

# Facing the Spectre of Permanent Opposition? A Case Study of the Japanese Parliamentary Opposition 2013-2019

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'In order for a party cabinet system to work properly, there must be confrontation between two major parties.' Yoshino Sakuzō, *Gendai no Seiji*, 1914 (quoted in Bannō, 2014: 157)

## ABSTRACT

Between 2013-2019, opposition parties in Japan have been plagued by fragmentation, electoral failure and transience. Such pathologies have left them languishing in a developmental cul-de-sac, characterized by the qualities that we equate with a 'pre-fab' type-party, which has stymied their capacity to institutionalize and project themselves as a credible government-in-waiting. At the heart of this conundrum has been a self-replicating pattern whereby: 1) the weakness of the main opposition party invites challenge; 2) challengers emerge from intra-parliamentary splits and realignments; 3) in a bid to short-circuit the process of party-building (institutionalization) new parties overly rely upon 'political celebrity' (charisma); 4) tactical cross-party electoral alliances while seen to hold potential are ultimately half-hearted; 5) the subsequent failure of 3 and 4 leave a litany of failed parties in its wake as deputies prioritize personal survival over party survival via which they start the process all over again. Such a pattern, scripted by political choice and augmented by the inherited political structures that deputies bring with them, have combined to tip the 2012-2019 oppositional story towards ephemerality rather than institutionalization. At the end of 2019, though, incipient signs of a shift beyond this developmental pattern *appear* to be unfolding.

**Key words:** Parliamentary opposition, Institutionalization, 'ephemerality', political crafting, structural factors, pre-fabricated parties

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Political scientists, especially those trained in the US tradition, confidently predicted that the reforms of the electoral process of the mid 1990s had created significant changes to the incentive structures within Japanese politics that would have an impact on both the policy making process and

party system (see for example, Rosenbluth and Theis 2010). In particular they suggested the introduction of the single member districts (SMD) would impel Japan towards the adoption of a two-party system. The electoral landscape certainly became more volatile in the twenty-first century with big swings in support behind the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2005 being followed by an almost equal and opposite avalanche of support for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009 and then back the other way in 2012. These dramatic swings could be explained as a reasonable response by the electorate to the failures of LDP and DPJ governments to deal effectively with the 'Lehman shock' of 2008/9 and the Triple Disasters of 2011. But if the evidence of the electoral results in 2005, 2009 and 2012 suggested the emergence of a two-party system, why did we not see the consolidation of the opposition in 2013 and after? Why did the opposition fail to create a plausible alternative to the LDP that is able to hold the party in power to account while in opposition and ready to take over the reins of power if and when it fails at the next political crisis? This is the puzzle that we will address in what follows.

There seems little doubt that the framers of the post-war constitution envisioned Japan as a parliamentary democracy where opposition parties would brand themselves as a 'government-in-waiting'<sup>1)</sup>. In 2012, barely three years after having been the first opposition party to take power via an election victory, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was dramatically thrown back into opposition. Its defeat would mark the beginning of an era, for the opposition camp, characterized by fragmentation, electoral failure and transience. Within the wider party politics literature, one reading of the consequences of electoral defeat is that it should be seen as a natural swing of the political pendulum i.e. an outcome where the governing party was replaced by the main opposition party. Under this scenario, the losing party would then be expected to rebuild either under a new leadership and/or a corresponding revision of the party programme (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Janda, Harmel, Edens and Goff, 1996: 189). Alternatively, if the degree of electoral failure is extensive then a party dissolution might be expected after which an

equivalent political force would be expected to take its place (Laroze, 2017).

Both readings appear to suggest a rather straightforward natural (even deterministic) self-correction. To date, however, the Japanese case has resembled neither. Between 2013-18, it looked like a chaotic mix dominated by a self-replicating pattern of ephemerality (a term drawn from Rose and Mackie 1998) that was tied to the prolonged death throes of the main opposition party. During that timeframe we can point to the rise and fall of a *mélange* of parties all seeking to position themselves in the hope of eventually inheriting the title of the main opposition party. Such pathologies have left them facing the spectre of permanent opposition. The lost political capital has yet to be recovered. Indeed, little has changed since 2013 when Eda Kenji, at the time leader of the short-lived *Yui no Tō*, was quoted as saying, ‘The current opposition camp can’t stop the LDP... and the public thinks the opposition camp is useless’ (*Japan Times*: 2013). At the end of 2019, though, that chaotic era appeared to be in transition towards a new staging post: a resolution taking place between the two main political forces – the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) that might even bring back together all centre left politicians. This will require all parties to venture beyond the developmental *cul-de-sac* associated with the previous era. How, therefore, might we explain the 2013-2019 opposition story and what might that suggest for the future?

