

INSIGHT

Voters' pick

Lex Zhao says the state of the Japanese economy was the most important consideration in the DPJ's election loss, and it will remain the key in politics, even under the rule of 'right-wing' LDP

So the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), led by Yoshihiko Noda, was defeated by a landslide only three years after it had won by a landslide over the Liberal Democratic Party. When presidents of other countries usually emerge as heroes in the face of disaster, you may wonder how, in Japan, incumbent leaders often end up total losers.

Perhaps the DPJ deserved the defeat, because it is not the same party that took over power three years ago. In 2009, voters were frustrated with the LDP's long dominance, so they gave power to the DPJ in hopes that its pledges to listen to individuals rather than big companies, and to run the country through politicians, not elite bureaucrats, would come true.

However, exuberance caused the DPJ's anxious leaders to make at least four consecutive fatal errors. One, quick attempts to distance Japan from US dominance on foreign policy and to move a US military base away from Futenma eventually resulted in the ousting of the first DPJ prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama.

Two, poor handling of the nuclear meltdown incident after last year's earthquake and tsunami forced then prime minister Naoto Kan to step down.

Three, Noda's move to double sales tax from 5 to 10 per cent by 2015 clearly violated campaign pledges and caused heavy-weight Ichiro Ozawa and some 50 other lawmakers to break from the DPJ. By then, the core of the DPJ had changed from idealistic, pacifist lawmakers to a group consisting of former LDP dissidents and young conservatives such as Seiji Maehara.

Four, the DPJ's attempt in 2009 to befriend China fell into a trap and turned into showdowns over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands when then Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara proposed to buy three of the islands. The move devastated economic ties with China, Japan's biggest trading partner. Both sides probably ended up bleeding equally badly.

Even LDP chief Shinzo Abe admitted his victory reflected "no" votes to the DPJ's politics over the past three years.

A new phenomenon that caught some eyes in the last election is the "third force". After the LDP and DPJ alternated in power and both failed, many new parties emerged, with charismatic leaders who promised to "rescue" Japan.

Ishihara and Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto formed the Japan Restoration Party, the first national political party based outside Tokyo.

In addition, there are the anti-tax party, the anti-nuclear party, the anti-Trans-Pac-

ific-Partnership party, and so on. With such grass-roots movements, politics in the next decade could become really interesting in Japan.

The DPJ initially pledged to represent the common voter instead of vested interests, advocating clean politics, just like grass-roots activists. To be fair, the overnight victory in 2009 gave them too much confidence. Although they were eager to make a new Japan, they didn't have enough experience to govern the world's third-largest economy.

In the face of such issues as ageing, de-

Economic conditions that plagued Noda have not changed, and Abe's toughest days lie ahead

clining population, economic stagnation and globalisation, being the prime minister in the Japanese system is a tough job, and the cabinet's term is not fixed as it is in Britain and the US. Politicians must focus on short-term results to woo voters instead of longer-term goals of national interest. As a consequence, they may announce a policy, then abruptly reverse themselves, as when Noda announced in September that his government would phase out the use of nuclear power by 2040, only to have it rolled back the next week in the face of outraged cries from business groups and communities that support nuclear plants.

The record-low voter turnout on Sunday also meant the elections were dictated by the diehard, the vested and the elderly—all of whom favoured the LDP in bringing back a previously failed prime minister.

While other East Asian countries worry that Japan is turning right with different parties dragged by young conservatives, I think the Japanese system indicates that economic issues still dominate over every-

thing else. Politicians will have to step down if economic problems are not solved, no matter how patriotic their rhetoric is during political campaigns. Compare that with the Chinese system, in which political face must be saved at any cost. Economic conditions that plagued Noda have not changed, and Abe's toughest days lie ahead.

Since the Japanese media is almost as good at fanning patriotic flames as the Chinese media, in order to focus energy on solving domestic problems and not aggravating foreign relations, I suggest that Abe's cabinet invite 3,000 young people from China to visit Japan, say, for 10 days, to return a favour that China did in 1984, when then Communist Party general secretary Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) invited 3,000 young Japanese to visit China. This way, young Chinese can see for themselves how Japan works and not worry about the revival of "Japanese imperial militarism".

Lex Zhao is a professor of economics at Kobe University in Japan. zhao@rieb.kobe-u.ac.jp



Baby steps

Victoria Wisniewski Otero says Hong Kong's plan to give new fathers time off work is a good start, but complementary policies must follow

If Hong Kong is to be a world-class city, it is going to have to bring its parental leave entitlements up to global standards. According to the International Labour Organisation, at least 49 countries in the world provide some form of paternity leave. Recent developments to introduce a law granting a three-day statutory paternity leave are a good start, but more efforts need to be made to improve work-life balance for both women and men.

