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**Kishida's Onerous Task After the General Election:
The Promotion of Democracy in Domestic and World Politics**

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Kishida and the Lessons from His Predecessors

Obuchi's success story is an intriguing case to utilize as a lens for understanding the new Japanese prime minister, Fumio Kishida. Obuchi's inauguration in July 1998 seemed similar to that of Kishida's in the light of his poor level of popularity among Japanese voters. Keizo Obuchi, dismissed as "cold pizza" by a Japanese political analyst for his political opportunism (he belonged to the same faction (Heiseikenkyu-kai, 平成研究会) as Ryutaro Hashimoto, the former prime minister),¹ has come to be remembered as a success story among moderate politicians in the Japanese political arena. This is due to his notable political and diplomatic achievements such as forming a coalition government between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s and Komeito that, to this day, remains highly effective in winning over opposition parties (with the exception of the 2009 general election), and the reconciliation with its neighbors, South Korea and China. Obuchi's approval rating nearly doubled during his term, from 24.8% in August 1998 to 47.6% in October 1999.²

Why is this success story of the "cold pizza" meaningful for the new Kishida administration? It is said that Kishida has learned lessons from his predecessors—especially those who graduated from the same school, Waseda University.³ Not only were they alumni at the same school but they were also members of the school's oratorical society (早稲田雄弁会). The administrations led by Waseda alumni prime ministers, however, have been short-lived⁴; Obuchi died at 62, less than two years into his term after a stroke. Kishida's seniors had to address the political predicaments and controversies within the opposing parties and inside the LDP.

During the LDP presidential election held last September, Kishida, like his predecessors, was recognized as a "moderate politician," and some critics underestimated his political potential to

¹ *New York Times*, July 23, 1998 ("Cold Pizza Hits the Spot in Japanese Politics").

² Central Research Services (中央調査社) (「小淵内閣支持率の推移」<https://www.crs.or.jp/backno/old/No506/5062.htm>).

³ *Asahi Shimbun*, October 7, 2021 (「(岸田文雄研究) 『自分は石破政権の次』 安倍氏に仕えた苦悩」).

⁴ Ishibashi (65 days), Takeshita (576 days), Kaifu (818 days, the longest term), Obuchi (616 days), Mori (387 days), Fukuda (Yasuo, 365 days), Noda (482 days).

handle various problems faced by Japan, such as the COVID-19 crisis, the economic downturn, and foreign relations in East Asia, especially China. “A lukewarm reaction” to his winning was evidenced in the relatively low approval ratings,⁵ and thus many political experts proclaimed that there was no “celebratory mood” for Kishida since approval rates tend to be high for the first cabinet of a new prime minister. Furthermore the “3A (Abe, Aso, Amari),” elderly politicians who have had powerful influence on the LDP, known as supported him in the run-off vote, which was viewed as a sign not to expect change anytime soon. The first cabinet makeup in October was overshadowed by his efforts to pay respect to LDP elders.

The general election on October 31, however, showed that the majority of Japanese people seemed to approve of the Kishida administration; the LDP secured a comfortable majority in the lower house, winning 261 seats. Although the LDP lost fifteen seats before the election, the coalition party, Komeito, increased by three seats. According to several election polls led by the media, the LDP was expected to lose its independent majority. Kishida’s strategy to hold an early election was so successful that he was able to push his domestic politics and diplomacy agenda. Rather than when he was first elected as PM, he can now be called “the second Obuchi.”

The Recovery of Democracy in Domestic Politics

Maintaining a comfortable majority, Kishida needs to address two issues that are likely to collide: the first is the recovery of democracy in domestic politics, and the second is the carrying out of a realistic foreign policy for the promotion of democracy in world politics. These two issues are associated with the legacy of the Abe–Suga administration, with the former having been overlooked for almost a decade. Several indices suggest that democracy in Japan has been in retreat even though many Japanese, especially politicians and political scholars, did not perceive it as a serious problem.

