

Destroyer at work

Japan's opposition leader resigns, provoking yet more political uncertainty.



ICHIRO OZAWA has long been known as “The Destroyer”, less for his treatment of political opponents and more for his capacity to demolish his own side. As leader of the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), he was recently on track to crush the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in a general election that must be called by September.

Instead, on Monday May 11th, he bowed to public pressure and resigned as DPJ chairman. He had been a long time in going. Mr Ozawa had tried desperately to stay on as party leader after a fundraising scandal that erupted in March in which his political secretary was accused by Tokyo prosecutors of accepting some ¥35m (\$354,000) in slush money from a construction firm.

Mr Ozawa's failure to take responsibility or to show remorse did him no favours. The public, increasingly frustrated by mediocre politics, found his attempt to sweep the matter under the carpet infuriating. His behaviour seemed to typify much that is wrong with the Japanese political system.

As a result his party, rather than representing change, risked appearing to offer more of the same poor leadership that is currently provided by the government of the prime minister, Taro Aso. An opinion poll at the weekend suggested that 71% of respondents wanted Mr Ozawa to resign, more even than the 60% who want to see the back of Mr Aso's lot.

The risk for the opposition might be that the long delay in Mr Ozawa's departure leaves voters unwilling to break the grip on power long held by the LDP. Much depends on how a new opposition leader is chosen: a transparent and competitive process in which ideas are debated openly might invigorate voters; it would augur poorly for the party if its leaders instead stitch up a decision between themselves.

The DPJ is composed of factions with widely diverging interests, ranging from socialists and former bankers to pacifists and right-leaning politicians. Its party platform offers mainly platitudes about improving the economy and the plight of workers—still, such a platform is more than that offered by the LDP. Even with this handicap the opposition party would stand to gain from voters' frustration if it could field credible candidates, but few are able to boast of any governing experience.

Mr Ozawa is resigning in the hope of getting one of his own men, the secretary-general of the party, Yukio Hatoyama, into the post. The widespread assumption is that Mr Ozawa would then continue to pull the strings, with the help of his heavyweight supporters in the party. Mr Ozawa, too, would try to avoid having a party leadership election take place.

Others in the party will argue for a clean break and are likely to promote Katsuya Okada, a mild-mannered former bureaucrat who as DPJ boss in 2005 led the party to a huge electoral defeat. He knows his own mind and even spoke out publicly, albeit perhaps too late and too subtly, against Mr Ozawa's failure to disclose more about the scandal.

Mr Ozawa was always as much a liability as an asset for the DPJ. After making his name as a young, up-and-coming politician in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), he abruptly left in 1993 vowing to topple it. He then built and tore apart a handful of political parties, for which he earned his nickname. (He also helped to oust the LDP from power for a few months in 1993-94.) Mr Ozawa still retains his Diet seat and it is too soon to classify him as a man of the past.

The outcome of the party leadership will help to determine whether factional internal politics as characterises the LDP will similarly infect the DPJ. For optimists, Mr Ozawa's resignation clears the way for the DPJ to define itself and jettison the old-style of politics that Mr Ozawa embodied and which the public rejected. But to do this, the DPJ needs a form of leadership that it has so far shown itself unable to muster.

For the shape of a future government, it remains unclear whether either of the two parties is likely to win an outright majority at the election later this year. That leaves open the possibility of a grand coalition, which would deal a further blow to the idea of sharp, competitive politics in Japan.

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