Before developing our argument in more detail, we would like to advance a couple of brief caveats, in order to give credence to the approach we have taken. First, we would suggest that this period is quite unlike others in recent Japanese political history when the opposition seemed similarly hopelessly divided. From the late 1940s there was an expectation that the cold war parameters would push Japan towards a two-party system which seemed to have happened by 1955. However, this broke down to create a ‘1+ several’ system by 1970 which continued until the revision of the electoral system in 1994/5. That system with a majority of single member districts created structural incentives that it was expected would lead to the emergence of a two-party system. It took longer than expected but these

predictions were apparently validated by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) success in the 2009 elections. In December 2012 things fell apart and for the next six years there were no signs that there were any structural factors that were impelling Japan's party system towards a two-party or any other model. Second, much attention has been paid to Prime Minister Abe's strategies: how he has dominated the media narratives, how he has called early elections to wrong-foot the emergent opposition and his apparently effective 'Abenomics' policy package. Thus, we recognize there will be different perspectives vis-à-vis the most pertinent explanation for oppositional weakness. Nevertheless, even considering that, we intend to suggest a third-way that emphasises and accounts for the failing strategies of the opposition.

Analytically, by viewing 2012 as a critical juncture (Capoccia 2015: 173; see also Di Palma, 1990) our focus is directed towards the opportunity that party-political actors have to craft their future. Those choices (regardless of whether they are effectual or ineffectual) have a much greater independent impact in an emerging rather than established party. Such intentionalism, however, does not have total free-rein i.e. it is not being written on a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). Certain structural realities, within which actors make their choices, also have an impact on those choices. In our case, this includes the nature of the electoral system; state party-funding rules; and the inherited political structures that deputies bring with them (the *kōenkai* - personal support organizations that essentially run in parallel to the local party organization - if there is a local party organization). Therefore, we argue that scripted by political choice and augmented by certain structural realities, this pattern:

- 1) ensured the 2012-2019 oppositional story tilted towards ephemerality rather than institutionalization before the emergence of two leading oppositional forces in 2019; and
- 2) given that attempts at party building cannot escape this context, its impact on the type of party that emerges, i.e. thinly institutionalized, cannot be ignored.

To explore these issues further we will first discuss some of the relevant characteristics associated with the term ‘institutionalization’ and highlight the ways in which the Japanese case departs from this traditional picture. Section three will evidence this assertion as we trace the evolution of the 2013-2019 opposition story. Each election post-2012 witnessed a similar general pattern: a series of newly minted political formations appearing on the ballot paper for the first time against the backdrop of the on-going electoral and organizational decline of the DPJ/Democratic Party (DP) as the official opposition. Section four will highlight the impact of certain structural constraints within which party evolution has been taking place. Front and centre will be the way in which the *kōenkai* have complicated the process of party-building by easing the pathway for shifting party allegiances. We will then draw some tentative conclusions by asking whether the opposition in late 2019/early 2020 is pivoting towards a new era.

## 2.0. INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF STABILITY, DURABILITY AND LOYALTY

The key players of a parliamentary democracy are, of course, political parties. As an ideal-type, a political party is meant, *inter alia*, to nurture and socialize social identities, reflect and respond to salient political issues and represent various social values and social forces during and between elections (see, for example, Alan Ware, 1996: Chapter 3). Historically, representation has been tied, in some shape or form, to the representation of social cleavages that have a national (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) or, more recently, a transnational reach (Hooghe and Marks, 2017). In the wake of an election, while some parties enter government; others join the opposition. The purpose of a parliamentary opposition in a multi-party democracy is to keep a government in check by, for example, having a voice in, and, bringing transparency to, the legislative process and present itself as a government-in-waiting. In addition, Shapiro highlighted the normative importance of an

opposition when he stressed that 'democracy is an ideology of opposition as much as it is of government' (quoted by Helms, 2004: 22).

In order to effectively carry out their role in an oppositional or governing guise, much of the party politics literature asserts that a party needs to be: 1) institutionalized and 2) nested within an institutionalized party system (see, for example, Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Hicken and Kuhonta, 2011; Norton, 2008; Inoguchi, 2008; Imai, 2011). Whether institutionalization is an *absolute pre-requisite*, in all parliamentary democracies, remains contested. Wilkinson (2015: 432), for example, when explaining the case of India, writes about '... 'deinstitutionalized' parties ...doing a relatively good job in reaching out to voters'.

It was Samuel Huntington's (1968, 2006: 12) memorable phrase that set the tone for the on-going debate about institutionalization. For him, institutionalization is concerned with the '...process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability'. Building on Huntington's belief (2006: 13-14) about the relationship between time and the depth of institutionalization, Rose and Mackie (1998: 536) sought to quantify that relationship in the following terms: 'a party is judged to have become institutionalised if it fights more than three national elections. A group that fails to do this is not an established political party but an ephemeral party' (see also Bértoa, 2014: 17 and Lindberg, 2007: 222). Huntington's emphasis on stability would also remain one of the central assertions of much of the subsequent literature that came in its wake. John Aldrick (2006: 566), for example, believes that stability enables parties to '...develop long-term reputations that the personalities of particular politicians or variable agendas of policy concerns are generally unable to provide'. Stability was also at the heart of Randall and Svåsand's take on institutionalization because of its impact on '...the extent to which the party's existence is established in the public imagination' (2002: 14-5). This also dovetails with the need for specific intra-party developments such as bringing about a situation whereby '...party actors and supporters... acquire an identification with and commitment to the

party which transcend more instrumental or self-interested incentives for involvement' (Ibid., 2002: 13). That embeddedness ensures that the party, as an organization, in the words of March and Olsen (2006: 3) '... becomes relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances.'

