on assembly	Partially dependent on assembly	Not dependent on assembly
Executive Origin	Popular Executive Elections	[1] Elected Prime-Ministerial (Israel 1996-2002)	[2] Semi-Presidential (e.g. France)	[3] Presidential (e.g. USA)
	No Popular Executive Elections	[4] Parliamentary (e.g. Britain)	[5] Chamber-independent (e.g. Australia)	[6] Assembly-independent (Switzerland)

Source: Ganghof (2014: 651).

The typology itself was for the sake of comprehensive comparison. Ganghof focused on two aspects of the executive: executive origin and executive survival. First, executives could be popularly elected or not. Second, executive's survival could be fully dependent on, or fully independent on the assembly, and it could also be partially dependent on the assembly. According to Ganghof, executives partially dependent on the assembly could occur in two ways: 'first, there can be a *dual executive* only one part of which, the president, survives independently from the legislature; and there can be a *dual legislature*, only one part of which can dismiss the executive' (Ganghof, 2014: 650-1).

Ganghof classed Japan's bicameralism, with Australia's, as chamber-independent government. It was defined as 'a system in which the cabinet originates from a "dual legislature, i.e. a parliament with two powerful chambers, but survives separately from only one of them' (Ganghof, 2014: 652). Three further conditions were required for a chamber-independent government. First, the second chamber must be popularly elected to have roughly the same legitimacy as the first chamber. Second, it must have an absolute veto on all important (non-financial) legislations. Third, the second-chamber majority must not have the power to unilaterally dismiss the cabinet for political reasons.

Ganghof argued that although the House of Councillors did not possess an absolute veto, the House of Representatives needed a two-thirds majority to override the House of Councillors. The second chamber could also push the government into a corner and force it to resign, yet it could not constitutionally force this to happen. Therefore, Ganghof concluded that 'Japan is a version of chamber-independent government, but since there is no absolute veto, it is a diluted version' (Ganghof, 2014: 653).

When we review recent discussions on the Japanese political system, it becomes obvious that Japan cannot be understood as a straightforward parliamentary system.

### **Abuse of Power by the House of Councillors?**

Having said that, the House of Councillors was much stronger than how Ganghof described it. More importantly, the House of Councillors performed its functions differently from what the Constitution required of it.

Two points should be taken notice. First, although the House of Councillors could not veto the budget (the main finance bill), it could reject ordinary bills. Thies and Yanai pointed out, 'Probably the most important category of "ordinary bills" are what we call budget-enabling bills'. Budget-enabling bills, using Thies and Yanai's term, concerned various issues, which would include, for instance, annual tax reforms, a bill for the special deficit-financing bond issues, and bills required for particular budget

implementation. The House of Councillors could effectively block the budget from functioning by killing the budget-enabling bills, even though the Constitution explicitly denied such power (Thies and Yanai, 2014: 66).

Second, the House of Councillors could essentially pull down a government. It is true that the House of Councillors could not destroy the government constitutionally. However, presently the House of Councillors could, under certain conditions, determine the fate of the prime minister and therefore the entire executive. They did so in two ways, as described above. One was through the upper-house election. 1989 was the first year prime ministers started resigning after losing an upper-house election. The reason was political rather than constitutional; the governing party did not allow the prime minister to stay on after a defeat at an upper-house election.

The other way was the censure resolution by the House of Councillors. Constitutionally the House of Representatives could choose the prime minister with or without the agreement of the House of Councillors, and the cabinet solely relied on the support of the House of Representatives. To repeat, the Constitution did not allow the House of Councillors to pull down the government. Yet the censure resolution effectively came to function like a no-confidence vote by the House of Representatives. The opposition parties threatened to adopt and indeed adopted a tactics to combine a censure resolution with a boycott of Diet deliberation. This threat and fear realised in 1998 when the then Director General of the Defence Agency, a cabinet minister, was forced to resign facing this tactics by the opposition parties. If the censure resolution could force a minister to resign, there was no reason to believe that the prime minister was exempt (Takenaka, 2010: 200-1).

While the House of Councillors did not have the power to choose the prime minister, yet had the power to dismiss him, the system provided the upper house with an incentive to use the censure resolution, when it disagreed with the decision of the House of Representatives. However, when the House of Councillors resorted to this power in reality, it destabilised not only the office of the prime minister but also the entire executive (Takayasu, 2013a; Takayasu, 2013b). The reason was because, while the House of Councillors could not choose who was to lead the executive, the decision of

the House of Representatives could not settle this most important problem.

