

INSTITUTE OF ASIAN STUDIES



Interviews

Prof. David Green





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Thank you for having us Prof. Green. Could you please describe for our readers the contemporary landscape in Japanese politics, and its political parties?

Yes, I would be glad to. Perhaps, as a way of background first, Japan has a parliamentary, multiparty system with a bicameral legislature consisting of two houses, namely the House of Councilors and House of Representatives. In terms of the political landscape, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is by far the most dominant force in Japanese party politics. It has mostly been a single party rule for much of Japan's modern history since the WWII, with the LDP as a governing party since 1950s. There were few instances where that has changed slightly, in 1993 for example, where an eight party coalition upset LDP and again in 2009, where the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power briefly. Aside from these two periods, it has always been the Liberal Democratic party. In addition to them, there is what's called the New Komeitō, which is another political party. They have been ruling in coalition with the LDP since 1999. Komeitō is center right much like the LDP, but with more of a religious background. It is organized by the Soka Gakkai, which is a Buddhist organization with their own ideology, different from the LDP. But for the most part they have been in tandem with one another for the last decade.

At the moment there is really not any strong opposition to LDP. The DPJ, which was in power in 2009, is currently the largest opposition party, but they are in the definite minority. You have a few other parties, for example socialist and communist parties who have some representation in the Diet as well but not very strong. There are also more far right parties, who tend to be along the same lines as the LDP, since the LDP is center right they do not disagree too much.

To flash it out more, the LDP, in Japanese Jimintō, is now in power with its Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It is the party that is by far the best funded too. Their ideology is interestingly very vague, which I think is something unique to Japanese politics. The LDP can be for pretty

much anything, it is what you might call a catch-all party. In the US or in Europe, you often find parties with a very specific ideological platform, which is generally where they channel their support from. But here that is not the case at all. The DPJ and LDP have ideologies that are almost interchangeable. One is center right and the other center left but beyond that there is a very minor difference. Many members of the DPJ are actually LDP defectors. There is a lot of overlap between the two parties. Because the LDP is so dominant and large, it acts as a sort of a de facto political system in its self. There are different factions within the LDP, which are more conservative, more liberal and you have a vying for power within the LDP among them, which creates something close to a political system of its own.

The DPJ, or Minshutō, is the largest opposition party. It has also a very weak ideological platform and it is not particularly clear where they stand. They are against the revision of Article 9 for example but beyond that it is pretty general. Among the smaller parties are for example the Innovation Party, Ishintō, which is the further right. More rightwing than the LDP. It was founded by the former mayor of Osaka Tōru Hashimoto, who previously lead the Japan Restoration Party, Nippon Ishin no Kai. There is also the Communist Party, the Kiosantō, which is actually the oldest party in Japan. They are more socialist than communist though. They have a steady presence in Parliament, always a very minor presence but it has actually grown recently. Mainly out of disgust for all the other parties, which is I think why people are voting for the Communists lately. There are also some minor parties, as for example the People's Life Party, Seikatsunotō, which is Ozawa Ichiro's most recent party. He was formerly a member of the LDP, and later DPJ himself and he has a lot of hands in Japanese politics. He has been called by some the "Shadow Shogun" due to his back-room influence. But these parties, similarly to the socialist parties and other hard right parties have for the most part a couple of seats in the Diet at best. Japanese politics generally speaking it is the LDP, DPJ, Komeitō, the Innovation Party and to a lesser degree Communists.

When it comes to the LDP do you still perceive it as factionalized? Some have argued that the character of the party has changed since PM Abe came to power.

Well not any more, in the past you had a lot of movement on part of the LDP, PMs had to shore up support within their own factions, because you always had rival ministerial candidates from different factions who could take power. Even though there was a lot of LDP rule, almost uninterrupted, there were PMs serving for maybe two years, or even less during the time. But now for whatever reason there is not any strong opposition in place inside the LDP itself too, not only in party politics. In my opinion that is only a temporary thing. Abe will of course eventually have to step down and people, factions, will come up again. The longest serving previous PM was Junichirō Koizumi, who governed for five years continuously. He stepped down just after five years because that was the norm at the time. He could have gone on had he so chosen. It will be interesting therefore, to see whether if Abe makes it that long, will indeed step down or if he is going to try to continue governing. There theoretically is no limit to office terms for a PM and at this point it looks he could be able to continue if he wanted to.