Given the temporal nature associated with institutionalization, it is hardly surprising that newly formed parties, in an attempt to make an instant impact, have turned to the charismatic leader – what some now refer to as 'political personalization' (Rahat and Kenig, 2018) or political celebrity. It appears to offer the opportunity to by-pass or short-circuit traditional practice. In an era of political celebrity driven by today's 24-hour news cycle, dominated by social media (that can be used to by-pass the filter of the legacy media), new parties (as well as established ones) have become increasingly reliant on the charismatic leader. Three decades ago Panebianco (1988: 66-7), claimed to have identified a trend where charismatic leaders were '...generally associated with strong resistance to institutionalization. The leader, in fact, has no interest in organizational reinforcement which would inevitably set the stage for the party's "emancipation" from his control'. Whether charisma offers a Holy Grail or more of a poisoned chalice remains an empirical question but its influence is beyond doubt. For Papadopoulos (2013: 40), for example, charisma has now become a 'structural phenomenon' of party system development 'driven by the erosion of group identities, by the convergence among parties on policy options and...by an increase in the importance of the mass media'.

When we turn our attention to the Japanese case, what characteristics define the 2013-2019 era, and how might they impact on what comes next? It seems to us that 2013-19 was constituted by the following self-replicating pattern:

- 1) the weakness and lingering decline of the DPJ (reconstituted as the Democratic Party in 2016), not surprisingly, invited challengers for the mantle of the main opposition party;
- 2) challengers emerged from new formations that themselves have tended to emerge from intra-parliamentary splits and realignments (that are often timed to ensure the continuation of state funding);
- 3) in a bid to short-circuit the process of party-building (institutionalization) these new parties overly rely upon political celebrity as the basis upon which to chase a constituency of voters at election time (sometimes without an agreed party programme) rather than emerging as a response to a need from the electorate;
- 4) tactical cross-party electoral alliances formed in a bid to go head-to-head with the governing party in the single-member constituency seats (SMD) have potential but are ultimately half-hearted;
- 5) the failure of 3 and 4 have left a litany of failed parties in its wake as deputies, cushioned by their inherited political structures (*kōenkai* which in a weakly institutionalized party become the buttress that provides the support for individual politicians) and generous levels of state funding for newly formed parliamentary groups, prioritize personal survival (and hence a willingness to defect) over party survival via which they start the process (2-4) all over again<sup>2)</sup>.

An additional complication is that when the name of a party disappears and new formations emerge, they are built upon their prior constituent parts. This problematizes the emergence of a 'new' cohesive identity, stability and durability as parties come to resemble loose collections of individuals rather than organized entities that are more than the sum of their parts. Under such circumstances, with each constituent part retaining its own tribal identities, realignments have soon run into partisan difficulties that we highlight in section 3 below.

If 2013-2019 is viewed as a necessary filtering process, the beginning of 2019 saw the number of potential contenders for the mantle of the main opposition party whittled down to two – the CDJP and DPP. The former had 28 seats in the House of Councillors and 68 seats in the House of Representatives while the latter had 27 seats and 41 seats respectively (as of May 2019). Having come through the process outlined above, what sort of path-dependent characteristics might they display? Perhaps the most

striking characteristic of this overall period is the portable/flexible nature of opposition parties which remains a constant danger to their continued integrity. From our perspective, a useful schema (laid out in table one) draws upon the metaphor of the construction process associated with pre-fabricated housing. Observing whether these qualities become stable, or are more transitory in nature, then becomes an integral part of understanding the future evolution of the parliamentary opposition parties. So why the pre-fabrication analogy? Within the building trade a 'pre-fab' has all the trappings of a house but the central difference concerns the choices made about the process of construction and the subsequent structural nature of the completed building. While there have been periods in contemporary history when such an approach to house-building has been a necessity other periods have called into doubt their appropriateness.

**TABLE ONE: CHARACTERIZING A 'PRE-FABRICATED' PARTY**

<b>The characteristics of pre-fabrication party</b>	<b>Mapping out the Japanese case</b>
<b>Construction process</b> Quick and easy to build	Ease of forming a new party Manufactured in the parliament rather than on the ground
<b>Structural Stability</b> Tethered rather than concretized foundations	Weakly institutionalized – often built on personal celebrity or localized connections rather than deeper normative commitments
<b>Structural integrity - duration/ resilience</b> a) Portability - easy to move, expand or replace  b) Limited life span	a) Easy to rebrand - aided by generous rules on party funding  b) Easy to defect - deputies less likely to be committed to, or identify with, a national party as there is more electoral security in cultivating their own personal support structures than strengthening the national organization
<b>Structural malleability (Retro-fitting) -</b> Converting a 'pre-fab' into a standard house	The importance of political choice, vis-à-vis measures of thicker forms of institutionalization, becomes integral to securing the mantle of the main opposition party

What comes to light, therefore, in the case of the parliamentary opposition is that the characteristics associated with pre-fabrication may well be a necessary evolutionary asset attuned to a specific period of time i.e. when the oppositional landscape is crowded and fluid. As events begin to settle and that *mélange* of oppositional forces gives way to fewer contenders, for the mantle of the main oppositional force, such characteristics become a hindrance. This then necessitates a different set of political choices if such parties wish to present themselves as a credible government-in-waiting.