The fear and threat of the censure resolution caused uncertainty and instability in Japanese politics, which created frustration not only amongst the political leaders but also for some in the public and in the media. *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* ran an editorial in January 2012, which stressed the importance of breaking away from indecisive politics<sup>9</sup>. *Sankei Shinbun*, the rightwing newspaper, interpreted its survey result in February 2013, which showed that 66.0 percent of the respondents expected the LDP with or without Komeito to win majority in the 2013 upper-house election. The paper concluded that this result reflected the public's desire to overcome divided diet and realise 'politics that can decide [kimerareru seiji]'<sup>10</sup>. Masato Shimizu from *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* argued that Japanese politics was drifting towards 'a parliamentary system based on the House of Councillors [San'in Naikakusei]' rather than the House of Representatives. Divided diet, if not bicameralism itself, was under attack.

The House of Councillors was far stronger in reality than Ganghof's understanding. Particularly problematic was the censure resolution, which destabilised the entire executive.

### **One-Party Dominance –Mark II?**

The 2012 general election brought a huge majority to the LDP in the lower house, while the LDP with the help of Komeito recovered majority in the upper house in 2013. With the government enjoying majority in both houses, Japanese politics started to function like a parliamentary system again. Real power in a parliamentary system lied with the governing party or parties. As long as the prime minister could maintain the support, either positive or passive, of the governing party or parties, his/her position was safe. To be precise, if the majority of the national assembly did not turn against him/her and knock him/her down, the prime minister's position was safe.

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<sup>9</sup> *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (25 January 2012), <http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGKDZO38277050V20C12A1PE8000/>, accessed on 20 March 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Sankei Shinbun* (25 February 2013), <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/news/130225/stt13022520590005-n1.htm>, accessed on 20 March 2015.

Accordingly, how tightly the governing party(ies) controlled their leader, the prime minister, determined the strength of the prime minister. As George W. Jones (1965: 185) aptly stressed in an article on British prime ministers as early as in 1965, ‘A Prime Minister, who can carry his colleagues with him [sic] can be in a very powerful position, but he is only as strong as they let him be’. To put it differently, Jones stated, ‘Being leader of the party confers on the prime minister no automatic guarantee of its support’.

The present author argued previously that the LDP gradually tightened the control over its leader and thus the prime minister until the mid 1990s (Takayasu, 2013; Takayasu 2014). In particular, amalgamation of the LDP diet members into the five major factions were critically important, in that they provided tools for the LDP diet members to overcome their collective action problem. The five major factions coordinated their interests with one another. They in effect supported the *zoku* diet members and their policy communities, which were composed by the *zoku* diet members, the related bureaucrats, and the organised interests. Once such a system was established, it became extremely difficult for ministers to by-pass the policy communities; even the prime minister did not wish to destabilise his support in the party by so doing (Takayasu, 2013: 12). The party strongly controlled the prime minister to such an extent that he lost substantial autonomy in the policy processes.

The political reforms in 1994 gradually destroyed the cohesion of the five major factions in the LDP, while provided resources for the party leadership to control the diet members of the party<sup>11</sup>. The internal struggles within the LDP gradually deprived the diet members of their resources to overcome their collective action problem. Faction leaders ceased to be the chief provider of leadership candidates after the mid 1990s. The party leadership could take away the decision-making power of the LDP’s internal bodies, as they lost their power base, the factions. It was not the electoral reform itself but rather the power shift inside the LDP that strengthened the party leadership and thus the prime minister.

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<sup>11</sup> As for the impact of the political reforms in the 1990s, see Takanaka (2006) and Shimizu (2005).

In particular, Abe as party president did not hesitate in interfering in the deliberation and decision-making processes within the LDP. Abe established sixteen organs in November 2013, which were directly accountable to the party president: the national vision project headquarters, administrative reform promotion headquarters, headquarters for party and political system reform implementation, headquarters for the promotion of revision to the Constitution, regional government (dôshû-sei) promotion headquarters, headquarters for accelerating reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake, electoral system reform headquarters, headquarters for Japan's economic revitalisation, headquarters for the revitalisation of education, strategic council on rebuilding diplomacy, headquarters for North Korean abductions, headquarters for regional diplomatic and economic partnership, headquarters of the action committee for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games, headquarters for creating attractive urban areas, headquarters on creation of regional vitality in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, promotion headquarters for the national campaign 'Vitalising Japan'.<sup>12</sup> In March 2014 the headquarters for preparing for the national security legislations (promotion headquarters for the national security legislative amendments and establishment) was also set up<sup>13</sup>. Their responsibilities overlapped with those of the existing bodies within the LDP.

