

# Japanese Politics Today

From **Karaoke** to **Kabuki** Democracy

Edited by

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## INTRODUCTION

# FROM *KARAOKE* TO *KABUKI* DEMOCRACY: JAPANESE POLITICS TODAY

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Our 1997 book, *Japanese Politics Today: Beyond Karaoke Democracy*?<sup>1</sup> questioned the nature of contemporary Japanese politics in the closing years of the twentieth century. In this book, after a decade into the twenty-first century, we return to the political stage. We find much has changed in the structures and processes that characterized Japanese politics in the 1980s and most of the 1990s. Japanese politics has moved beyond *karaoke* democracy. The performers, their performances, and purposes have changed dramatically, with analogies that cleave closely to a very different type of Japanese drama: *kabuki*. Now we see a transition under way, from a *karaoke* style of democracy to one that we believe is well captured in the label “*kabuki* democracy.”

What is “*kabuki*” about current Japanese politics? How and why has the performance on the nation’s political landscape transformed from the *karaoke* style we observed in the late 1990s? In this introduction we provide a brief overview. The ensuing chapters provide the details.

*Kabuki* as traditional performance art has itself undergone transformation since its genesis in seventeenth-century Japan. And as with life on the national political stage, *kabuki* will always be subject to different interpretations, appreciations, and appraisals depending on the observer’s perspective. However, we see the essence of the resemblance with contemporary political life in the nature of the performance: who it reaches and how. *Kabuki* in its modern form is exciting, a show of drama and extravagance, not for the narrow elite but broadly for the *hoi polloi*. Its players perform a skillful dance to an original script that strikes a deep emotional chord with audiences. In *kabuki* democracy, political leaders bring personality and emotions to their role on the national political stage. This direct and wider engagement with the ordinary people makes national politics more interesting and vibrant.

In *karaoke* democracy, bureaucrats provided political leaders with scripts on policy statements. Leaders generally rendered those statements as their own and tried to convince voters that they deserved to be returned to power

on the basis of their ideas and policies that delivered successful outcomes. Thus, although prime ministers and cabinet ministers changed frequently in a single party-dominated system, policy directions only mildly changed, determined largely by bureaucrats who preferred incremental change to keep the national ship steady. Deep, substantive reform, no matter how much it may have augured economic, social, and political improvement for the nation, was not on the political agenda. Similar to a *karaoke* stage, the singers behind the microphone came and went but the song sheets remained unchanged.

Under *kabuki* democracy, politics becomes more interesting and colorful because political leaders seek—and bring—change to the political agenda. They have their own distinctive personal style, and consciously express their human qualities—emotions, personal preferences, and vulnerabilities—to skillfully connect with the people. In their political performances leaders are eager to have an emotional connection and to strike a deep chord with audiences. Junichiro Koizumi, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) prime minister (2001–2006), clearly captures this *kabuki* style.<sup>2</sup> In this sense Koizumi was somewhat exceptional as an LDP prime minister, moving away dramatically from the *karaoke* song sheet of policy. The three years of post-Koizumi political confusion confirmed Koizumi's style as exceptional, with a succession of three LDP leaders who metaphorically and in practice appeared to have lost the plot line. *Kabuki* style disappeared as quickly as Koizumi had swept it in; *karaoke* democracy returned to the political stage as the microphone was passed from one new prime minister to the next.

Defeat over the LDP would not come till the August 2009 general election. Trouncing of the severely weakened LDP by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) ousted the conservative party, after 38 years of unbroken rule, from parliamentary power.

Many observers expected that the defeat of the LDP at the 1993 general election would usher in a new era of politics in Japan, shifting away from *karaoke* style to one more appropriate to the popular participatory style of democracy transforming political systems in many countries.<sup>3</sup> But that hope faded quickly. The unwieldy eight-party coalition government under first Morihiro Hosokawa and then very briefly Tsutomu Hata could not endure internal division among coalition members. As a result, the LDP bounced back quickly into the ruling seat and Japan returned to business as usual: faction-based LDP politics with bureaucrat-dependant and interest-group-oriented policymaking.

Although the 1993–1994 coalition governments were short-lived, the Hosokawa government set in motion fundamental changes in the electoral system that would eventually bring competition and alternation between parties in power, ending the LDP's one-party dominance that long characterized Japan as an “uncommon democracy.”<sup>4</sup> This possibility remained elusive, though, even after a new electoral system was put in place. Partly it was because the opposition remained weak and divided following the LDP's return to government in 1994, in coalition with a number of political parties

including, briefly, its former archrival the Japan Socialist Party.<sup>5</sup> But six years later, the LDP itself was clearly in decay.