We will now turn our attention, in the next two sections, to the events that constitute our 2013-2019 story.

### 3.0. OPPOSITIONAL FRAGMENTATION AND DECLINE

The fall-out from the DPJ's inability to effectively re-brand itself before its eventual disappearance in 2016, a pattern replicated by its successor the Democratic Party (DP) only 18 months later, has been at the heart of the 2013-2019 oppositional story. By unleashing a contest for the mantle of the main opposition party, the political landscape was populated by a continuing stream of 'ephemeral' parties that barely lasted from one election to the next and failed to make in-roads in public support even when the governing parties were experiencing their own turmoil. Indeed, all the main opposition parties which took part in the general election of 2017, apart from the historic JCP and the tiny Social Democratic Party (SDP) neither of which had any chance of becoming the party in power, had not even existed a year earlier<sup>3)</sup>.

It was only a decade ago that the picture looked so different. In 2009, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) secured a landslide victory with 308 of the 480 HR seats. In so doing, it became the first opposition party to take the reins of power on the back of an election victory since the start of the 1955-system (see table two below)<sup>4)</sup>. For some years the assumption had been that Japan was on a path to a more standard Westminster-type (left-

right) two-party system, bolstered by the post-1996 mixed electoral system (Reed, 2005)<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, as part of its organizational development, the DPJ appeared to import several political tools from the UK in an attempt to develop its public profile and embed itself in the minds of the electorate. This included drawing up a detailed manifesto for the first time in 2003 (a practice continued thereafter) as well as designating senior party members as ‘shadow cabinet’ ministers post-1999.

Then the party’s spectacular fall from grace in 2012, with approximately one third of the votes received in 2009 (see table one below) and a seat-count which fell from 308 to 57 (out of 475), precipitated a huge sense of disillusionment with its time in office<sup>6</sup>. This had included three different prime ministers in three years, an inability to implement any of its signature policies, increasing numbers of defections from the parliamentary group, and simply no time to capitalize on its temporary political dominance.

**TABLE TWO: SHIFTING ELECTORAL FORTUNES – THE DPJ AND LDP IN THE 2009 AND 2012 ELECTIONS TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

	Number of Seats	Number of votes	Turnout
2009 (Aug. 30)	DPJ 308 seats	33,475,334 in the SMDs 29,844,799 PR votes	69.3 percent (a record high)
	LDP 119 seats	27,301,982 in the SMDs 18,810,217 PR votes	
2012 (Dec. 16)	DPJ 57 seats	13,598,773 in the SMDs 9,268,653 PR votes	59.3 percent
	LDP 294 seats	25,643,309 in the SMDs 16,624,457 PR votes	

SOURCE: Adapted from: [http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/data/shugiin44/index.html](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/data/shugiin44/index.html)  
[http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/data/shugiin45/index.html](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/data/shugiin45/index.html)

Such disappointment manifested itself in one of two ways: many voters either did not vote (turnout fell 10 per cent to 59.3 per cent) or voted for one of the several new right-of-centre, ‘third force’ parties that had

emerged electorally since the House of Councillors election in 2010. This included the Japan Restoration Party JRP - *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (which came to prominence on the back of the media fixation with its charismatic leader Hashimoto Tōru), or Your Party, YP - *Minna no Tō* - which was under the leadership of Watanabe Yoshimi. At the time, speculation ran wild about the transformative impact that these third force parties were going to bring to the party-system as self-proclaimed anti-establishment forces. They appeared to be banking on the belief that leadership driven qualities (celebrity) would be able to compensate for the absence of more traditional party-building qualities. *Asahi Shimbun* (2012), for example, (while recognizing the lack of clarity about some of their policy positions) speculated about their potential:

New parties have little or no ties to the bureaucracy or interest groups, such as industry lobbies and labor unions. Their independence enables them to respond to diverse popular aspirations in ways established parties cannot... It can't be helped that they are poorly organized and don't have many party members. But where they excel over established parties is that they are armed with new ideas and they have the expertise of people which have headed administrative organizations as governors or mayors.

In an attempt to shore-up a sustained electoral relevance, they soon turned to a series of political realignments. Once again, however, traditional forms of party-building were superseded by developments that came across as opportunism that was merely tactical in nature. On November 17, 2012 for example, two of the most high-profile and charismatic political figures, Hashimoto Tōru (b. 1969) leader of the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) and ex-Tokyo Governor and former LDP politician Ishihara Shintarō (b. 1932) who days before (November 13) formed *Taiyo no Tō* - The Sunrise Party - orchestrated a merger on the conservative right. The UK based *Financial Times* (2012) referred to the two leaders as the 'odd couple of Japanese politics.' An editorial in *Mainichi Shimbun* (2012) also doubted the legitimacy

of such a tie-up: ‘...a third political force will never win support from voters if *Taiyo no Tō*, the JRP and others hastily join hands without coordinating their views on such important policy issues that will determine the direction of the country.’