What should we expect from the upcoming Upper House elections next summer, after this rather tumultuous year in Japanese politics?

As I was saying before, I don't really see much opposition within the LPD or outside of it in which case I do not expect too much from the election coming up. It is interesting because Abe keeps saying that he is not ruling out the possibility of calling snap election around the time of the House of Representatives election too, and have double elections, but I really do not see any advantage to that. What could Abe possibly gain? If there is no viable opposition, you have two thirds in the Lower House, almost two thirds in the Upper House, why would you even risk it? If there was another faction for example, that would be causing some rivalry to his own power within the party, then it could make sense to try and shore up his support but that is not even the case now. He is still toying with the idea though for some reason which I do not entirely understand why. But in terms of the election, since there is no major opposition I do not expect any change, unless there is a major gaffe on part of the LDP. If they were to mess up, or unfavorable report would come up, or if the economy suddenly tanks, then you could most definitely see it ricochet to elections, but if things continue along the same path, I would not expect anything major to happen. Most people are relatively uninterested in the Upper House anyway. So you will probably get mostly the old people voting, generally conservative, which you already have.

So you do not expect even the controversy around the security legislation to play its part in the election?

At this point I have not really seen it. Of course there was a lot of controversy when the interpretation was actually being implemented, and the Diet had to vote on the security legislation, but it does not seem like the opposition has been sustained. If you have movements against the party in power, they are often galvanized by leaders, people who are able to act as a focal point and coalesce other people and general public around them. But that has been missing in the protests there. You do have a lot of people who are dissatisfied or disaffected with the system but they do not have anyone to channel their dissatisfaction through right now. And so if you do not have any opposition in place, it is not possible to really bring the change to the system you hear people talking about. You can protest maybe, but that is not going to affect the election results. The Communists might gain a couple more seats but I do not see anything much beyond that.

Tying in with the last question, how would you assess the SEALDs movement and other popular protests in Japan recently, even with former PMs taking the streets in case of the nuclear restart protest for example?

Yes, there were this time also former PMs protesting in the streets. When it comes to the nuclear protests, or both really, in my impression, they are almost unprecedented in Japan. You have not seen something similar since 1960s. There have been smaller flair ups here and there intermittently, as when Narita airport was being built, there were a lot of protests right around that area but that was more of a reminiscence of the 60s counterculture than anything else. Since then however, there has been nothing and it is interesting to see it reasserting now. What is new is that the protest seems to be very youth driven, which is not a bad thing necessarily but I wonder how effective they will ultimately be. Again I have the impression that it is not sustained. I would be surprised if they will be able to gather the kind of support they had in the

summer again. I could be wrong of course and that would be very interesting if they are able to achieve it, but at that time you had a pressing issue whereas SEALDs could define themselves against, now that it is already over and done with people are moving on and it is not quite that urgent as it was. Maybe if Abe attempts to reignite the constitutional interpretation issue, actually passing an amendment to the Constitution for example than you could get a large opposition against it again. But in the current situation if it just stays as it is then I don't think it is going to be able to get the same level of support it once had and you can see Abe's approval rates rising again already, from the dive they experienced in the immediate aftermath after the security legislation. I think people are going to just move on and ignore it until and if it becomes a pressing issue again. The same more or less goes for the nuclear protests, which you see flair up periodically and there were a lot right around the Fukushima time of course, but it seems they are less frequent now. People are generally against the restart of the nuclear reactors but it is currently not a pressing issue and both of the issues really are much more of reactive initiatives.

There has been now a recent state of unconstitutionality of the election decision, was there any change in the election scheme that we should expect to affect the election?

There could be, but I have not really heard any specifics about changes right now. After the elections got ruled unconstitutional, or in a "state of unconstitutionality" for a several times in a row, the Abe administration said reconciliatory that they will try to make them constitutional but I haven't heard anything beyond that, or how that is actually going to change. What it has to do with is representability of the National Diet, which is the legislature in Japan. You still have the rural prefectures disproportionately represented in the voting scheme. They have ultimately more voting power than urban areas which favors the LDP, whose supporters are typically older and more rural, as it often happens with conservative parties. I am not sure if there will be an independent council administering any electoral changes or how that pledge for reform is going to materialize but it will be interesting for me to see that as well. However, often a lot of these things seem to be done behind closed doors, when changes are proposed without much public deliberation and then of course you might expect problems recur as we have seen with the decision of the Supreme Court on elections for both houses really, coming consecutively every year since 2011.

