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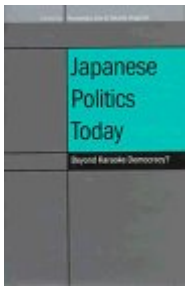

Purnendra Jain, Takashi Inoguchi, eds.. *Japanese Politics Today: Beyond Karaoke Democracy?.* New York and Melbourne: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 248 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-17394-4.

Reviewed by Andrew DeWit

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"Karaoke democracy" is how the Yomiuri newspaper describes the factional recycling of cabinet posts during the protracted reign of the LDP. As used in this book, the term applies more generally to the image of Japanese politics as routinized and rather less than representative--a "democracy-lite," if you will. However, the overall thesis of the book's chapters is that the image needs updating, especially in the wake of Japan's historic shift to coalition governments at the national level.

Designed perhaps in part with the classroom market in mind, the book's 13 chapters cover the basics of postwar party politics, local politics, the legislative process, the bureaucracy, and such policy areas as tax reform, labour, agriculture, and so forth. But this is by no means a dull textbook. Several of the chapters are written by deservedly well-known scholars in Japanology, including the editors themselves as well as Junko Kato, Minoru Nakano, Steven Reed, and J.A.A. Stockwin. Their contributions provide a solid background for understanding Japanese politics' current era of transition, but also offer original insights and arguments concerning what has been, and is likely to be, going on (but this being an e-mail review, where the key to being read is brevity, I will review only a few chapters).

Purnendra Jain's chapter gives the reader a useful primer on Japanese party politics. For example, sketching the order that gradually emerged in the aftermath of the Pacific War and tracing it up to the present, giving special attention to the period after the LDP's fall from electoral grace in 1993. He situates the current party maneuvring amidst changing domestic institutions and the shifting external context in the wake of the Cold War. His concluding section suggests, in line with most arguments on the issue, that over the long haul Japanese politics will come to centre on two major as well as several minor parties, and be more concerned with policy issues as opposed to the longstanding focus on pork.

Nakano, who has an impressive record of publications on policymaking in Japan, provides a satisfyingly detailed discussion of "the changing legislative process in the transition period." In his view, coalition governments from 1993 to 1995 were largely unable to reform a legislative process that relies heavily on influential individu-

als. He presents two case studies--legislation for the welfare tax and the reform of semi-government offices (tokushu houjin)--that illustrate problem areas in Japanese politics, including continuities from the era of LDP one-party dominance. But he also argues that under coalition governments, including those centred on the LDP, the roles of power-brokers (jitsuryokusha), policy tribes (zoku giin), and bureaucrats have declined. The reasons for these changes include politicians' deliberate efforts to reduce bureaucratic involvement in Diet politics, the proliferation of decision-making channels, increased public criticism of closed-door politics, and the gradual disappearance of individuals with the talents and experience required for manipulating the parties and the bureaucrats.

In Nakano's view, the LDP's Policy Affairs Research Council has reemerged as the real locus of decision-making. But he offers a strong warning concerning the potential for a return to collusive deal-making among zoku, bureaucrats, and special interests. This seems prescient, as zoku-style politics appears to be a major reason why Japan's latest and truly massive fiscal stimulus is top-heavy with outmoded, cement-intensive public works rather than the communications infrastructures that many believe would provide more lasting benefits to the economy. Moreover, a very recent bit of sleaze saw bureaucrats admit that they advised LDP members in advance concerning public works projects in their new single-seat constituencies. Nakano is thus quite correct in concluding that the current period poses numerous challenges, especially in regulatory and redistributive areas, with which the legislative regime and leadership appear ill-equipped to cope.

Through a user-friendly statistical analysis of the 1976, 1983 and 1990 booms in voter support for non-LDP candidates, Reed addresses the question of whether Japan is not quite fully democratic. His analysis of urban and rural voting outcomes suggests that the crucial variable was the attractiveness of the non-LDP candidates. In other words, from 1976 on, voters were prepared to dump the LDP, but persuading them to do so depended on there being a credible opposition. That became avaialable in 1993, especially at the rural level, and now we are all watching the often ironic but always interesting aftermath.

Moreover, that it took the 17 years between 1976 and 1993 to drive the LDP from office does not, Reed argues, demonstrate the oft-alleged weakness of Japanese democracy. In his view, "it is difficult to come up with concrete examples of democracy working more quickly in any other country." Readers might want to quibble with that claim, referring to such examples as Canadian voters' heartwarmingly harsh rebuke of the dissolute federal Conservatives, but a comparative debate is precisely what Reed aims to provoke. He favours a shift away from the unrealistic absolutes often applied to Japan and towards more "dynamic models of democracy as messages sent by the electorate, and messages received (or not received) by the parties and candidates."

Junko Kato's chapter on tax policymaking focuses on the 1994 decision to increase the consumption tax rate to 5 percent (which occured on April 1, 1997, and help bludgeon Japan into a real recession). Her contribution is a most welcome one, not least because domestic and external pressures are driving the country towards what are likely to be grossly inequitable "deforms" of its fiscal system. Kato's focus is on the degree of influence wielded by bureaucrats, especially MOF, vis-a-vis politicians, and concludes that MOF lost power under coalition governments because it lost much access to incumbent politicians' support for its favoured policy options.

This point of view underscores the fact that MOF was not free to act alone in tax policymaking, even when the ragbag reformists were in power. But the close watch on MOF unduly limits the terrain of argument, as MOF is not the only bureaucratic actor in tax policymaking. Kato al-

ludes as much in her discussion of MOF's opposition to the local consumption tax, yet fails to note that the local consumption tax was not pushed onto the agenda by politicians, but is instead the product of a well-orchestrated campaign by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Indeed, MOF has also been contending, for several years, with an equally aggressive challenge from the same ministry on how to apportion impending cuts in the complex of taxes on corporate income. In other words, the zero-sum calculus of the "politicians versus bureaucrats" approach overlooks inter-agency turf wars over taxes. These are rife in Japan due both to its vast and formally centralized intergovernmental fiscal regime and the fact that the regime is in crisis.

Beyond content-related issues per se, other criticisms that could be made of the book include a few spots where the syntax needed closer editing. But "Japanese Politics Today" is certainly worth having, particularly now that the twists and turns--as well as the policy immobilism--of Japanese politics hold such enormous importance for the politico-economic stability of the Asian region, if not the globe itself.

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