The life-cycle and subsequent fragmentation of the *Ishin no Kai* exemplified the malaise at the heart of the opposition story. *Ishin* unraveled within 18-months when the Ishihara wing broke away following the party’s plans to merge with *Yui no Tō*. They went on to form *Jisedai no Tō* (Party for Future Generations) which renamed itself *Nippon no Kokoro wo Taisetsu ni suru Tō* (Party for Japanese Heart) within a year. By 2016, all talk of a ‘third force’ had vanished as these parties had ceased to exist or were pale imitations of their previous selves.

### 3.1. The lingering decline of the main opposition party

As for the main opposition party, the name of the DPJ would linger on until March 2016 before being replaced with *Minshintō* (in English, Democratic Party - DP) following the party’s merger with the Japan Innovation Party (JIP which had been formed following the merger between *Ishin* and *Yui no Tō* mentioned above) (Pekkanen and Reed, 2016: 68-9). But even with a new name, and six months later a new, female leader (Murata Renhō), the party’s fortunes continued to decline. While some hoped she would provide a new start, for most the writing was already on the wall. Its rather pitiful situation was epitomized by the comments of the head of its youth wing Onishi Kensuke at the launch of its mascot ‘*Minshin*’ in March 2017: ‘I have mixed feelings about the fact that there are more people from the media here now than when we announced our policies’ (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2017).

Still, as the main opposition party, the DP’s goal at the electoral level remained to draw voters away from the LDP. Given the first-past-the-post (winner takes all) nature of the SMD seats an emerging consensus was that

oppositional forces would need to devise a united electoral front. This stemmed, in part, from the belief that only a single joint opposition candidate stood any chance of unseating an LDP incumbent/or holding off an LDP/*Kōmeitō* challenge in any of the SMDs. Such electoral co-operation would initially see the light of day in the run-up to the 2016 House of Councillors election when the DP, Social Democratic Party, Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and, yet another, recently created parliamentary formation People's Life Party (PLP) & Taro Yamamoto and Friends, worked together<sup>7</sup>). While this appeared to stem some of the opposition losses it was unable to prevent the LDP and its allies from increasing their strength. Co-operation would then migrate to a few gubernatorial elections: a single DP/JCP candidate in the Tokyo governor election in August 2016 (who finished a poor third) and a few months later a successful joint opposition candidate for the post of governor of Niigata - although even that campaign was not without its tensions and the seat was lost in 2018 to a candidate supported by the LDP/*Kōmeitō* coalition.

Part of the problem with electoral co-operation was the disquiet within certain sections of the DP about co-operating with the JCP. The *Mainichi Shimbun* (2016) drawing upon an anonymous source close to the DP, captured the sense of unease. From their perspective the party had become '... mired in the agony of "how not to leave out the JCP too much, while not approaching it too closely."' This inability to make electoral inroads coupled with its disastrous showing in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections on July 2, 2017 where the DP actually lost two of its remaining seven seats (out of 126) that it was defending, resulted in the departure of its general secretary (July 25) and two days later Renhō. She was replaced in September by Maehara Seiji, a known critic of the decision to engage in tactical co-operation with the JCP. He was more sympathetic to working with parties on the political right - a reality that would fundamentally alter the course of the opposition in the immediate run-up to the October 2017 House of Representatives election.

### 3.2. Realignment, fragmentation and transience

On 20 September 2017, the prime minister announced his decision to call another early HR election. The electorate would, once again, be faced with a series of unfamiliar oppositional brands. This time round the main contender was a new party named *Kibō no Tō* (Party of Hope, hereafter *Hope*) launched on 25 September. Its leader was Tokyo Governor, former LDP member of parliament and cabinet minister, Koike Yuriko. She aimed to repeat the electoral success of her local party *Tomin First no Kai* (Tokyoites First) at the Tokyo Metropolitan elections a few months earlier<sup>8</sup>). She positioned herself as an anti-establishment political celebrity with a core message of opposition to Abe's alleged 'cronyism' and a Japan that was led neither by the LDP nor DP. However, Abe's decision to hold a snap election meant that Koike's new party had no time to organize a founding congress or even draw-up a provisional set of party statutes/detailed party programme.

This election would also prove to be the final death knell of the DP as an on-going concern despite the fact that it would linger on as a group of deputies in the House of Councillors. Its end, when it came, took the form of a series of dramatic and unprecedented events that began in the morning of September 27<sup>th</sup>. *Mainichi* newspaper captured the unfolding drama with the headline '*DP leader Maehara to propose merger with Liberal Party prior to election*'. The article went on: 'After merging with the opposition Liberal Party, the DP will form a united front with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party in a bid to field one candidate in as many single-seat constituencies of the HR as possible.' Yet, only a few hours later *Asahi* was reporting a dramatic shift under the headline '*Maehara, Koike agree to cooperate in snap election*'. What initially appeared to be a tactical shift of political alliances, in part tied to Maehara's reticence about working with the JCP, became something even more dramatic when the following day he announced his decision in effect to dissolve the DP into *Hope* just days before the start of the official campaign.