During Yoshiro Mori's prime ministership from April 2000, the LDP became the least-favored party in Japan. The party was increasingly fragile, facing the prospect of defeat at the forthcoming upper house (House of Councilors) elections in July 2001, while the opposition led by the DPJ gathered momentum.<sup>6</sup> To prevent electoral catastrophe, the LDP forfeited the traditional factional considerations and methods of selecting party president. Popular leader Junichiro Koizumi was chosen as party president and thus Japan's prime minister in April 2001. A new and maverick LDP leader, Koizumi undertook the daunting task of rescuing the party and the LDP leadership from ever more dismal electoral prospects. The national political stage was set for drama, for reengaging the deeply disillusioned constituency. Koizumi delivered, in unprecedented *kabuki* style.

Koizumi swiftly engineered a remarkable turnaround in public reception, with his own popularity soaring above an unprecedented 80 percent. He had been chosen to lead the nation without the binding ties of allegiance that had hamstrung his predecessors to factional groups within the LDP, to special interest groups, and to other LDP leaders. Koizumi was free to do as he thought best to rescue the party, govern the nation, and, importantly, reengage the people. He came as an unconventional LDP leader, at a time when LDP conventions—especially the service of entrenched interests—had manifestly led the party into political morass. Takashi Inoguchi refers us to *zeitgemaessheit*: “political leaders in harmony with the political environment of the time.”<sup>7</sup>

Koizumi used his personal skills of cultivating popularity and engaging the people so masterfully that he freed his leadership and office from the traditional constraints of party and bureaucracy. He selected cabinet members without factional consideration and locked horns with party bigwigs as occasion demanded. The source of his political strength was his direct rapport with Japanese voters, particularly through policy pronouncements and his media-savvy appearance. He could, and he did, emotionally connect with the people. In local elections in June, two months after he became prime minister, Koizumi led the party to win in key areas such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly. In the following month's upper house elections in which his party was slated for defeat, the LDP lost seats but won the election.

His personality and ability to communicate with the electorate to build support for his political convictions eclipsed the political space long dominated by factions, bureaucracy, and special interest groups. Koizumi had set the national political stage to move beyond *karaoke* democracy into the more populist and engaging style of *kabuki*. In consummate Koizumi style, the song sheets he did later choose to sing from, during a prime ministerial visit to the United States in July 2006, were none other than Elvis Presley's.<sup>8</sup> This was a classic display of the populist politics and emotional connection that Koizumi played out on the national, and sometimes international, stage.

A hard act to follow, and not simply because of his personal charismatic style, Koizumi public leadership qualities had shifted the ground on which Japanese prime ministers would exercise national leadership and the Japanese public would expect to engage with their national leader. In an era of globalization, he had pulled the nation toward the populist, participatory modes reshaping political life in countries across the globe.

As public dissatisfaction deepened with the LDP and its leaders after Koizumi's departure, and as the opposition DPJ gathered political momentum with its solid performance at the 2007 House of Councilors election, the political climate was right for a seismic shift in Japanese politics.<sup>9</sup> Here was a political environment seeking strong and popular leadership. The August 2009 general election produced a landslide victory for the DPJ and a crushing defeat for the LDP.

The DPJ under Hatoyama entered a political stage already prepared for *kabuki*-style leadership by Koizumi. Hatoyama's administration began on a high note because of its *kabuki*-style political promises of direct communication and populist outreach. Key goals resonated well with ordinary Japanese people, particularly emphasis on governance and leadership by politicians instead of dependence on bureaucrats, and pledges to cut back on unnecessary and unproductive public works projects, and to distance government from special interest groups. Public outreach included the DPJ's well-received promises of care, for those with special needs. The new government's honeymoon was, however, brief. Within months of the DPJ coming to power, media reported that not only Ichiro Ozawa, the chief party strategist and secretary general renowned for "political dealings," but also the new prime minister himself were involved in "money politics."

We contend that this style of personal, populist politics is likely to continue in Japan for some time. The advent of DPJ government replacing the LDP signals a major shift in conditions on the national political stage and within the electorate, conditions that now enable and promote the populist *kabuki* approach. National leaders' direct connections with the people make for a more engaged and participatory political system—an important component of democracy as the nation's economic, political, and social transition proceeds alongside globalization.