You focus in your research, other than on politics, also on immigration politics and policies. How do you assess immigration policies of Japan? Perhaps from a comparative perspective too, either compared to countries here in Asia or globally?

Generally speaking, Japan is considered to be a closed country to immigration and the immigrant population here is small. Nowhere else around the developed world there actually is that small foreign population as in Japan. At the same time, the naturalization procedures to become a Japanese citizen are fairly strict. They follow the jus sanguinis principle, that is the citizenship by blood rather than birth. What you get then is the sort of a colonial legacy where you have here people of Korean heritage who are the fourth or fifth generation now, but they still remain Korean citizens. Their parents, grandparents, even their grand grandparents were all born and raised in Japan, completely enculturated here, but they are still Korean nationals,

which is something that is completely unique to Japan. European countries that employ similar kind of citizenship principles have successfully incorporated people of foreign nationalities going that back. Although this issue should not be overly flattened, because there actually is a fast-track naturalization procedure, which would apply in these cases, if one went for it.

Japan's historical and geographical isolation plays a role in that. You have here a perception of homogeneity and a very small foreign population which is currently around 2 percent of the total population. Obviously when it comes to the EU, or the US, or Canada, there is not really even much comparison. They all have much higher immigration rates, they are more open to immigration, and are considered to be doing much more in terms of servicing their foreign populations, having multicultural and multilingual environment. Countries in the immediate region of Asia are considered to be somewhat more progressive in terms of immigration as well. South Korea is probably the largest comparison, rather than the closet comparison to Japan and they have actually recruited foreign workers much more actively and are definitely more upfront about it compared to Japan. Korea has nominally a smaller foreign population compared to Japan but there is a smaller population in Korea as well. They have a larger proportion of skilled workers and are considered to be a bit friendlier to immigrants there.

That said Japan is not all bad about immigration, immigration is something that is really necessary for the country. Japan has one of the world's most rapidly ageing population. This is not something unique to Japan, most developed European countries also have ageing populations and the government feels something needs to be done about that. The fertility rates are low and the immigration is seen by many as a way to address this problem at least to some degree. You have therefore government policies that are aiming to promote immigration not directly, but sort of indirectly. Immigration in Japan like in many places is generally unpopular. If you ask Japanese if they are for or against immigration, most likely they are against it and the government knows this. It avoids an overt guest worker program because it just would be extremely unpopular. Every administration had recognized that. Japanese governments have never opened an official guest program. It was rather always the so called "side door" entry for foreign workers as a matter of fact, which is in my opinion expanding.

Rather than opening doors for foreign workers directly the government is really aggressively recruiting students. In Japan students can work legally part-time during their academic year and then fulltime during vacation period. What happens too is that a blind is turned to students who work in addition to whatever they are legally supposed to be doing. Students are actually an important source of labor in Japan, in many countries as well, but especially in Japan. They usually work in convenient stores or restaurants. Government is this way able to fill labor shortages on market, when it comes to types of labor that would not necessarily be attractive to native Japanese themselves. Another side entry that has been common are internships and trainee programs, which are often very targeted and specific. For example, a call for Indonesian seafood industry workers, or Philippines health care workers who come under the auspices of learning new techniques but still provide labor. They often have a host organization for which they work for a certain time, this is not an official work program but it has the net result of bringing foreigners to provide work in the country. Government has been also more actively recruiting skilled workers through visa implemented for highly skilled foreign professional in 2012 for example, specifically tailored for that purpose.

The conventional wisdom is that as the society continues to age and especially with the Olympics coming up as a millstone event, there is even greater need for unskilled manual labor that the native population does not want to do. You therefore have even greater pressure now for increased immigration to take up some of that slack and the foreign population will most likely increase in the upcoming years. When it comes to integration of the workers that come to Japan however, that is a whole separate issue. There is still not a huge amount of work going into integrating foreign populations in Japan, but since it does not have a long history of immigration they have to build a lot of these schemes from the ground up. This all started in the 1990s. In 1990 there was a revision to the Immigration Control and Refugee Act, which was the main immigration policy, still is and that brought in a lot of Brazilian workers of Japanese heritage as another way of a side door entry. The idea was that people of Japanese heritage up to third generation could receive an entry and work permission in Japan. It was not an official work program, rather a program aimed at cultural learning but it happened as a matter of fact that those who came, were able to stay indefinitely and given a permission to work. You have a lot of people from Brazil and Peru and other Latin American countries, whose ancestors came to those places, who are now able to live and work in Japan. This population increased quite a bit.

