

Powerful leader could point nation to fascism

The Asahi Shimbun

The Liberal Democratic Party's presidential race kicks off Wednesday. The party is in dire need of a new leader to salvage its badly battered image—a legacy of Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's Cabinet, arguably one of the least popular administrations in Japanese history. But judging by all the usual LDP backstage deal-cutting that is going on among its factions, the party is clearly not focused on the fundamental question of who, among its members, is truly qualified to be the nation's top political leader.

Something is seriously amiss with this election—an observation shared by many. Especially worrisome is the fact that the party's cadre of Young Turks has kept strangely quiet.

Kiyomi Tsujimoto, policy board chairwoman of the Social Democratic Party, aired her views in a recent interview with The Asahi Shimbun.

Q: What do you think of the lineup of LDP presidential candidates?

A: It reminds me of a clearance sale at a supermarket that's about to go belly up—the market being the LDP, of course. The lineup reflects no awareness whatsoever (on the LDP's part) of the fact that this is for a race that will determine the nation's top political leader. Voters are going to get food poisoning from being dished out stuff that belongs in a trash bin. My prediction is that whoever becomes the new LDP president will go down in history as the one who brought the curtain down on the LDP. With all due respect, I urge the party to choose the person very carefully.

Q: Even the party's Young Turks are not really doing anything. Any idea why?

A: They talk big like they know all the answers, but they are fossilized, totally immobilized by the party's antediluvian customs. That's because many of them are second- and third-generation lawmakers who have to depend on supporters in their ancestral constituencies.

Q: But we can't expect much from opposition parties either, can we?

A: The Social Democrats are too



THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Kiyomi Tsujimoto

insignificant to be effective as a party. There is no question that Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan), as the leading opposition party, ought to be doing better. But I can appreciate the extreme difficulty of uniting this party, which is really a conglomeration of diverse elements. Actually, some Minshuto members are essentially no different from their LDP counterparts. It's like the question of whether you say "curry rice" or "rice curry."

Q: Do you agree that there is a shortage of real talent in both the ruling and opposition parties?

A: Yes, and this has largely to do with the proliferation of second- and third-generation politicians who don't know how the rest of society lives. Another factor lies in the current electoral system that combines single-seat districts and proportional representation blocs. If you are from a single-seat district, you have to devote your entire time and energy to preparing for the next election. You simply have no time for any other activities. And to have any chance of keeping your proportional representation seat, you must belong to a party.

I believe in greater political participation by company employees, owners of

small- and medium-sized businesses, shopkeepers and so on—people who really know from hard experience how this society works. But unless they had the backing of some powerful organization, they wouldn't dream of starting a campaign. I think political parties ought to make it easier for such people, men and women, to run.

Q: Are you saying conventional organizations alone will not be able to guide politics?

A: I was invited to the Davos meeting of the world's political and financial leaders in January. This forum was originally meant for rich capitalists, and to a former NGO activist such as myself, they used to be enemies rather than allies. We used to hold protest rallies outside their conference sites.

This time, however, the organizers were big enough to accept people who didn't share their values, and invited representatives from NGOs and developing nations. They did this because they realized there were some areas they couldn't handle by themselves and therefore needed to collaborate.

Why do you think the Sogo department store chain went bankrupt while the Uniqlo clothing chain won the hearts of consumers? The answer is that while Uniqlo was sensitive to the needs of consumers, Sogo wasn't. The same applies to politics.

Q: Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori was repeatedly criticized this past year for his gaffes and questionable conduct. What do you think are the qualities expected of a prime minister?

A: A prime minister must be able not only to state his opinion, but heed the opinion of others, too. Also, he should be able to explain his opinion and win people over. There is no point in telling this to the outgoing prime minister, of course.

Politics is about giving shape to hope. At the same time, it is also about practicing what I'd call the art of compromise. Take U.S. President George W. Bush, for instance, who has decided to pull the United States out of the Kyoto protocol on global warming. I assume his

argument is that he has to consider the interests of his own nation. But what about the interests of the rest of the world? I believe it is the task of a politician to stand by his or her argument while seeking potential compromises with opponents, and to explore ways to forge a hopeful future.

Q: What do you think of the argument that if we want a prime minister who is a strong leader, the post should be up for public election?

A: I think it's about time we dropped the illusion that a change of system will improve politics. The president of the United States is vested with tremendous authority, but this goes hand in hand with comprehensive information disclosure. If nothing is done to bring greater transparency to politics, extending the leader's presidency will only result in a dictator being elected to lead the nation. Advocates of public election for prime minister are probably thinking something along the lines of prefectural gubernatorial elections. But I sense that these people want a strong leader because they themselves do not want any political commitment. I think this is dangerous.

It's dangerous because when everything is left up to the leader, the people will have no need to participate in politics. That's not democracy. The current situation is disturbingly similar to what existed in pre-World War II Japan, when the public's mistrust of political parties and the legislature was great and the economy was in the doldrums.

At a time like this, society may well turn to fascism if a powerful leader emerges—one whose sole claim to authority is his or her vast popularity. I think this fear is quite legitimate.

Kiyomi Tsujimoto, 40, is chairwoman of the policy-making board of the opposition Social Democratic Party. While a student at Waseda University in 1983, she founded Peace Boat, a citizens' international exchange organization. Tsujimoto was elected to the Lower House in 1996. She is currently serving her second term.