Today Japanese people no longer accept the cozy relationship between political leaders, bureaucracy, and big business that entrenched exclusive interests within the political system and produced the political malaise.<sup>10</sup> Public will has shifted and political players know it. Political executives and governing parties understand that intrinsic to their hold on power now is capacity to control and direct bureaucracy rather than follow policies made by bureaucrats. Instead of factional politicking, party leaders themselves are expected to take responsibility, to be accountable, and to connect directly with the people. These new protocols and expectations have excised much of the political turf on which business organizations operated, rendering *their voices* much weaker in political decision making. The steady tide of globalization appears to have reduced the role and influence of social intermediary organizations and the state itself.

Addresses to the National Diet provide insight into the evolution from *karaoke* to *kabuki* democracy.<sup>11</sup> Instead of representatives from bureaucratic agencies, business sectors, personal support organizations, and other organized groups, individual actors can now appear on center stage without the organizational and financial strength that was needed earlier. Now the requirement is to strike a chord among audiences. Oratorical excellence, rhetorical brilliance, and support mobilization are vital. In delivering a Diet speech, the presenter must now create a context in which audience members become coactors with the presenter. This can make *kabuki* democracy erratic on the Diet floor as few leaders are to make the needed emotional connection with their audience.

At this point, it is useful to consider the etymology of *kabuki*. The word “*kabuki*” derives from *kabuku*, which means “lean in a certain direction.” Some say the word is related to *katamuki*, which means “slanted” and “strongly inclined.” Both meanings refract the lens through which we can understand *kabuki* democracy.

Koizumi certainly leaned in a particular direction as prime minister and the particular policies he pushed may be regarded as slanted and strongly inclined. His controversial postal reform is a classic example. In pushing postal reform, Koizumi alienated a strong group of LDP supporters and colleagues who identified with the postal lobby group. His slant so strongly toward postal reform led to party breakaways and, some say, ultimately caused the defeat of the LDP in 2009. A similar slant can be seen within the DPJ, with its move to reduce the influence of bureaucrats in policymaking. The move receives widespread accolades for the DPJ, but the party understands that it is unwise to alienate the bureaucracy whose tradition not only reaches back to the Tokugawa period but remained untouched during the postwar Occupation period (1945–1952).<sup>12</sup>

We also see signs of lopsidedness emerging in the national political arena in areas beyond policy. One is in the parties themselves, or at least the LDP. The once invincible LDP has today become a fragile political party, rudderless and without direction. It seems to be fragmenting as senior members leave the party to form their own parties.<sup>13</sup> The party has yet to learn how to be an effective opposition. The DPJ, despite its troubles and the controversies surrounding its key leaders, remains strong and is hardly in danger of being swept out of power anytime soon. If the LDP continues to weaken and remains dysfunctional in opposition, the stage is set for a return to lopsided politics with a single dominant party (now the DPJ). However, this scenario is less than acceptable to any democratic nation in the twenty-first century.

The new political era in Japan today is leaning toward *kabuki* democracy. The transition has not yet truly lifted Japan from its long political morass, but it has moved the country a step forward into the new century. The recent move toward *kabuki* democracy is not of itself dramatic, but it indicates that voters no longer endorse the old ways of karaoke democracy. Japanese voters seek leadership that promises and delivers new political approaches and directions appropriate for today.<sup>14</sup> Even while Japanese politics has changed,

much remains the same. Ongoing change is likely as Japan's democratic system transforms itself in response to the needs of society in a rapidly evolving globalized world. This volume records both the changes and the stagnation over the past decade in a range of political structures, processes, and policies. The chapters also discuss ways forward as the nation moves further toward—then ultimately beyond—*kabuki* democracy.

