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Wakeup call for Japan's politicians

By CHRISTOPHER HOBSON
 Special to The Japan Times

The massive shock that Japan received from the earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, was not enough to shake the country's politicians out of their comatose state. This was already evident before the recent national elections.

The shifting of responsibility, the confused policies, the lack of leadership, the bureaucratic wrangling and the misuse of government funds — all of these tawdry practices continued after the "triple disasters" without too much disruption.

There were some grounds for optimism that political change might be possible, given the considerable growth in civil society activism in response to the disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. Anti-nuclear protests surged in the summer of 2012 following the restart of two reactors at the Oi nuclear power plant.

This led some hopeful pundits to propose that it might even be the beginnings of a Japanese version of the "Arab Spring," in which large protests and active civil society movements could bring about a major political opening. Half a year later such suggestions now seem excessively optimistic. A notable feature of the Dec. 16 Lower House election results is that the strong anti-nuclear sentiment present in Japanese civil society did not translate into influence at the polls.

Indeed, quite the opposite occurred: The Liberal Democratic Party, the party most closely aligned with the "nuclear village," was returned to power with a considerable majority. Moreover, it is not a "different" LDP, but essentially the same cast of characters, with a set of ideas similar to the ones dispensed only three years ago.

There is little evidence that the LDP is much better equipped than the

Democratic Party of Japan to tackle the serious political, economic and social challenges that the country faces.

Many commentators have correctly observed that the election results were determined more by the voting public seeking to punish the DPJ rather than by a strong endorsement of the LDP.

In an Asahi Shimbun survey 81 percent of respondents answered that the LDP's victory was because of "disappointment with the DPJ government," compared with only 7 percent that thought it was due to "support for the LDP's policies."

Even LDP leader and new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has expressed an awareness of the limited mandate his government has received. This is certainly true, but focusing on the fortunes of the various parties misses a significant underlying message: On a more basic level, the elections were a major rebuke to Japan's entire political class.

Here the most telling statistic is voter turnout: At 59.3 percent it was the lowest in Japan's postwar history. Considering it was the first election after the 3/11 "triple disasters" and that it came at a time when there are heightened concerns over Japan's economy, as well as raised tensions with neighbors in East Asia, there

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- ☐ **More family-friendly work initiatives to keep women in the workforce.**
- ☐ **Serious progress with post-tsunami reconstruction in Tohoku.**
- ☐ **Monetary policy that keeps the yen at a healthy exchange level.**
- ☐ **The aggressive pursuit of alternative energy sources.**
- ☐ **Diplomatic strategies that ease tensions with Asian neighbors.**
- ☐ **The settlement of the Futenma issue.**

Total Votes : 733

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were many reasons for people to vote.

The small turnout cannot simply be dismissed as voter apathy. Notably there was a 10 percent drop from the 2009 elections. This suggests something deeper: a growing sense of frustration and alienation among the Japanese public toward those tasked with ruling them. This may be expected given the small-minded behavior of many of their politicians, but such a state of affairs is deeply problematic for Japan's democracy in the long run.

The distance between the politicians and the public could be seen in the way issues related to 3/11 were dealt with during the election. Much was made by candidates of the suffering of those displaced by the tsunami and nuclear disaster, but among the victims. There was a pervasive sense that their plight was being used more for political gain.

Ryohei Endo, who was forced to leave his hometown in Fukushima and is now living in temporary accommodations, expressed this sentiment: "I wonder how concerned [the candidates] are about people leading miserable lives like us? ... I assume they want to be Diet members for their own sake in the end."

A cleanup worker at Fukushima also voiced skepticism: "I doubt any politician is giving serious thought to how to bring the crisis under control. It seems the political parties' call for a move away from nuclear power is intended only to attract votes."

Another displaced Fukushima resident, Takako Kuroki, summed up this divide between those affected and those tasked with improving their situation: "They have no idea how much we are suffering."

The poor handling of the crisis in Fukushima and the slow progress in rebuilding from the tsunami are not just problems in and of themselves. These failings are a microcosm of the more general malaise that has come to define Japanese democracy.

If a massive natural disaster and the world's second-worst nuclear accident have not been enough to spur the country's politicians into action, it is hardly surprising that the public is losing faith in them. This situation is deeply corrosive for Japan's democracy in the long term.

Elections are moments that can demonstrate the health of a democracy, and it is important that we carefully reflect on what these results tell us about the state of Japan's democracy.

One immediate conclusion is that this election should be a wakeup call for Japan's politicians to address the growing gap between themselves and the Japanese people.

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