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WHY HAS JAPAN HAD SO MANY PMS?

Yasuhiro Tase

It feels like Japan has returned to the time when the prime minister was jeered at as “the most productive” in Japan. The successors of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Shinzo Abe and Yasuo Fukuda, both resigned after just a year or so in office. I started covering Japanese politics in 1972 and have had the honor of interviewing 21 prime ministers over 36 years. Since the quality of Japanese politics never improves at all, I never run out of material as a political critic.

Why do Japanese prime ministers have such short terms in office? People often attribute it to the quality of the politicians, but is this true? I cannot assume that the qualifications of Japanese politicians are much worse than those of American

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politicians. I met four American presidents; Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. They were all great communicators with charisma, but when it came to their qualifications as national leaders, I thought there was not much difference between them and their Japanese counterparts.

Consider President-elect Barack Obama. He was an obscure figure a decade ago. He does not have much experience as a senator either. Why, then, was not much concern raised about his experience? With a change of American president comes a turnover of several thousand staffers at the White House, allowing professionals in various fields picked from around the US to assist the president. As a reporter who covered the White House during the Reagan era, I am surprised to see Reagan now so honored as to have an airport and a street named after him.


When he took office, no one would have imagined that Reagan would be ranked as one of the historic presidents. He was prone to slips of the tongue. What made it possible for him to navigate that difficult time at the end of the Cold War was the persistent assistance of such talented aides as George Shultz, Howard Baker, and Caspar Weinberger. Such is what is lacking in Japan. Japanese ministers appointed by a new prime minister have to dive all on their own into ministries filled with competent bureaucrats. In the United States, Secretaries throw in their lots with the president; in Japan, even the secretary to the prime minister tends to work to protect his own position, rather than the PM's, for he is slated to rise to the highest rank of the bureaucracy.

How could a prime minister achieve anything outstanding under such circumstances? Except for the secretary in charge of political affairs, the staff members gathered around the prime minister have usually never met the prime minister before. The most important tasks for the newly elected prime minister are a policy address and a press conference where he presents his ideas to the Japanese public. There are no professional speech writers in Japan, however; the PM's speeches are written by bureaucrats. The main task of bureaucrats is to explain why they cannot execute such and such policies. How can they write for the prime minister a speech that appeals to public sentiment?

Furthermore, far from everything is ready for the prime minister, who has

come to the PM's office all on his own. When Keizo Obuchi, the former prime minister, died while in office, it was agreed to assign a doctor and a nurse to the PM's office, but no such arrangements have been made so far. The prime minister is supposed to live in the designated official residence, but no cook is assigned there. To entertain guests, he must use outside catering or *demae* food-delivery service, often considered casual dining in Japan.

Public polls conducted every month by media outlets are another factor contributing to the short lifespan of Japanese prime ministers. The Japanese media meticulously follow how the PM's approval ratings fall from the first week of the new Cabinet. A 100-day honeymoon in the United States sounds dreamlike; some of the Japanese Cabinets have lasted less than 100 days. Approval ratings are more affected by the PM's personality, the way he responds to TV cameras, and his facial expressions than by the content of policies, but only a few politicians can manage to succeed in all these areas.

As a result, the PM's approval rating falls day by day. The market is sensitive to this figure, leading to drops in the Nikkei Stock Average, which in turn pull down the PM's approval rating further. Japanese politics is caught in a vicious circle. A Japanese prime minister is expected to do an impossible job of implementing policies welcomed by the public, maintaining a lovable character, and exercising strong leadership on the world stage at the same time. This results in prime ministers with an annual income of approximately 30 million yen being criticized by TV presenters earning hundreds of millions yen in income as "thoughtless of the public." The day might come soon when no one wishes to become prime minister in Japan. 

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