When the LDP discussed a social policy legislation in August 2013, it skipped the policy research council board and the general council, whose approvals were usually required for a legislation<sup>14</sup>. Another example was the research commission on the tax system. Previously it had been fiercely jealous of its independence in deciding the taxation policy. In 2014 the prime minister with Akira Amari, the cabinet minister for economic and fiscal policy, repeatedly pressed for cutting corporate tax<sup>15</sup>. Eventually the research commission on the tax system of both the LDP and Komeito agreed in implementing this tax cut<sup>16</sup>. The once powerful organisations within the LDP were

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<sup>12</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, 15 November 2013. A full list of these organs is shown on the LDP HP (English version). <https://www.jimin.jp/english/profile/english/>, accessed on 22 March 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, 1 April 2014.

<sup>14</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, 20 August 2013.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, *Asahi Shinbun*, 7 June 2014.

[http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/politics/AJ201406070031](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201406070031), accessed on 22 March 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, 29 December 2014 <http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASGDY3WLQGDYULFA006.html>, accessed on 22 March 2015.

gradually being hollowed out.

The power shift within the LDP was clearly favourable to the prime minister/party president. The LDP became far less constraining upon its leader in policy-making. In fact, the political reforms in the 1990s had aimed for creating such a strong leader.

The problem was that the campaign for the political reforms, which started in the late 1980s, expected that they would create a different type of control over the strengthened political leadership. The reforms were to create or transform political parties to become more coherent, which would put forward clear policies and compete with one another openly. The threat and reality of losing power to another party should put pressure on the political leaders and make them more responsible and responsive to the electorate. In the 2000s the DPJ became a serious challenger to the LDP, even taking away power from it in 2009. Establishing strong leadership with checks and balances between political parties were expected to be the new model of democracy in Japan.

Unfortunately, the pattern of party competition in Japan changed in the 2010s. The present party system in Japan seemed to lack a serious challenger to the LDP. The LDP's dominance in the party system became evident once again. Yet Japanese politics lacked the intra-party control mechanism within the LDP, which had existed until the 1990s. Therefore, although the appearance of Japanese politics might look similar to the conditions of the past, the power balance is quite different at present. Executive dominance was a serious but familiar problem for parliamentary systems. What we observe currently was precisely this problem, which was even more serious, as Japanese politics was short of the control mechanisms based on both intra-party and inter-party pressure.

## **Conclusion**

In his article of 2014, Ganghof summarised Stanley Bach's argument on the Australian bicameralism and stated: 'the systems of government in Australia (or Japan) could thus alternate between parliamentary and non-parliamentary phases'. This distinction

indicated ‘if a cabinet is formed that controls a majority in both chambers, there is a parliamentary system; otherwise there is something else’. Ganghof strongly criticised such a distinction. Ganghof admitted, ‘This typological mix of fixed institutional features and variable behavioural patterns is well known from the literature on semi-presidentialism’. Yet he contended that such an approach needed to be avoided. Citing Matthew Shugart, he stressed ‘preferable is a purely institutional approach, which “defines the authority patterns of the executive and assembly and how they are constitutionally related to one another” (Shugart, 2005, p. 327)’ (Ganghof, 2014).

Ganghof’s typology was significant, as it contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the governing structures across various political systems. Nonetheless, Japanese prime ministers showed such a different performance that it was unhelpful to give the Japanese political system a single characterisation. Japanese politics showed contrasting features and problems. The divided diet controlled the prime minister and the executive so strongly that it killed political leadership and destabilised the system. In contrast, when the governing party or parties commanded the majority in both houses, and when the governing party lacked intra-party control over the leadership as we see at present, such a condition made executive dominance easier and control extremely difficult.

It is difficult to give Japanese politics a single characterisation, although it should be possible to categorise it. Observers need to be aware of the fluctuations of the system’s character and the different features as well as the problems of the system. One solution might facilitate further problems in another condition. Systems need to be understood within a context of power balance, a pattern, created by both inter and intra party competition, which is after all what institutions mean.

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