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*'DECISION-MAKING REFORM IN JAPAN. THE DPJ'S FAILED ATTEMPT  
AT THE POLITICIAN-LED GOVERNMENT'*

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Karol Żakowski is a doctor of political science, a lecturer in the Department of East Asian Studies at the Faculty of Political and International Studies of the University of Łódź. In his academic work he focuses on Japan, both on its external affairs (mainly relations with China), as well as internal ones. The subject of the reviewed book is the best example of his interests. Żakowski describes in it an unsuccessful attempt of a reform of the decision-making system and the introduction of an effective mechanism of policy making in the country which the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), ruling in Japan in 2009–2012, tried to put into practice.

In the introduction the author writes about the DPJ's victory in the parliamentary election in 2009, and its announcements and plans to exchange state administration managed by bureaucracy. It concerned the whole Japanese system supporting the 'iron triangle' of connections between politicians, bureaucrats and big business (p. 1).

These announcements were not realized, and the DPJ returned to the political practices of its predecessor, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The consequence of this was its electoral defeat in 2012 and the return of the LDP to power.

In the introduction the author identifies and defines the theoretical foundation on which the analysis of the issues described in his work is based. It is a 'historical institutionalism'. Żakowski quotes the opinion of a scholar Douglas North, according to which 'institutions are the rules of the game in society' and 'man-made structures, shaping human interactions' (p. 2).

Later in the introduction the author recalls the inspiration of the DPJ leadership with the British political system (the so-called Westminster model),

as well as the idea of the government composed of and administered by politicians (not bureaucrats).

In the first chapter Żakowski presents the decision-making process during the reign of the LDP. He points to its weakness, whose main element was the ‘two-track’ decision-making process – where bodies of the ruling party were more important than the government. The consequence of this were ‘weak prime ministers’ – not able to push their vision over the opinion of party leaders.

That is why, the slogan about the government controlled by politicians became an important element of the identity of the DPJ and was one of the reasons of the political change in 2009.

Reforms conducted in the nineties strengthened slightly the position of the prime minister against the ruling party and bureaucrats. However, according to the author, what was needed to properly apply them was a prime minister with the personality of a strong leader. One such person was the LDP Prime Minister – Junichiro Koizumi, in contrast to his successors.

The next three chapters of the book (the second, third and fourth) are devoted to the evolution of the mechanism of policy making during the exercise of power by the offices of successive prime ministers of Japan – Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda.

The aim of the first of them was the creation of a new system of governing. However, his strong anti-bureaucratic stance led to problems of coordination and communication between various ministries, which greatly undermined the effectiveness of decisions made by Hatoyama. In spite of the electoral slogan of concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister and his government, DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa had a large impact on their decisions. He exerted pressure on individual ministers and their ministries.

The pronounced differences in opinions between Cabinet members combined with the lack of support from the ministerial bureaucracy (including the dissolved council of deputy ministers) led to the resignation of Hatoyama from the function of the prime minister of the government on 2 June 2010 (pp. 102–103).

The third chapter describes the next Prime Minister Kan’s attempts to cope with these problems. Unlike his predecessor, he presented a more realistic approach to the mentioned issue. He tried to use old bureaucratic structures and new institutions supporting his government (such as, e.g. the Policy Research Committee). However, external factors (the failure of a nuclear reactor in Fukushima during the earthquake), along with errors in internal and external policies (such as, for example, plans to increase VAT or a bad

strategy during the incident on the East China Sea)<sup>1</sup> led to the loss of social trust. The bad government policy in this latter issue was affected, among others, by the fact that he ignored suggestions given to him by the ministerial clerical staff (pp. 134–136).

The next chapter is devoted to the further process of reforms of the decision-making system conducted by the next prime minister – Noda. Influenced by the experience of the predecessors from his party, he reverted to the old political practices of the LDP. The majority of ministers of his government ‘seemed pleased to accept the presidency of bureaucracy’ (p. 192). Nevertheless, his cabinet fell, among others, as a result of factional arguments in the DPJ, caused by, *inter alia*, the adoption of VAT increase.

An equally important reason was the deterioration of relations with China related to the nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This step was taken by the government to prevent islands from being bought by the nationalist governor of Tokyo because otherwise they could become a place of demonstrations of the Japanese extreme right. However, this move of Noda’s government only inflamed relations with the People’s Republic of China. The reason for this state of affairs was the lack of informal relations of the government with the leadership of the Communist Party of China and relying only on official diplomatic communication channels (p. 191–193).

The book ends with a summary and conclusions. In them the author explains the DPJ’s failure in the introduction of the ‘Westminster model’ in Japan by means of the differences between this party and the British Labour Party. One of them was the lack of ideological cohesion of the Japanese party, which was created by politicians from different parties. Another was a different ethos of the civil service in both countries. While the British bureaucracy was apolitical, the Japanese one had strong relationships with both politics and business. Therefore, the full implementation of the ‘Westminster model’ in Japan failed.

A consequence of the DPJ’s failed attempts to introduce the reform of governing was the return of the LDP to power in 2012 and the rule of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In the last sentence of his book the author states that ‘an appropriate external model, a coherent political vision and appropriate institutional tools’ are needed to strengthen a new system of government (p. 206).

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<sup>1</sup> This incident took place on 7 October 2010 when a Chinese fishing vessel collided with two Japanese patrol vessels near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The Japanese arrested the Chinese captain of the ship. He was released after several days, but Japanese-Chinese relations had already deteriorated. (The author’s note).

The reviewed book provides an accurate description of the operation and transformation of the Japanese government in 2009–2012 and is a solid institutional analysis of the causes of the failure of the DPJ in the creation of the government administered by politicians.<sup>2</sup>

However, after reading it, other questions may come to mind of anyone interested or involved in Japanese domestic politics.

Was the party system in Japan, with the LDP dominating since 1955, permanently changed in the years 2009–2012<sup>3</sup>?

Has the return of the LDP to power in 2012 restored the system anew?

At the end of the book there is an impressively long list of books and materials used by the author, pointing to his strong academic and intellectual background.

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<sup>2</sup> Though the author of this review is not enthusiastic about explaining political and social phenomena by means of an institutional analysis, because he believes that external factors and human interactions have a greater impact on them. (The author's note).

<sup>3</sup> This system is called a 'system of 1955' or 'imperial democracy'. (the author's note).