

Who is Naoto Kan (菅直人) ?

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Mr Naoto Kan was born in Ube (宇部) in Yamaguchi Prefecture (山口県) on 10 October 1946. (He's just turned 64.) Yamaguchi Prefecture used to be the Chooshuu-han (長州藩) which was one of the main forces which toppled the Tokugawa Shogunate. Hence, it's no surprise if we find a certain progressive characteristic in Naoto Kan, inheriting radical and innovative ideas. His father, Toshio, is an engineer in a private company and was working in Ube.

Naoto Kan attended local public schools from primary to senior high school, but in 1963 his father was transferred to Tokyo and the whole family moved with him. Kan transferred to Oyamada High School (小山台高校), which was one of the top public schools in Tokyo. He graduated from that School in March 1965 and entered the Faculty of Science in the Tokyo Institute of Technology, majoring in Applied Physics (東京工業大学理学部応用物理学科).

It was an era when radical student movements were at their height and the TIT was no exception. Naoto Kan was active in organising a student group called "University Reform Promotion Organisation (全学改革推進会議)", but he didn't join any established left-wing student bodies nor did he support right-wing student factions supporting the university establishment.

In March 1970, he graduated from the TIT and studied in order to pass the national qualification examination to become a Patent Attorney (弁理士). He had been trying to pass this examination since his university days and obtained a certified qualification in 1971 at his 4th attempt. However, he was not seriously thinking of pursuing a career in this profession. He was more interested in actively taking part in grass-root political movements and organised a group called the Citizen's Association (市民の会). The Citizen's Association stood for 'clean elections' and refused to use either big organisations such as labour unions or business enterprises or 'unaccounted money' and took an 'anti-money politics' stance.

In 1974, he took up the task of manager of the election campaign for the octogenarian Ms Fusae Ichikawa (市川房枝) – a women's suffrage leader. She ran in the 1974 Upper House election with the support of the Citizen's Association. Ichikawa was reluctant at the beginning, but Kan's enthusiasm persuaded her to run and she was placed second with close to 2 million votes in the 100-member National Constituency. The system of election to both houses of the Diet (Japanese Parliament) was different from what it is today.

The Citizen's Association became convinced that it needed its own representative in the national Diet to fight against corrupt practices and 'money politics'. Naoto Kan

decided to run in the 1976 Lower House election with a slogan “better life for the citizen (より良い市民生活)” and “citizen participation (市民参加) in politics”, but did not get elected. He tried again for the 1977 Upper House election and for the 1979 Lower House election, but failed to get elected on both occasions. (He came to visit the ANU between those two elections in 1978.)

In the meantime, he joined the Socialist Citizen’s League (社会市民連合) led by Saburoo Eda (江田三郎), who had left the Japan Socialist Party (日本社会党) as a result of in-fighting between different factions within the Party. This group was renamed the Socialist Democratic League (社会民主連合) in 1978 and Naoto Kan remained a member.

In 1980, he successfully ran for the Lower House election with a top position in his constituency and became a Diet member for the first time. Professor Purnendra Jain of Adelaide University succinctly analysed his success as being based on the following three factors:

- One was that more and more people began to favour younger representatives with a clean image, especially in the metropolitan suburbs. Kan, at 33, was quite young compared with the average age of Diet members which then stood at well over fifty.
- Second, the road to political offices was not only through the established political parties as a new political culture was emerging in Japan, represented by Kan and his group whose political activities were based in civic groups and volunteers.
- Third, Kan’s election campaigning style differed significantly from the traditional election campaigning...”

However, Kan himself talked about the reason for his own success in an interview in the book 「菅直人 市民運動から政治闘争へ」. He said that (1) the three failed attempts before played a pre-election campaign role and so his name was well-known by the polling day and (2) the voting percentage rose by 10% compared to the previous election (partly because it was in a way a ‘mourning’ election at a sudden death of the Prime Minister, Masayoshi Ohira during the election campaign) and that increased portion all voted for Kan according to an opinion poll by Mainichi Shimbun immediately after the election.

In 1993, Kan was elected for the fifth time in a row in the Lower House election. He joined the Coalition Government of the New Party Sakigake (新党さきがけ) and the Japan New Party (日本新党) and was appointed as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Lower House. In 1994, Kan joined the New Party Sakigake and soon assumed a role of the Chair in Policy Investigation Committee. He was a key person in policy making in the Coalition Government of the Liberal Democratic Party, Japan Socialist Party and New Party Sakigake.

In January 1996, he was appointed Minister for Health and Welfare in the Hashimoto Cabinet. During his portfolio, he became prominent as a pro-active Minister who was trying to solve many 'unresolved issues' that the Ministry of Health and Welfare has been putting off for many years. One of his achievements was a thorough investigation of the issue of the HIV-tainted blood scandal (薬害エイズ事件) and for the first time in the Ministry's history he apologised to the victims as Minister for Health and Welfare.

The Japanese HIV-tainted blood scandal refers to an event in the 1980s when between one and two thousand haemophilia patients in Japan contracted HIV via tainted blood products. Controversy centred on the continued use of non-heat-treated blood products after the development of heat-treatments that prevent the spread of infection. Some high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Health and Welfare, executives of the manufacture company and a leading doctor in the field of haemophilia study were charged with involuntary manslaughter.

In September of the same year (1996), he established the old Democratic Party with Yukio Hatoyama and others and became the Leader of the Party. In April 1998, the Democratic Party absorbed the Good Government Party (民政党) led by Tsutomu Hata and New Fraternity Party (新党友愛) mainly consisting of the former Democratic Socialist Party (民社党) and Kan again became the leader of the newly enlarged party. In September 1999, he became the Chair in the Policy Investigation Committee of the Democratic Party. In September 2000, Kan was appointed as the Secretary-General of the Democratic Party.

Between December 2002 and May 2004, he was the Leader of the Democratic Party. In September 2003, the Democratic Party merged with the Liberal Party (自由党) led by Ichiro Ozawa and became a new Democratic Party. In November 2003, the Democratic Party gained a large number of seats in the Diet under the Leadership of Kan and an optimistic hope was felt that a change of the government was within reach.

In September 2005, Kan was elected for the 9th time in a Lower House election, but the Democratic Party experienced a landslide defeat due to the so-called Koizumi fever. In April 2006, Kan became Acting Leader of the Democratic Party, supporting the Leader, Ozawa, and the Secretary-General, Hatoyama. In July 2007, the Democratic Party recorded a landslide victory in the Upper House election and the Government Party (LDP) lost its majority in the House.

In August 2009, Kan was elected for the 10th time in a Lower House election. The Democratic Party recorded an unprecedented victory and brought about a change of government. In September, he became Deputy Prime Minister in the Hatoyama Cabinet and assumed the portfolios of National Strategy, Economic and Fiscal Policy and Science and Technology Policy.

In January 2010, he became Minister for Finance while retaining the Deputy Prime Ministership and the Economic and Fiscal Policy portfolio. In June 2010, he became the 94th Prime Minister of Japan after the resignation of Hatoyama. On 14 September

2010, he defeated Ichiro Ozawa in the Democratic Party Leader election. On 17 September 2010, the reshuffled Kan Cabinet started work.