Women have made great strides over the past decades in the formal labour market; however, they continue to bear a disproportionate burden in the care economy. Paid maternity leave without corresponding paternity leave reinforces the traditional expectation that women are the primary caretakers.

Women who choose to return to work after having children often face a "maternity penalty" not felt by men; their earnings and career status suffer, often affecting the rest of their professional trajectories. Statutory paternity leave encourages the sharing of family responsibilities at home, and promotes gender equality in the workforce.

In Hong Kong, which has an ageing society with one of the lowest birthrates in the world, the government must work harder to raise fertility rates as an economic imperative. One way would be to help families strike a better work-life balance – another indicator in which Hong Kong ranks low. Granting parental leave would help people cope with work duties and daily living.

Moreover, worker satisfaction is good for the employer, as well. Empirical evidence shows that the cost of granting three to five days' paternity leave would be negligible on the wage bill. But in any case, the benefits of providing a better work-life balance will outweigh short-term profitability losses. In determining the costs and gains from paternity leave, policymakers must factor into their equation the intangible benefits of worker happiness on their productivity, as well as the returns to societal welfare and family harmony.

In many countries where paternity leave is offered, many fathers do not take advantage of their legal entitlements for fear of being stigmatised or penalised in the workplace if they did. For example, a survey of 1,000 men in Britain last year found that 41 per cent of men would not take the extended leave made available by new rules in Britain, despite 70 per cent reporting dissatisfaction with the previous statutory allowance.

Therefore, complementary measures need to be put in place for men to combat negative stereotypes.

Questions about the eligibility criteria, funding, flexibility and other details of such a proposed measure remain, but the consensus is growing that Hong Kong must join most of the developed world and many of its Asian neighbours in introducing a statutory paternity leave or shared parental leave.

As economies grow, governments have an obligation to progressively improve the labour rights of their societies commensurate with increases in levels of development, without discrimination.

Victoria Wisniewski Otero is a human rights policy researcher and advocate specialising in economic, social and cultural rights. This article is part of a series on women and gender issues, developed in collaboration with The Women's Foundation

Does the government's housing plan really care about trying to cool market?

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying won the election and got to where he is because of the support from Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong. After six months in office, he has made no contributions to show for it. To be honest, he is merely a "paper general", which means he's all talk and no action.

Being a paper general, he will disappoint us with his empty promises on policies such as his long-term housing strategy. Most of us will remember the notorious plan to build 85,000 flats annually that he proposed to former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa in 1997.

During the chief executive election, Leung tried to rally public support by saying Hong Kong had an ample supply of land to satisfy local demand. He blamed the previous administration for dragging its feet in developing sufficient public housing.

He gave the impression that he would not side with the rich and powerful property developers. He even hinted that he would challenge their power on behalf of the people. All these won him favourable public opinion and support, especially from the middle class and professionals.

In fact, Leung only knows how to talk the talk but not walk the walk. Bearing the brunt of Leung's conflicting policies will be the plan to allow qualified candidates to buy second-hand subsidised public flats without having to pay any land premium. This will not benefit the low-income homebuyers, and will undoubtedly push up prices and encourage market

Albert Cheng says many alternative plans exist to help increase public housing, yet the chief executive and his team are not tapping them



speculation. Increased market speculation will offset measures such as extra stamp duty aimed at curbing speculation and stabilising property prices.

Even less attractive residential areas such as the desolate Tuen Mun district have units demanding more than HK\$10,000 per square foot.

Over the past six months

A parking space can now cost up to HK\$3 million, thanks to these anti-speculation measures

under Leung's administration, the already high property prices in Hong Kong have continued to rise rather than cool down. Residential units are becoming even more unattainable for the masses.

Even parking spaces have become the target of speculation. One parking space can now cost up to HK\$3 million, thanks to Leung and his so-called anti-speculation measures.

What's baffling is the way Leung's team members and advisers, who boast that they are highly trained professionals, can

come up with such an ineffective housing policy.

First, the government appeared ready to scrap plans for a sports complex at Kai Tak. But, now, there is talk about relaxing the plot ratio control to meet the needs of housing and socioeconomic development, which totally disregards the city's long-term planning and development scheme.

Over the past five years, the government has been focusing on sustainable development, which emphasises striking a balance between development and conservation.