Within the DP there were three responses. Some followed their leader and sought endorsement from *Hope*. However, Koike, in order to make a mark, wanted the political theatrics of a vetting process so that only those fully in-tune with the norms and values of *Hope* would be admitted (see for example *Mainichi Shimbun* 2017b). This was intended to send the public a message that developments were much more than mere political expediency. Others announced they would stand as independents. A third group, mostly to the left of centre, swiftly formed the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) which launched on October 3<sup>rd</sup>. The result of the election was that the hastily created CDPJ became the second largest party with 54 seats well behind the LDP's 281 but just bigger than *Hope* which secured 50. The number of independents, many of them refugees from the DP who could not bring themselves either to join *Hope* or the CDPJ, more than doubled in size compared to 2014 (see table three).

**TABLE THREE: THE RESULT OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ELECTION OCTOBER 2017**

Party	SMD	PR	2014 (total 475)	2017** (total 465)
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	215	66	291	281
Kōmeitō	8	21	35	29
Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ)	17	37	73*	54
Hope	18	32	-	50
Restoration	3	8	41	11
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	1	11	21	12
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	1	1	6	2
Independent	26		8	26

SOURCE: Adapted from: [http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo\\_s/data/shugiin48/index.html](http://www.soumu.go.jp/senkyo/senkyo_s/data/shugiin48/index.html)

\*Size of the Democratic Party of Japan.

\*\*Turnout at 53.68% was slightly up on the record low of 52.66% in 2014

A year on from the electoral debacle of 2017, the opposition was caught up in yet another wave of fragmentation and transience as the original incarnation of *Hope* began to break apart. Its remaining fragments in the HR and the HC caucus of the Democratic Party entered merger talks in Spring 2018 with a view to becoming the largest opposition party. In the end on 7 May 62 out of the 107 members of these groups formed yet another new party the People's Democratic Party for the People (*Kokumin Minshūtō*) (*Tōyō Keizai on-line*, 2018).

We will now shift our focus to the structural side of our argument and the way in which we believe that certain party-systemic features have impacted upon the opposition's ability to present itself as a potential government-in-waiting.

#### 4. THE IMPORTANCE AND CONSEQUENCES OF STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

An understanding of the 2013-2019 era can only be taken so far by reference to the role of agency-based political crafting. In order to complete the circle, it is necessary to recognize that leaders do not have total free-rein to write the script and have to take account of a number of systemic features. Together, these features have contributed to a situation in which parliamentarians can change party labels at will and persuades us to define the era as one of 'ephemerality'. At the time of the general election of 2017, for example, none of the main opposition parties had fought two successive elections. Our account highlights the way in which systemic features have ended-up encouraging instrumental/self-interested behaviour on the part of national parliamentarians who do not feel beholden to the party.

Despite predictions, the electoral system introduced in 1996 has not led to a two-party system. This is firstly because the new system continued to offer a space for the representation of smaller parties through the PR system. In addition, very quickly most parties presenting lists of candidates

to the PR blocs decided to have their candidates stand in both an SMD and the PR bloc listing them as first equal, thus leaving the final decision as to who gets the PR seat up to the operation of the 'best loser' rule. This means that a candidate may be defeated in the SMD race but still win a Diet seat if their party has sufficient overall votes in the PR block and their individual margin of loss in the SMD (the *sekihai-ritsu*) is sufficiently small. An ambitious third party might decide that their candidate could attract the vote from the two main party candidates such that even though they may not get enough votes to win, the candidate would become a close second and thus qualify for a seat from the PR list. For the party, even if they failed to get the seat they would benefit from the publicity. For the candidate, a dynamic campaign could ensure they got a seat via this secondary route. This not only reduced the incentive for third parties to withdraw from the SMDs but also increased the incentives for successful candidates to maintain their *kōenkai* within the constituency even where they are representatives of the PR block (Suzuki, 2016: 112). So, despite the predictions of many political scientists of the imminent arrival of a two-party system there has only been one election, 2009, where only two parties won more than 85% of the total vote in the SMDs: scarcely a two-party system.

*Kōenkai*, personal support organisations designed to sustain the electoral activities of individual candidates became politically significant for LDP Diet candidates in the later 1950s but by the 1980s all national level politicians and most local politicians relied on them (Abe et al., 1990: 152-4). Many felt that the *kōenkai* system was a product of the multi-member constituency used by Japan for all assembly elections until 1993 and would cease to be nationally significant under the new, SMD dominant system (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2011: 65-6). However, whether by accident or design is unclear, but it turned out that the 'best loser rule' within the post-1996 electoral system described above has contributed to preserving a role for the *kōenkai*. Since every vote is important, each candidate continues to have a personal support group in addition to the local party branch with the former

especially geared-up to attract or retain the votes of those not inclined to identify with the party that the candidate belongs to (See also Rosenbluth and Thies, 2010: 121; Krauss and Pekkanen, 2011: 97).

