Japanese Politics and its Challenges under the Global Pandemic

Tuesday 1st June 2021, 12.00-13.00 BST

Professor Makihara began by explaining the background to his research. A member of the University of Tokyo's Research Centre for Advanced Science and Technology since 2013, he has conducted extensive interviews with Cabinet Secretariat bureaucrats and other officials. Furthermore, during his tenure as a member of several national advisory boards, he had ample opportunities to observe governmental decision-making processes, as well as the activities of the Chief Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister himself. It was armed with these experiences that Professor Makihara joined the webinar to discuss the challenges facing the Suga Cabinet in the context of Japan's political and institutional history.

Professor Makihara's first slide showed a simple diagram depicting the three essential national policy areas, namely diplomacy, economy and domestic affairs. He pointed out that Japan has made little progress in institutional reform in the area of domestic policy, engendering a weakness in the government's policy-making process.

Next, Professor Makihara discussed what he called the two 'epoch-making events' in Japanese constitutional politics: the general elections in 2009 and 2012. The formation of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government in 2009 marked the first time in Japan's constitutional history when a minority opposition party won a majority in a general election and took power. Consequently, the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) landslide victory in 2012 and the subsequent formation of the Abe Cabinet was only the second regime change in Japan's constitutional history. Using these events as examples, Professor Makihara went on to explain the difference between power transitions and power successions. A power transition is a shift in policy agenda from the ruling party to the opposition party. In contrast, a power succession refers to a change of cabinet within the same ruling party framework, of which Suga's succession to the Prime Ministership after Abe is a prime example.

At this point, Professor Makihara pointed out a fascinating series of 'firsts' that have occurred in the last few years of Japanese politics. The LDP's victory in 2012 was its first transition to power as a former minority party, while 2020 marked the first power succession after a power transition for the LDP. These firsts have led to the occurrence of unpredictable phenomena in the political arena. For example, Suga's succession was remarkable, as it is rare for a Chief Cabinet Secretary to be appointed Prime Minister.

This unusual appointment was influenced by the Cabinet Secretariat, explained Professor Makihara. Though small to begin with, since being reorganised in 2001 the Cabinet Secretariat has grown to the size of a government ministry. To illustrate this, Professor Makihara displayed a table showing a sixfold increase in Cabinet Secretariat staff from 2000 to 2018, dwarfing the change in staff numbers at the Ministries of Environment and Finance over the same period of time. This meant that Suga, in his former role of Chief Cabinet Secretary, wielded considerable power and influence. Furthermore, political reforms in the 1990s led to the provision of public subsidies to political parties and centralised power in the hands of party leaders, namely, the party President and Secretary-General. Upon Abe's

resignation in August 2020, the LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai joined forces with then Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga and after the latter became Prime Minister and President of the LDP, he then reappointed Nikai to the Secretary-General position. This relationship of mutual support continued the centralisation of party power and cemented the coalition between government and party. As a result, the Suga Cabinet initially enjoyed high approval ratings.

As Professor Makihara went on to say, however, the government's approval rating has fallen, with little public support for Suga's pandemic response. Though Japan's case rate is low compared to Western countries, Professor Makihara explained that this is because Japanese citizens have protected themselves rather than relying on a government they do not trust. Observing that failures in handling the pandemic have been occurring since the end of the Abe administration, he argued that these failures stem from embedded issues within the wider Japanese political system.

Unlike the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy for the economy, and the National Security Council and National Security Agency for foreign and security policy, there is no 'control tower' for domestic policy, Professor Makihara explained. Going back to the diagram of the three national policy areas, he pointed out that while Japan has made progress in the economic and diplomatic spheres since the 1990s, it has struggled to deal with domestic issues. Without a coordinating body for domestic policy, the government is simply not equipped to handle complex issues such as the pandemic.

According to Professor Makihara, establishing such a body would be a difficult endeavour because Japan's domestic politics are different from those of other countries. First, countries with larger populations than Japan tend to have federal systems and are mostly developing countries. Secondly, the education level of the Japanese public is high compared to these countries and the public's assessment of government policy is extremely harsh. As a result, by international standards there is a heavier burden on the Japanese central government when it comes to making domestic policy decisions. The structure of Japanese politics is also characterised by French-style centre-local relations and German-style administrative organisation, meaning that centralisation and the vertical division of ministries are both strengthened. Unlike in France and Germany, however, creating a Ministry of the Interior in Japan would not gain public support, as it would echo the pre-war Home Ministry. Consequently, coordination in domestic politics is weak, and each ministry tends to take its own approach when it comes to domestic issues. Interestingly, Professor Makihara remarked that the Abe administration had managed to stay in power for so long precisely because it had not faced any major domestic challenges prior to the pandemic.

To conclude his presentation, Professor Makihara argued for the creation of a National Domestic Council. This would function as a command centre for domestic affairs, providing a comprehensive overview of the domestic policy field. The Council would be composed of experts in domestic affairs who would provide advice, and transparency could be increased by opening meetings to the public. Just as reforms in the 1990s strengthened coordination in foreign and economic policy, the new National Domestic Council would enable the central government to respond more effectively to domestic issues. Without this, Professor Makihara

warned, Japan is likely to return to an era of short-term administrations for as long as challenges in domestic politics persist.