Former development secretary and current chief secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor failed in her duty to promote this policy, but nonetheless, there is a consensus that this is the way forward.

Most Hong Kong people support sustainable development that focuses on the quality of life in the development process. No matter how urgent a development plan is, it should in no way override other policies and plans that have been put in place. We still need fairness, transparency and proper consultation in any policy implementation.

At present, the waiting list for the allocation of public housing units is too long. The number of applicants topped 200,000 in September. Simply put, if Leung does

keep his election pledge that he would shorten waiting time to three years or less, the government needs to build at least 70,000 public units per year over the next three years. This is impossible.

And if he really could achieve that, we are talking about bringing 70,000 public and 20,000 private units onto the market every year.

It would certainly have a negative impact on the property market, similar to the expected colossal effect of the plan of 85,000 units per year during the Tung administration.

Alternatively, Leung could rejuvenate industrial buildings and turn them into residential units. This will be a quick and easy way to resolve our housing shortage.

According to government figures, there are 1,400 industrial buildings in Hong Kong, about half of which are zoned for business or other uses. They could be converted as part of the solution for affordable housing.

They could also be rented out to popular supermarkets or restaurants or even used as offices. There are so many alternatives to solve our housing problem, but Leung seems to disregard these feasible choices. The only explanation is that he doesn't want to offend the property developers.

Albert Cheng King-hon is a political commentator. taipan@albertcheng.hk

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It's time to stop taking shots at Leung; let him do his job

Lau Nai-keung says a border 'tsunami' is one of many tough issues

On Sunday around noon when I returned to Hong Kong from Shenzhen via the Huanggang-Lok Ma Chau checkpoint, I was stunned once I stepped out of the building. The compound outside was so full of Hong Kong-bound tourists. After a half-hour navigating over hundreds of suitcases in the direction as indicated by the signage, I came to a dead end. I had to double back with equal difficulty until finally I found the waiting bus. It took a full 90 minutes.

The tourist guide told me this has been the usual scene ever since the new building opened, and the same chaos also takes place daily at the Lowu and Western checkpoints.

Enough is enough, and it is about time we do something about it.

Tourism is one of the pillars of our economy, employing directly and indirectly almost a million workers. The contribution of mainland tourists to this pillar is also undeniable. But as always, too much of a good thing will deteriorate into a nuisance at some point.

The economic value of tourism is now on a relentless trend of diminishing returns, and the accompanying social costs are becoming more obvious by the day. Business appears to be flourishing, but with employment kept low and shop and office rental rising, there is no incentive – in fact, no room – to diversify into other trades. Like me at the checkpoint, Hong Kong is stuck in the swell of mainland tourists,

and there seems to be no way out of it.

It will take political guts and acumen to navigate out of this predicament, but as things are going, this is not a job cut out for C.Y. Leung's administration, which has much more imminent problems fighting for individual as well as collective survival. In the short run, the plan seems to be to just keep the status quo and let the community and infrastructure gradually adjust to it. Leung can also please a lot of people here if he can, in a very high-profile

Hong Kong is stuck in the swell of mainland tourists, and there seems to be no way out of it

way, put a stop to more mainland tourists flooding in.

We all know that this is just cosmetic, but it is what politicians under popular pressure all do. Leung is in a very weak position with no bargaining chips; the only thing he can sacrifice is the city's long-term future.

But we can hardly blame him. He's under constant bombardment from friends and foes alike. Put the blame on the petty politicians whom we either directly or indirectly elected. This is perhaps the price we all

have to pay for a semblance of democracy.

So, let's go back to earlier this year, when opinion polls all indicated a big majority wanted Leung to lead Hong Kong to make changes. That was the general wish of the people and why he got the job.

So far, he and his team have done nothing wrong, because they have not been allowed to do anything. Apart from the character assassination of Leung and the people around him, he and his administration are held responsible for all the sins he inherited from his predecessor. According to the great American democratic tradition, which our dissidents so admire, all political differences and grudges have to be put aside in favour of a general reconciliation when the election is over. It is not happening here.

This is not fair, to C.Y. Leung et al., as well as to you and me. We want change, not witch-hunting. We want progress, not hindrance. We did not elect a saint who has to be "whiter than white", but someone who can plug the leaks.

Since Leung is still standing after the last round of assaults, why don't we give ourselves a chance and this man a break? Let him implement his election pledges, and then let us see. If Leung is that inept, it will show, and then everybody will love to see him go.

Lau Nai-keung is a member of the Basic Law Committee of the NPC Standing Committee, and also a member of the Commission on Strategic Development