Ultimately however, the foreigners' treatment has been much more at the discretion of the local governments than national government driven. In some places they are more inclusive, and offer a multilingual guidance at city halls for example, or disaster preparedness information in different languages, various levels of assistance or incorporation, some cities have what they call representative assemblies of foreign residents, who meet and deliberate and give recommendations to city governments. Some municipalities, as for example Nagoya city and Aichi prefecture both have Japanese language courses for foreigners and, you also have private ones as Nagoya University and other universities that do the same. There are also community organizations that offer language courses for free or very little to pay. You do have, at local level, policies that try to help foreign population to integrate. But there has not been too much movement at the national level yet, as for example a nationalized curriculum for Japanese language learners employed by the Ministry of Education. The system is rather a patchwork of private and local initiatives, dependent on what local governments want and how much are they willing to give. National government has not addressed the issue of integration of foreigner and there is also discrimination. It is for example not illegal to discriminate in Japan. A landlord could refuse to rent property to a foreigner and foreigners could have difficulty finding rents for example.

Is Japan experiencing any increased influx of migrant workers, or refugees now?

The short answer is not at all. I guarantee you however many refugees your country took, Japan took less.¹ I do not know whether you have heard the statistics but in 2014 there were 5000 people who applied for asylum or a refugee status in Japan. Of those eleven received it. I am not familiar with the eleven who actually got it but I would be really curious what they had to do in order to be approved. That seems like a really high bar to pass. The refugee issue is one of the areas where Japan, from an international perspective, very much wants to be considered a so called "normal" country. They want to have equal status at the table in

international negotiations, security related issues and all that but then when you look at it, refugee issue is one of the things where Japan is definitely not a normal country. There is some history of receiving refugees in Japan particularly from Vietnam in the 70s or 80s but it has not really done much since that time. And as far as I am aware it has not recorded any uptick either given the refugees crisis and the issues going on with the middle east. It seems like the most of the refugees tend to go toward Europe. Japan has been able to avoid the issue till now and some people are critical of Japan on that and perhaps rightfully so.

How do you assess the ease of engaging in an employment market and society in Japan as a foreigner?

This is going to be a long answer probably. It is easy to stay in Japan, once you are given working visa for example. Most of the people who come to Japan to work, if there is some kind of working visa or people of Japanese heritage from Latin America primarily, in either of those instances it is pretty easy stay on provided that you pay your bills, do not commit any crimes, and pay taxes. In most cases you can get permanent residence within 10 years or less, depending on the visa category but until that time you can extend your visa and it is not particularly problematic doing so. Some countries are stricter in that regard. In some cases, they have for example schemes as coworker visa permits, as it is in Singapore or Korea where it is 2-3 years and you are out. You can come back again, but you have to leave and apply from abroad and wait for all the documents to process before reentering. Japan is not strict in this regard, which acts again as a de facto way of promoting permanent residence and trying to increase foreign population without actually upfront saying so. Once you are already here and can contribute something to the economy, the government is willing to keep you.

In terms of employment opportunities for foreigners, I think there is a direct relationship between the level of proficiency and the opportunities you have. If you are a foreigner of Korean descent living in Japan, you are probably fine for the most part, although you may have some trouble going through the Japanese shushoku katsudo if you have Korean name, which is the Japanese employment after universities. Most Japanese students do job hunting when they are junior in college, in their third or fourth year of university. They get hired for right when they leave university so they have their path set and historically it has been difficult for Korean nationals even if they are enculturated to Japan to go through this process. But essentially, for a Korean national if you speak the language you can go through the Japanese rout, which is relatively unique here. For someone like you or I who does not have native level Japanese proficiency it can be more difficult. If you are in a specialized field as for example me, where I can speak in my native language while I do my job and most Japanese people are not able to do that, then you are better off. But if that is not the case and you have low Japanese language proficiency, then you have more limited options. That said there is still a very strong demand for manual labor and people who do not necessarily speak Japanese can get employed if they do not mind working in a factory, construction work, working in a convenient store with only basic Japanese.