Our theme is that the key feature of Japanese politics has been changing from *karaoke* to *kabuki* democracy. The political manifestation of this transition is characteristically Japanese. Yet the shift is not necessarily confined to Japan. The shift is very closely related to the changing nature of democracy worldwide. This global shift as labeled by John Keane is from representative to monitory democracy.<sup>15</sup> By representative democracy, Keane means the type whereby people's deputies are electorally selected and with people's mandate they carry out the task of government according to their understanding of people's preference. Representative democracy is sometimes called classical democracy. Whereas people give legitimacy to government through democratic election, government tries to affect positively the lives of people. By monitory democracy, Keane means the type whereby the conduct of government is watched carefully and the explanation of government conduct intermittently required. Monitory democracy is sometimes called digital democracy. Not only is government conduct digitalized for popular scrutiny but also popular feedbacks to government are digitalized in such forms as leader's popularity, ups and downs of company stocks and government bonds, and protest movements. For government to initiate and implement policy action, imaginatively crafted policy statements and a set of policy measures are required to strike a chord among people. Whereas representative democracy has intermediary institutions between government and people, monitory democracy makes it critical for government and people to interact directly and intermittently with limited interference by intermediate-level social groups. Under monitory democracy leaders are required to have a much better instinctive sense of popular preference and discomfort, to express passion and determination to match people's mood, to mobilize and move people with oratorical finesse, and to avoid faux pas, gaffes, mishaps, and so on. *Karaoke* politics is about making the best use of bureaucracy, whereas *kabuki* politics is about reducing mediation and appealing directly to the public. *Karaoke* politics is primarily about securing organized votes, whereas *kabuki* politics is primarily about securing floating votes. *Karaoke* politics is a Japanese version of representative democracy; *kabuki* politics is a Japanese version of monitory democracy. Monitory democracy is defined as the politics of mutual monitoring of government and citizens evolving around transparency and accountability. Its Japanese version is *dadamore minshushugi* (leaking democracy).<sup>16</sup>

The chapters in this book are actor oriented and fall under the above two distinctive regime environments. After this introduction, Inoguchi describes and illustrates the prime ministers—Shigeru Yoshida, Kakuei Tanaka, and Junichiro Koizumi—in three distinctive periods of Japanese politics. The shift

from *karaoke* to *kabuki* democracy is vividly illustrated. Hiroaki Inatsugu presents a fairly schematized picture of Japanese bureaucracy in terms of its size, its mission, its location in, and relation to, society, its employment, and its payment. In other words, how a small-sized bureaucracy exercises substantial influence in policymaking and legislation. However, how it metamorphoses under *kabuki* democracy remains to be seen. Kentaro Fukumoto gives a daily time-spending pattern of legislators and legislative outputs of the 1955–1993 prereform period and the 1993–2009 postreform period. Reform refers to legislative reform in 1993 governing political money and electoral system. Steven Reed describes the electoral and political reform enacted in 1994 and analyzes the electoral ups and downs of political parties under a new electoral environment. The 2009 victory of Democrats is closely analyzed in the two-party system framework. Arthur Stockwin gives a masterly story of Japanese party politics from the Occupation period through the 2009 political earthquake—victory of Democrats. Aurelia George Mulgan examines interest groups. She singles out the farm lobby, richly detailing how it exerts great influence despite a small agricultural population. Although many social intermediate organizations reduce their size and activity, they still constitute a strong wing of Japanese protectionism. Jennifer Chan portrays and analyzes civil society from the postmodern perspective, tackling citizens frontally but not in relation to the state. Rather than state-subject and state-citizen relationship perspectives, which have dominated discourses on Japanese civil society, she adopts a global citizenship perspective in her examination. Gregory Kasza and Takashi Horie examine social policy, the “issue of all the issues.” After tracing the historical evolution of social policy from the prewar period, they examine how the current predicament of social policy arose and annoys the government and people as direct participants of social policy under the policy environment of low fertility rates and rising inequalities. Purnendra Jain describes how subnational governments try to activate the policy direction they deem important: greater decentralization and political participation from the nadir of their profile. Ofer Feldman examines mass media in terms of dissemination of political information. The media is characterized as concentrated, under indirect government control, commercialized, and self-censored. Feldman focuses on how these features are changing under globalization and government deregulation. Helen Hardacre tackles constitutional revision, an issue that the long-governing LDP includes as one of the political missions in their party constitution. She focuses on the legislation of an administrative law that in her view would produce a similar effect to constitutional revision on government capacity in legislation in issues such as education and the rising of the national flag and singing of the national anthem.

Our collective hope is that readers find the volume important and interesting: important in understanding how *kabuki* democracy requires astuteness and agility; and interesting in realizing how a cleverly crafted speech moves people and changes politics overnight.

The present volume is a product of our continuing interest in, and questioning of, Japan’s contemporary political system. In our several meetings as



editors of *Japanese Politics Today: Beyond Karaoke Democracy?* we began to rethink our characterization of Japanese politics in the context of the changes reconfiguring the national political landscape, especially since the emergence of the Koizumi administration. With this in mind, we asked leading international political scientists on Japan to present their research at a Tokyo workshop in mid-2008. Since this meeting, Japanese politics has undergone further transformation through the historical shift in August 2009. Each author has revised their respective chapters in light of the changes since the Hatoyama government took office in September 2009.

