

Self-destruction

Japan's ruling party should cast its most famous member, Ichiro Ozawa, into the wilderness.

NOT for nothing is Ichiro Ozawa known as "The Destroyer". Over a career spent scheming in the back rooms of Japanese politics, he has made and broken alliances, toppled governments and, with laconic disdain, treated transparency and other democratic norms as so many Western pretences. Yet his latest ploy is one of his darkest. In challenging Naoto Kan, the prime minister, as leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), he threatens to bring down Japan's third government in 12 months. Worse, he may destroy what remains of the trust that voters put in the DPJ when it ended 55 years of one-party rule last year. For the good of Japanese democracy, not to mention its own future, the DPJ must reject Mr Ozawa and all that he stands for.

If the challenger does pull off a victory in the vote on September 14th—and he may—he would take over the DPJ a mere three months after he had been forced to step down as secretary-general under the cloud of a political-funding scandal. He would also replace Mr Kan as prime minister—or, if he preferred to stay in the shadows, install a puppet leader in his place. That would be a disaster, even by the sorry standards of recent Japanese politics, in which four prime ministers have come and gone in the past four years.

Among the public and his party at large, Mr Ozawa is hugely unpopular; less than 15% of the DPJ's rank-and-file support him. He has no clear policy platform. Many may justifiably wonder whether he wants to take control of his party purely out of a desire for power, or also to keep the consequences of his murky financial dealings at bay: high office brings immunity from prosecution.

However, Mr Ozawa is not to be stopped by mere unpopularity. He excels at a form of money politics that has long plagued Japan. Running a formidable electoral machine, he provides finance and campaign management in return for the loyalty of members of parliament. Hence Mr Ozawa controls the biggest group among the DPJ's 412 members of parliament, and their vote is likely to be decisive. Never mind that voters rejected this sort of cronyism when they kicked out the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) last year. No matter that few of his faction in parliament have the gravitas even to join an effective cabinet. What counts is that many MPs are only in politics because Mr Ozawa put them there.

Be brave

Mr Ozawa's cronies may feel they have no option but to support him. But democratic politics is about choice, and all but the party's most short-sighted politicians face one. Mr Kan badly damaged the party during upper-house elections in July by stumbling into an ill-judged discussion over consumption taxes. But in refusing to make any back-room concessions to Mr Ozawa, and in seeing off Mr Ozawa's sidekick, Yukio Hatoyama, the former prime minister, he has started to earn back the public's respect. Support for his cabinet has risen sharply in the past week. The public seems happy that he has chosen to take the fight with Mr Ozawa out into the open.

Tribal politics has no place in modern Japan. The country, trapped in a 20-year economic funk, needs bold leadership, not blind loyalty. The divisions in the party have already had worrying economic repercussions: the stockmarket this week fell on fears that the government is too weak to stimulate faltering growth and stop a crippling rise in the yen. There is a growing fear that whoever wins the leadership contest will face a split party. That will put it in an even weaker position to cut deals with the opposition.

A fatal rupture need not happen if the DPJ, under Mr Kan, puts its faith not in its own discredited faction bosses, but in the opinion of ordinary voters. A year ago they kicked the LDP into the political outback. In June they left the vapid Mr Hatoyama in no doubt he should resign. The next month they dealt a sharp blow to Mr Kan. If the DPJ picks Mr Ozawa as Japan's next leader, it can expect no mercy.

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