In any case the confused party-political circumstances of the late 1990s were not conducive to the dissolution of *kōenkai*. Following the implosion of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in 1995 after its ill-fated decision to join a coalition with its erstwhile opponent the LDP, a new party, the *Shinshintō*, emerged as a slightly left-of-centre alternative to the LDP. However, it was never very stable and disagreements within its leadership caused it to collapse entirely by December 1998. Several smaller parties were formed, none of any substance, and with no central party support many politicians were forced back to reliance on their *kōenkai* in order to sustain their lives in politics. Then, in 2005 it was the turn of a subset of LDP politicians to illustrate the importance of *kōenkai* when PM Koizumi withdrew his party's endorsement of those who had opposed his post office privatization reform plans. Some were defeated by 'assassins' parachuted in by party headquarters but the ones who 'survived' and were re-elected were those who had a strong *kōenkai* base. It is tempting to conjecture that those LDP politicians who were re-elected in the 2009 election – overall a disaster for the party – were successful not in small part due to their *kōenkai* supporters.

When the DP fell apart in the 2017 election, its former members fell back on their *kōenkai* organizations. This explains how it was that the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) was able to get 55 out of 78 of its candidates elected even though the party had only been founded as the election campaign was about to begin, how those former DP Diet members then standing under the *Hope* label could be returned and, how many of the former leaders of the DPJ who decided to join neither the CDPJ nor *Hope* also got back into the Diet. In sum, the political history of the last twenty years has resulted not in the weakening of *kōenkai* but rather demonstrated their ongoing utility, desirability and indeed indispensability for ambitious politicians.

The consequences of this are that most established politicians - say those who have been elected to a national seat three times or more - have a *kōenkai* sufficiently robust such that they can quit a new or even established party at only minimal risk to their personal chances of re-election. Take Watanabe Yoshimi for example. Having 'inherited' his father's constituency seat in Tochigi *and* his *kōenkai* of loyal supporters he was re-elected six times between 1996-2014 (before a loan scandal forced him out). Initially with the LDP label, then on three occasions as an independent and then twice as leader of the *Minna no Tō*. In 2016, he re-entered parliament on the HC lists of *Osaka Ishin no Kai*. Similarly, Koike Yuriko has been elected via five different political parties since the early 1990s. Thus, *kōenkai* function to reduce the risks involved in leaving an old party or creating/joining a new one.

The situation is further underpinned by the already noted generous levels of state funding. A new party does not necessarily have any local support groups, nor does it need them to qualify for state funding. This reflects the fact that national political parties in Japan have, with few exceptions, always been top-down organizations created within the Diet that have then tried to find or create local support structures<sup>9)</sup>. While the DPP 'inherited' the local branches of the DPJ/DP, the CDPJ had to create them from scratch and only in January 2019 was it even close to having a full national organization with party chapters in 42 of the 47 prefectures. In some countries the first priority of the elected members of a new party would be to devote time and energy to the creation of local party organizations so that their support can come from as wide as possible social spectrum. However, in Japan where *kōenkai* will often already exist, incumbent Diet members joining a new party will want to divide their time and energy between fostering their *kōenkai* and developing the local party branch. Moreover, given the chequered history of parties in the last 25 years, it would be rational for them to devote rather more energy to their *kōenkai* which is more likely to be able to secure their political future. In some ways the *kōenkai* provided ready-made support groups that can be persuaded to transfer their allegiance from

one party to another following the lead of the Diet member. This means they are always tied more to the person than the party.

Thus, rather than leading to the erosion of *kōenkai* as features of constituency political practice, the way national politicians adapted them to serve the demands of the reformed electoral process provides us with another explanatory factor for the transient existence of many opposition parties. Their continued existence weakens incentives for them to fully engage with extra-parliamentary party-building measures.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Between 2013-2019 the rise and fall of numerous opposition parties, alongside the terminal decline of the DPJ/DP, severely damaged the opposition brand. Even Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) heavyweight Ishiba Shigeru acknowledged an ironic debt of gratitude to the opposition with the claim that the Abe administration's '... rock-solid popularity is actually driven by the lack of viable opposition parties rather than genuine voter support' (Quoted in *Japan Times*, Nov. 21, 2016). By autumn 2019, however, the oppositional landscape appeared to be moving beyond the earlier chaotic era as two political forces – the CDPJ and the smaller DPP – moved towards serious cooperation starting with a decision to form a join *kaiha* (In-House Group) in the House of Representatives.

At an extra-parliamentary level, however, both parties continue to remain parked in the developmental cul-de-sac meaning that they have yet to transcend many of the pre-fabricated characteristics highlighted in this paper. The *Mainichi*, for example, when referring to the CDPJ, questions its ability to 'move beyond an over-reliance on its leader' (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2018). At the local level, the path-dependent legacy of the *kōenkai* continues to cast a shadow. As one informant put it: 'MPs continue to try to recruit *kōenkai* supporters not party supporters as a first step' (interview with author, February 2019). While *kōenkai* may have positive functions within an

institutionalized party, enabling candidates to win more support than they could with just party endorsement; within a weakly institutionalized setting they tend to inhibit party organizational development. Under these circumstances investing time and energy building up a national party, with local branches that might not exist at the time of the next general election, makes little sense compared to a politician devoting her/his time to establishing a *kōenkai* on which he/she can rely even when the national party leadership fails to deliver<sup>10</sup>.