The Democracy Index, compiled annually by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), shows that Japan continued to decline in overall scores—scoring 8.08 points (22nd) and ranking as a “full democracy” in 2010, to scoring 7.99 points (24th) ranking as a “flawed democracy” in 2019. Japan recaptured its full democracy ranking last year, in the aftermath of Abe’s resignation⁶. A series of political scandals might have been connected with Abe, such as the Moritomo–Take and cherry blossom scandal, but LDP leaders, including Kishida, have denied the reopening of detailed investigations.

A more serious problem is the freedom of the press, as confirmed in the ranking of The Press Freedom Index, presented by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Since 2012, the year the Abe administration entered office, Japan has always ranked lower than 50th place. In 2010, Japan was ranked in the top 20 (11th)⁷. RSF continuously urges the Japanese government to lift restrictions on reporters and foreign correspondents’ access to press conferences and government officials. However, so far no policy changes have been made.

Henry Laurence, a scholar of Japanese politics, points out that “Abe’s war on the media” is

⁵ Asahi: 45%, NHK: 49%, Yomiuri: 56%, Nikkei: 59%, Sankei: 63.2%.

⁶ Economist Intelligence (Democracy Index, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>).

⁷ RSF: Japan (<https://rsf.org/en/japan>).

symbolized by the legislature, the 2014 “Protection of Specially Designated Secrets Act.” This undermined the free coverage of the press, including the Japanese media, to contact government officials, as those who leak state secrets would be imprisoned for up to ten years, while reporters and journalists who published such secrets could face five years in jail. Laurence observes that “Abe was particularly overbearing in his attempts to wield influence over NHK,” adding that he did not expect that the situation would improve in the short term.⁸ Therefore the Japanese were barely surprised by the news in July 2020 that The New York Times would relocate its Hong Kong-based digital news operation to Seoul, not Tokyo.⁹

In sum, it is challenging for Kishida to handle this sort of problem in domestic politics because, as mentioned above, Abe is one of his allies among LDP politicians. To go against his decision would mean a “political adventure” for Kishida. Nonetheless, given the situation in which the LDP retains a comfortable majority, Kishida has more political room for the recovery of democracy within Japan, and he could play a major role in ordering the reinvestigation of two political scandals.

Of course, such an order would be accompanied by serious political risk. Although this is not a simple, easy decision, it is more likely to occur now than right before the election or if the Japanese voters call on him to overcome his predecessors. A survey conducted by Asahi Shimbun in December 2020 shows that 75% of voters believe that Shinzo Abe should explain his involvement in the cherry blossom scandal at an open hearing in the Diet.¹⁰ Another survey presented by Kyodo News the previous month reported that 69.7% of respondents “do not want the new cabinet to inherit the legacy of Abe and Suga.”¹¹ The process of democracy restoration is intimately linked to realistic foreign policy in terms of the promotion of democracy around the world, especially in Asia.

Japan’s Role in the Promotion of Democracy in Asia

Kishida declared that he would inherit his predecessor’s diplomatic legacy, which means that the agenda proposed by Abe (and also Suga) would continue to be developed. Two publications of the Abe administration in December 2013, when Kishida was foreign minister, were recognized as “the turning point” in Japan’s foreign policy: the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG).¹² According to the new security strategy, Tokyo declared that “proactive pacifism” would be a new agenda, shifting from “idealistic pacifism.” The values Japan aims to seek in foreign policy to enhance regional and international stability are democracy, human rights, and the rule of law while easing military constraints, such as a 1% GDP cap on defense spending. Thus, it can be said that Tokyo had begun to drive toward its “new diplomatic realism.”¹³

⁸ Henry Laurence, “After Abe, Will Press Freedom Improve in Japan?” (*The Diplomat*, October 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/after-abe-will-press-freedom-improve-in-japan/>).

⁹ *New York Times*, July 14, 2020 (“New York Times Will Move Part of Hong Kong Office to Seoul”).

¹⁰ *Asahi Shimbun*, December 21, 2020 (English version, “Poll: 70% want Abe to explain scandal in open hearing at Diet”).