## NOTES

1. Purnendra Jain and Takashi Inoguchi, eds., *Japanese Politics Today: Beyond Karaoke Democracy?* (Melbourne: Macmillan 1997).
2. Takashi Inoguchi, "Japan: The Personalisation of Politics-Koizumi and Japanese Politics," in Jean Blondel and Jean-Louis Thiébaud with Katarzyna Czernicka, Takashi Inoguchi, Ukrist Pathmanand, and Fulvio Venturino, *Political Leadership, Parties and Citizens: The Personalisation of Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 209–228.
3. Purnendra Jain, "A New Political Era in Japan: The 1993 Election," *Asian Survey*, 33, no. 11 (November 1993): 1071–1082. Takashi Inoguchi, "Japanese Politics in Transition: A Theoretical Review," *Government and Opposition*, 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 443–455; "The Rise and Fall of 'Reformist Governments': Hosokawa and Hata 1993–1994," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 2, no. 2 (December 1994): 73–88.
4. Takashi Inoguchi, "The Political Economy of Conservative Resurgence under Recession: Public Policies and Political Support in Japan, 1977–1983," in T. J. Pempel, ed., *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 189–225.
5. See Ethan Scheiner, *Democracy without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-party Dominant State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
6. Chao-Chi Lin, "How Koizumi Won," in Steven R. Reed, Kenneth Mori McElwain, and Kay Shimuzu, eds., *Political Change in Japan: Electoral Behaviour, Party Realignment and the Koizumi Reforms* (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2009), p. 112.
7. See Inoguchi, "Prime Ministers" in this volume, and Inoguchi, "Japan: the Personalisation of Politics—Koizumi and Japanese Politics," in Jean Blondel and Jean-Louis Thiébaud with Katarzyna Czernicka, Takashi Inoguchi, Ukrist Pathmanand, and Fulvio Venturino, *Political Leadership, Parties and Citizens: The Personalisation of Leadership* (London: Routledge, November 2009), pp. 209–228.
8. As reported, Koizumi "delighted the president, first lady Laura Bush and tour guides Priscilla and Lisa Marie Presley . . . With the pack of media in the room entreating him, Koizumi delivered a teasing cabaret of tunes," [http://www.elvis.com/news/full\\_story.asp?id=1050](http://www.elvis.com/news/full_story.asp?id=1050) (accessed May 18, 2010).
9. Arthur Stockwin has called it "political earthquake in Japan." See his "Political Earthquake in Japan: How Much of a Difference Will It Make?" in Purnendra Jain and Brad Williams, eds., *Japan in Decline: Fact or Fiction?* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2011).

10. See Inoguchi's characterization of the last of the three periods of Japanese politics since 1945, that is, military rule, strong economic growth, and steady globalization in Takashi. Inoguchi, "Japanese Contemporary Politics: Towards a New Interpretation," in Kay Lawson, Anatoly Kulik, and Baogang He, eds., *Political Parties and Democracy: Post-Soviet and Asian Political Parties* (New York: Praeger, 2010), pp. 173–189, 261–263.
11. See Takafumi Suzuki, "Investigating Japanese Government's Perceptions of the Postwar World as Revealed in Prime Ministers' Diet Addresses: Focusing on East-West and North-South Issues," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2009), 9, no. 2: 317–338.
12. Takashi Inoguchi, "The Pragmatic Evolution of Japanese Democratic Politics," in Michele Schmiegelow, ed., *Democracy in Asia* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), pp. 217–231; Inoguchi, "Political Parties and Democracy in Japan," in *Political Parties and Democracy*, pp. 173–189, 261–263, and Takashi Inoguchi, "Japanese Contemporary Politics: Towards a New Interpretation," in Rien Segers, ed., *A New Japan for the Twenty-First Century: An Inside Overview of Current Fundamental Changes and Problems* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 67–86.
13. For example, former health minister Yoichi Masuzoe, now heads Shinto Kaikaku, which includes five other upper house lawmakers. Other new parties include Yoshimi Watanabe's Your Party and the Sunrise Party of Japan led by former ministers Takeo Hiranuma and Kaoru Yosano.
14. Takashi Inoguchi, "Japanese Contemporary Politics: Towards a New Interpretation," in Rien Segers, ed., *A New Japan for the Twenty-First Century: An Inside Overview of Current Fundamental Changes and Problems* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 67–86.
15. John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
16. Takashi Higaki, *Dadamore minshushugi* (Leaking Democracy) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2010).