Next, our Chair Dr Nilsson-Wright took the floor to ask Professor Makihara a series of insightful questions regarding his presentation. Dr Nilsson-Wright's first question concerned Prime Minister Suga's loss of influence and power compared to his previous role. Suga excelled as Chief Cabinet Secretary, controlling personnel behind the scenes and placing ambitious young politicians in significant party positions. Dr Nilsson-Wright asked whether Suga's difficult situation was due to a structural problem, in that the role of Prime Minister is far removed from party politics, and whether Suga was struggling with the burden of both domestic and foreign policy issues. For his second question, Dr Nilsson-Wright touched on the expansion of the Cabinet Secretariat, asking if the trend of non-bureaucratic advisors being brought into government ministries could be a way in which the Secretariat might acquire more influence over domestic politics. Drawing attention to Suga's weakness as a public performer, a liability in the context of his position's public-facing nature, he also asked if there was any way for Suga to improve his public standing. Finally, for his last few questions Dr Nilsson-Wright asked Professor Makihara about his predictions for both the September LDP presidential election and October general election, especially in the light of the LDP's poor performance in recent by-elections.

Professor Makihara began responding to Dr Nilsson-Wright's questions by highlighting what in his opinion was a bias among Japanese political scientists and journalists. Calling this the 'Hashimoto and Koizumi bias', he explained how these two former Prime Ministers, with their detailed institutional knowledge and instinct for policy, set a high standard for government leaders which has not been matched in the eyes of political commentators. Next, in response to the question about the Cabinet Secretariat, Professor Makihara pointed out that during his time in government, Abe had in fact established a team of LDP members and political advisors who had some influence over government ministries and Secretariat bureaucrats. However, this team gradually collapsed, a process catalysed by Abe's involvement in political scandals. On the topic of the LDP presidential election, Professor Makihara singled out Minister for Administrative Reform Tarō Kōno as a strong potential candidate for Prime Minister, noting his policy expertise. Finally, Professor Makihara briefly expanded on his idea for a National Domestic Council. One of the major challenges of Japanese domestic politics is the coordination between the central government and the approximately 1800 local governments. Currently this is conducted by the bureaucracy which increasingly finds itself under pressure from government ministers aiming to assert their own will in domestic affairs. The proposed National Domestic Council would thus take over coordination with local governments, helping to manage the large number of stakeholders. Professor Makihara admitted however that it could be difficult to overcome factionalism among the various government ministries that deal with domestic affairs.

After this came a lively Q&A session of which the first question, predictably, concerned the 2021 Olympic Games and the impact it would have on Suga's future. Professor Makihara noted that the government has no effective strategy to handle both the Olympics and pandemic at the same time. He argued that the government needs to publicise a strategy in order to reassure the public, who are currently anxious about the Games. He was pessimistic

about the Olympics, calling it a potential 'disaster', and predicted a negative impact on the LDP and Suga himself in the coming general election.

Next, Professor Kōichi Nakano, Professor of Political Science at Sophia University in Tokyo, took issue with Professor Makihara's focus on administrative reform, arguing that the wider problems were the government's glaring lack of accountability and the malfunctioning of the political system as a whole. In response, Professor Makihara acknowledged the aforementioned issues but countered that they were closely linked with administrative problems, asserting that administrative reform would also help to fix issues in the wider political system.

Dr Nilsson-Wright then asked about the future of the Japanese government. Comparing reports of Abe quietly advising Suga on foreign policy to the influential role former Prime Minister – and Abe's grandfather - Nobusuke Kishi continued to hold after his premiership, Dr Nilsson-Wright wondered to what extent Abe and the LDP 'old guard' might have a say in policy going forward. In addition, noting how Suga had recently begun to talk about constitutional reform, he asked how important constitutional issues were to the Suga administration. In response, Professor Makihara dismissed the idea of Abe attaining Kishi's status, citing his comparative lack of political connections and resources. Regarding the second question, Professor Makihara acknowledged the possibility of constitutional reform becoming a new policy goal after the Olympics but equally pointed out the lack of LDP seats in the Diet required to pass amendments.

The final questions were picked up from the audience chat and concerned the failure of the vaccination program headed by Tarō Kōno, and specifically the impact this would have on his leadership ambitions. Director General Jason James also inquired about the potential of House of Representatives member Seiko Noda and Mayor of Tokyo Yuriko Koike as alternative candidates for Prime Minister. Though Professor Makihara recognised Noda as a strong politician with close ties to LDP Secretary-General Nikai, he also identified Noda's lack of supporters in the LDP as a weakness. With regards to vaccine minister Kōno, Professor Makihara explained that any fallout from the slow vaccine programme would in fact impact Suga, as vaccines are seen as the Prime Minister's responsibility.

To close the webinar, Dr Nilsson-Wright made some insightful final comments on the vaccine programme and the future of Japanese politics. He pointed out that the relatively lighter impact of the pandemic in Japan was in large part due to strict border control, insulating the country from the risk of wider contagion. In addition, he predicted that once the Japanese private sector is able to manufacture and distribute vaccines under license, political commentators are likely to claim a national identity politics angle on the matter by labelling it as an effective Japanese response to a global problem. Finally, he recalled Tarō Kōno's visit to Cambridge a decade ago, where he gave a speech about the idea of immigration reform. Struck by such a young politician discussing an unpopular idea at the time, Dr Nilsson-Wright drew attention to the importance of leadership style for good governance, in addition to the structural problems in Japanese politics highlighted by Professor Makihara in his presentation.