What benefits do foreigners enjoy or lack for that matter compared to domestic workers, or generally living in Japan?

Foreigners are for example not prohibited from participating in political activities locally. Meaning that it is at the discretion of municipalities or cities whether or not they want to allow foreign residents to vote, say, in a public referendum. But at the national level, the government has not legislated it beyond that. You could have a national government affirming all foreigners are allowed to vote locally but that has not happened.

With regards to benefits for foreign residents, this is an issue which has been moving in a positive direction generally. The government is trying to extend additional benefits, not anything beyond what Japanese citizens get for the most part, but similar to Japanese citizens. Foreigners are therefore covered under minimum wage laws, and they do in theory have the same rights available to them as Japanese nationals. They cannot work excessive hours. It is generally frowned upon and they have to be in a safe environment, although of course there are number of instances recorded when they are working in unsafe conditions. But the government tries to address this. From a policy perspective, one of the major moves forward for the government, is allowing foreigners access to pension benefits. Previously foreigners were completely ineligible to receive pension in Japan. Even though they lived and worked in Japan all their lives they would not get their pension. Currently in order to be eligible for pension in Japan you have to pay in to the system for 25 years, if you have paid in for 24 years you are ineligible. For Japanese nationals that is not a problem, however for foreign nationals it easily might be. Also, there have been slight problems with the scheme as it is now because in some instance there were cases of Korean nationals again, who would have been eligible for pension but since the pension was not counting retroactively at the time they retired, despite they worked all their lives in Japan and they should have received pension benefits under that law, they became ineligible because of the counting system. But you actually had municipalities extend local pension benefits to them instead of national pension benefits which is again a unique way of tackling the issue. Some cities paid for the benefits denied on the national level themselves.

More recently there are foreigners that would be eligible for pension and the Japanese government is in negotiation currently for what they call “pension treaties” with number of foreign governments. Where if you worked for, say, ten years in your home county and that country has a pension treaty with Japan, those ten years would count towards your 25-year pension eligibility in Japan. Most foreigners here have spent some time abroad in their working careers and although this does not apply universally, in many instances it does and it helps in getting that eligibility for pension if you are in Japan for a long period of time. You also have initiatives like unemployment assistance for foreigners, where the government has been more active in helping foreigners. There is a system that is called “Hello Work” which is for Japanese nationals, but there is a similar scheme in place for foreign nationals in Japan, which offers multilingual assistance for nonnative speakers to find work but it is typically skewed toward manual labor.

Japan does have a history or the reputation of being unfriendly towards immigration which is probably earned. It is not the friendliest of the countries, but it seems it is till much more positive than it is given credit for. Especially there is a lot of effort being taken to make Japan more livable for non-Japanese speakers. There are again at the local level education programs

for children for whom Japanese is not their native language. In European countries, or in the US this has already been in place for a while but things are being implemented in Japan now and gradually improved and disseminated. Similarly, when you live here you have to go to the city hall or the ward office and register, which might be hard if your level of Japanese is not high enough. But they often provide you with at least English speaking help, it is a fairly normal practice here especially in urban cities. I am right now at early stages of a project on local service provision in different countries, because even in my country, the US which has a long history of immigration, we do not have something like that. In the US multilingual services are often not available and for example Spanish speakers, whom there are many, can have a significantly hard time when it comes to contact with administrative agencies. This is in some ways actually easier here, which is not what you would necessarily come to expect I think.

Opinions expressed in this interview are those of the respondent and do not reflect the position of the Institute of Asian Studies.

interviewer: Šimon Drugda

[1] As was this interview about to be published, preliminary figures of applicants for asylum in Japan for 2015 became available. The total number of applications filed increased to 7,586 from 5000 applications in 2014. Japan recognized refugee status of 27 applicants. Temporary permission to reside in Japan was granted to 79 individuals. As a point of comparison, Slovakia recorded 330 applications for asylum in the same period, out of which 8 applicants were granted asylum and 99 individuals granted temporary permission to reside in the country for humanitarian reasons. Figures for 2014 were respectively, in the same order, 331/14/41 (compared, these are aggregate figures not adjusted per capita).



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