¹¹ *Kyodo News*, October 5, 2021 (「岸田内閣支持率、55% 「安倍・菅路線転換を」69%」)

¹² Alexandra Sakaki, “Japan’s Security Policy: A Shift in Direction under Abe?” *SWP Research Paper*, March 2015, pp.16-17 (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2015_RP02_skk.pdf).

¹³ Michael Auslin, “Japan’s New Realism: Abe Gets Tough,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2016 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2016-02-16/japans-new-realism>).

A major change in the Asia Pacific region is the new “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” framework and its enhanced version, “Quad,” composed of the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan which has intensified security and economic ties due to tension from the Chinese threat. Although it is not a formal alliance, Japan has emphasized the democratic identity of the four nations. In November 2020, the four countries’ navies participated in their first joint exercise in over a decade. A virtual Quad meeting was convened in March 2021, where four leaders agreed to form working groups on COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, technological innovation, and supply-chain resilience. In his debut on the international stage in the COP 26 UN Climate Change Conference, held in Glasgow, Kishida pledged up to \$10 billion in funds over a five-year term to assist Asia on the path to zero carbon emission.¹⁴ This shows Kishida’s steadfast will to contribute toward the promotion of international cooperation, which might come from the original liberalism stance of his faction (Kouchi-kai, 宏池会). Kishida seems well aware of his role in international society.

As part of the Asian liberal democracy, however, Japan has not been able to prevent the collapse of democracy from dictatorship in the regional area—for example, in Hong Kong and Myanmar—even when the U.S. warned both President Xi Jinping and the Myanmar military junta to calm their violence. The aforementioned warnings and the efforts to improve the situation were futile as no meaningful changes were made. Nonetheless, there has been optimism in the Japanese media, especially in the case of Myanmar, suggesting that a compromise could soon be reached because Tokyo has its own “pipe (an interlocutor who has a route to communicate with his counterparts of Myanmar military)” toward Myanmar’s armed forces. Consequently, however, Tokyo has been unable to respond to such humanitarian crises, and the violence grew much more serious. In August, a person identified as “the pipe” by the media emphasized that Myanmar military officers understand democracy, and the incident was not a coup,¹⁵ but his insistence seemed unconvincing in light of the miserable reality.

The Hong Kong problem is more serious and complicated than just Myanmar, as it is associated with China’s fundamental political system; and China is one of the most important counterparts in terms of economic cooperation. Agness Chow, a symbolic figure often called the “goddess of democracy” by the Japanese media, planned to go to Hokkaido University as a research fellow last year, but her dream was unrealized because of the investigation and incarceration by the Hong Kong law enforcement. It is unknown whether Tokyo tried to aid her entrance into Japan as a foreign student or “political refugee,” but she has never left Hong Kong since the establishment of “Patriotic Oath Law” in Beijing. Her call for help was left unanswered even though although she always tweeted in Japanese.

The Way to Raise the Prestige of Japan in the International Society

It is an undeniably onerous task for Japan to maintain and promote democracy in internal and external spheres, and it is nearly impossible to address the problems only by spending large amounts of money or deploying military troops (certainly the latter is not a simple decision for Japan at all, compared to other democracies). The major setback in Kabul, Afghanistan, last August

¹⁴ *Bloomberg*, November 2, 2021 (“Japan’s Kishida Pledges Up to \$10 Billion in New Climate Finance”).

¹⁵ *Asahi Shimbun*, August 24, 2021 (「政変をクーデターと認めぬパイプ 記者が感じた国家主義」).

confirmed this. Thus, if Tokyo’s new realism has a core value of promoting democracy in Asia, then Kishida needs to provide a clear sign that he will be “realistic” in diplomatically and peacefully resolving the crisis of democratic values, and not resort to military means. This suggests that “reluctant realism (albeit referring to a more active role in the military alliance)”¹⁶ could turn out to be “realistic proactive pacifism,” which could be a way to contribute to democracy in both domestic and international politics. This is also likely to raise the prestige of Japan soon. ■

¹⁶ Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2003.

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