

"Ostracism" Brings Japan to Ruin

By SUGIURA Masaaki

The usual ploy of Japanese media to corner the administration by public opinion polls may bring the country to ruin, just as did Ostracism of the city-state of Athens in ancient Greece. Two prime ministers were forced to step down within a stretch of two years, and now a three-month-old administration is labeled as doomed to fail. Even though not represented in the Diet, journalism exerts a monstrous influence upon the fate of the administration in this country. I quite doubt it is the way journalism is supposed to be. Ostracism is a popular de-election system conducted in ancient Athens designed to forestall the emergence of disruptive tyrants. Voters inscribed a name of a candidate--- a potential foe for their community---on broken shards of pottery to be deposited in secrecy. If the votes reached a quorum of 6,000, that person was sent into exile for ten years. Democratic as it seemed, this system, in effect, was often abused by demagogues, who won over public support and ousted their political opponents. In some cases, eminent citizens or those who worked committedly for the good of their fellow citizens were voted out by those who were jealous of their ability. These cases are said to have accelerated the decline of Athens.

The style of onrush against the rule of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) by mass media, especially the Asahi Shimbun, has nowadays become so stereotyped as to be reminiscent of demagogues in ancient Greece. Aso administration, for example, has been bitterly criticized of its procrastinating on dissolution of the House of Representatives and lack of leadership, along with Aso's personal shortcomings such as his misreading of some Chinese characters and gaffe-proneness. Thus was the administration knocked off. These stories were carried with one-sided disparaging headlines. On the other hand, the movements of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and fringe groups within LDP are so played up as to go almost against the facts. Echoing such news reports are such TV networks as Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) and TV Asahi, and those rubbish TV hosts and telepolemicists cry down the administration loudly. And now, here comes the ostracism-like opinion poll. Under such circumstances, how could the popularity of the administration escape plummeting? And

when it does plummet, headlines would read "Lame-duck Cabinet" and the opposition parties capitalize on it, thereby throwing the Diet into confusion.

In advanced countries in the West, sharp decline in approval rating from corruption or grave political mismanagement will of course lead to the resignation of those in power. Looking back on the days I was covering the Watergate scandals in Washington D.C., the approval rating of former President Richard Nixon was down to 24 percent when he resigned. But this was not the direct cause of his resignation. He resigned because he was deadlier than a doornail in the aftermath of the revelation of the scandal. It is sheer nonsense that low ratings run politicians out of office. The New York Times and the Washington Post, in those days, never wrote of the low ratings putting the administration in its final death throes. Newspapers by right have an unwritten rule that they should not affect the fate of the administration. They should focus on describing the rights and wrongs of state of affairs, and entrust the readers with any judgments. Although the approval ratings of the Bush administration in its last days plummeted and fell below that of Nixon, no US media called for his resignation. Public opinion polls do not top the news in the first place. It is a "tradition" of Japanese newspapers from Meiji period on to educate and lead the unenlightened people, but it is by now good-for-nothing for the people with a high level of education.

Besides, the Japanese media seem to assume a principle that "he who hates Peter harms his dog." Every word and deed of a prime minister would be venomously criticized, despite the fact that whosoever would take over the administration should be hard put to tackle the "once-in-a-century" financial crisis. I am not surprised if Prime Minister Aso suffers a nervous breakdown like former Prime Minister Abe. Mr. Aso's wife said that, contrary to his daytime cheerfulness, he has suffered from insomnia for some time. He could be mentally crushed at any moment. There is no other advanced country where three prime ministers in a row are driven out of office not because of corruption nor of misrule but of media hype. The Asahi Shimbun is much to be accused of its arrogance, conspicuous in its political articles, of acting as if it were a self-fulfilling prophet. Asahi's false report of "Poll Date on Oct 26" could be attributed to this arrogance. Nevertheless, when Aso put off the election scheduled on that day, Asahi would run quite hysterically an anti-Aso campaign on the paper. What a shame....

It is quite predictable that these attitudes of the media would remain all the same even when DPJ rises to power. When it comes to the administration of Mr. Ozawa

Ichiro, for example, honeymoon period with the media would last only three months or so. "Ozawa bashing" would eventually go rampant, quibbling about his "problems" both public and private. Indeed, Ozawa has his weaknesses. The Hosokawa administration lasted no longer than 8 months. Ozawa administration is quite likely to suffer the same fate. Extremely short life span of past administrations of Japan, compared to those of Western advanced countries, should be ascribed partly to "political intervention" of the media in Japan. This trend would in the long run undermine the national power of Japan and leave it behind other countries.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. SUGIURA Masaaki, political commentator, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Seiho" of JFIR on December 24, 2008.)