Local election results in April 2019 did nothing to allay concerns about the opposition's weakness. Indeed, the combined support for the CDPJ and DPP in many areas actually fell below what was achieved by the DJP in 2015 – the last time the seats were fought. Subsequent commentary appeared to confirm the validity of the issues/concerns that we have raised in this paper. For the Mainichi (2019) the situation was tied to political choice: 'It appears that opposition parties prioritize power struggles within their camp rather than joining hands in confronting the LDP.' For the Japan Times (editorial, 2019), it was the 'weakness of their local organizations...Their inability to rebuild their local organizations bode ill for their fortunes in Diet elections...' The House of Councillors election held in July 2019 did not make much difference to this situation: the CDPJ gained 9 seats and the DPP lost 2.

During the current negotiations and then if and when the unified party is formed, the key question will be what value can it add? Can 'the party' bring something to the campaigns of its elected members and, in so doing, incentivize MPs to put at least as much effort into building and maintaining the national party as they do in sustaining their *kōenkai*? Can 'the party' develop the capacity to move beyond the pre-fabrication stage of development where the qualities associated with a thicker form of institutionalization emerge and prevail? At this point, one might be tempted to conclude that the 2009-2012 period when the LDP was out of office was an aberration and that we have now returned to the default position. Does that

mean that the spectre of permanent opposition is far more than a rhetorical quip? Before ruling out any possibility of change it is important to remember that 2009-2012 (and its long run-in) did provide a glimpse of what was possible given certain political choices.

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- 1) It is important to stress a few caveats regarding the wider opposition during the 2012-2019 time-frame. Of all the opposition parties, only the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) can be unquestionably be regarded as institutionalized. While it has, at times, been able to secure protest votes outside of its core electorate its wider acceptance amongst the electorate continues to remain hindered by the party's historical baggage and the negative perceptions associated with the party name. See Day 2010.
  - 2) According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, in order to qualify for funding a new party needs either a minimum of 5 Diet members or 'at least 1 Diet member' in addition to having 'obtained at least 2% of votes nationwide in one of six recent elections'. See Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Seitō Josei Seido no Aramashi (Outlines of the Political Party Subsidy System).
  - 3) For all intents and purposes, the SDP has drifted into parliamentary irrelevance despite being a short-lived member of the coalition government with the DPJ in 2009. It gained one seat in the HC election in 2016 and 2 seats in the HR election in 2017. Its decline was epitomized in the following newspaper headline: 'SDP's head office shrinks with political influence', *Asahi Shimbun*, May 9, 2017. In 2019 it no longer has political group (*kaiha*) status in the House of Councillors.
  - 4) The political landscape would, however, come to be dominated by a single party - the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in a structure that Richardson described as 'conservative hegemony under the LDP' (2001: 145). This led to Japan being classified as a 'dominant party-system' (see, for example, Pempel, 1990). Between 1955-2018, the LDP has only been out of power for four and a half years (1993-1994; 2009-2012). Not surprisingly this left the opposition struggling to project a role and significance. As Curtis (1988: 125, admittedly not always a sympathetic observer of the Japan Socialist Party), put it: '[t]he combination of the cumulative impact of permanent opposition party status and

the particular historical conditions that have influenced the JSP's behaviour have left it groping for a role in a society whose development it cannot explain...' (1988: 155)

- 5) The mixed electoral system was first introduced for the 1996 election to the House of Representatives (HR). In this new electoral system, 300 seats were to be elected via single member districts on a first-past-the-post basis while 200 seats were elected with a second vote via a proportional regional list system that saw the nation divided into 11 districts (see Kase and Day, 1997). Over time, the number of parliamentary seats has been reduced to 465 - a split of 289: 176. The House of Councillors (HC) is composed of 242 members - 96 of whom are elected via the national constituency and 128 from prefectures. Councillors are elected for 6 years with half of the seats up for election every three years.
- 6) The DPJ majority in the House of Councillors, which it had gained in 2007, played a key role in building up its public profile as a government-in-waiting. However, it was unable to capitalize on the controlling both Houses very early in its mandate following the 2010 loss of its majority in the upper house.
- 7) The PLP 'and friends' was formed to reach the necessary five parliamentary representatives needed to operate as a 'political group' in the HR. It renamed itself the Liberal Party later in the year.
- 8) It was formed from a few sitting LDP members plus candidates with no previous political experience. In the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections Koike's party increased its representation from 6 to 55 while the LDP went down from 57 to 23. With the support of the *Kōmeitō* (23 seats) this gave her control of the assembly.
- 9) The Japan Communist Party and *Kōmeitō* might be regarded as exceptions although the leadership of *Kōmeitō*, in recent years, appears to have acted increasingly independently of its support base in the *Sōka Gakkai*. See Klein and McLaughlin 2018: 53-4.
- 10) One radical step could be to choose to engage with an 'open recruitment' method of candidate selection. According to Smith and Tsutsumi (2016: 341), whose research focused on the LDP and the DPJ, this offers a succinct way of generating greater affinity to the party in part because such candidates lack a *kōenkai*.