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Japan's main opposition Democratic Party leader Yukio Hatoyama (l.) and former leader and chief campaign strategist Ichiro Ozawa react, as results start to come in, at the Democratic Party of Japan election headquarters in Tokyo, Sunday.
KIM KYUNG-HOON/ REUTERS

Japan's opposition crushes LDP in landmark victory

Exit polls on Sunday gave the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) more than 300 seats in Japan's 480-seat Diet (parliament), ending more than 54 years of nearly unbroken rule by the Liberal Democratic Party.

By [Peter Ford](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
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TOKYO - Voters ushered in a new era in Japanese politics Sunday, throwing out the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) after 54 years of nearly unbroken rule.

Instead, in elections to the lower house of parliament, they chose the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and its promises of a fresh approach to pull Japan out of decades of economic and political stagnation.

Exit polls gave the DPJ more than 300 seats in Japan's 480-seat Diet (parliament), an overwhelming victory that reveals the depths of disillusion with the ruling LDP.

"Japan has become a normal democracy," says Robert Pekkanen, a Japan expert at the University of Washington. "For better or worse, from now on we will see an alternation of power."

The LDP had been out of office for less than a year since the founding of Japan's post-war political system. Exhausted, beset by scandals and bereft of popular ideas or leaders, the party suffered a landslide defeat that marks a turning point in Japanese political life, analysts say.

"21st century politics in Japan has started in 2009," says Akikazu Hashimoto, a professor at Oberlin University in Tokyo. "There is no going back. This is a tectonic shift in the Japanese system as a whole."

WHY JAPAN LOST FAITH IN THE LDP

The DPJ, a broadly based party with a generally center-left bent, is not expected to make radical changes either to Japan's economic policy or its foreign policy. It won the Diet election because, after years of falling

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living standards and political paralysis, Japanese voters finally lost faith in their long-time rulers.

"People want a party that can do something," says Tobias Harris, who runs the perspicacious [observingjapan.com](#) website. "They are not convinced that the DPJ is that party, but they are 100 percent convinced that the LDP is not that party."

HOW WILL THE DPJ CHANGE THINGS?

The biggest change, if DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama can pull it off, will be in the way that Japan is governed. Mr. Hatoyama, scion of a prominent Japanese political family, has pledged to seize policy-making power from the senior civil servants who have wielded it for years, and hand it to elected politicians.

Other popular campaign promises included income support for struggling farmers, child allowances for parents, and the abolition of road tolls.

In foreign policy, the conservative-minded Hatoyama is not expected to shift Japan away from its close alliance with the United States, though he has said Tokyo will next year stop deploying refueling ships in support of coalition action in Afghanistan.

LDP'S ALLIANCE SYSTEM CRUMBLED

The LDP would have had a hard time holding on to power at these elections regardless of how long it had been in office. Over the past year Japan has suffered its worst economic recession since the war, and unemployment is at a near record 5.7 percent.

The party was fatally weakened, however, by the collapse of the system that had sustained it for more than half a century.

The LDP's dominance rested on its alliances with a range of powerful interest groups such as the farm lobby, the construction industry, the Japan Medical Association, and a nationwide network of influential local postmasters.

Instead of appealing directly to individual voters, the party relied on these groups to get out the vote at elections. For decades they did so, in return for policies that favored them.

One by one, however, these interest groups have peeled off, sometimes feeling betrayed by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's efforts at reform earlier this decade. Construction firms have been disappointed by a drop in public works programs; "Japan Agriculture", the farmers' co-operative, was upset by trims to farm support; the postmasters were angered by the privatization of the Post Office.

As the LDP party machine began misfiring, it lost the traditional loyalty many citizens felt for it. Today, estimates Mr. Hashimoto, who has written a book on unaffiliated voters, as much as 60 percent of the electorate is in the floating voter camp.

DPJ'S FRESH IMAGE

The DPJ, a 12 year old party projecting a fresh image and espousing a more immediate, transparent style of politics, has appealed directly to such voters. This has broken open the traditional power structure, built of businessmen, senior bureaucrats and politicians, to admit ordinary people.

"The public feels a certain anxiety about the DPJ, but it is ready to give them a chance" says Ken Takeuchi, a political analyst who founded Japan Internet News, a political website.

Not that the risks are that great. On many issues the DPJ's policies are very similar to the LDP's, and though trade unions and civil society groups will have a louder voice in the next government, it is not expected to make any radical moves to liberalize immigration, for example, or strengthen homosexual rights.

More than specific policies, however, it is the DPJ's victory itself, opening up the prospect for Japanese



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parties to alternate in power, that is most significant, says Prof. Pekkanen.

"Once peoples' expectations are changed, the system is broken for ever", he says. "Just the fact of change is bigger than everything else. What people had assumed as givens in Japanese society will no longer hold."

• *Takehiko Kambayashi contributed reporting to this article.*

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