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**The Liberal Melodrama of Japan's Opposition**

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The aim of an opposition to a parliamentary majority is to, somewhere along the way, become a site of optimism. But in Japan, no one, by and large, is ever optimistic about the opposition anymore because before the question of whether a party or a political project is a reasonable bet floats a different question: whether they are viscerally credible enough to listen to or argue for. Since the second Abe administration began in 2012, Japan's progressive opposition has been described as weak (Pekkanen and Reed 2018), irrelevant (Scheiner and Thies 2021), and "ephemeral" (Day and Neary 2020). This is not necessarily a conclusion drawn from an analysis of their policies or claims – in other words it is not that they promise too much or too little (though that may be true as well) – it comes instead primarily from the opposition's struggle to break free from past failures, one of which is that it continues to be loosely organized and likely to disintegrate. The problem with Japan's opposition is therefore increasingly thought of as credibility itself, not as a marker of failing to generate believable claims, but derived rather from its lack of status as an object worth investing with one's affects.

My research focuses on what this observation asks of us to explain, then: what is the role of an opposition that structurally fails to be a vessel for optimism? Who holds on to it regardless, and why? What other meanings can we ascribe to failure, and what work does that do to repair a society's relationship to a vision of democracy? I have

kept these questions vague, in a sense, because although I work mostly through problems within political science I do so in a way that is indebted to literary theory and the humanities. For this I heavily draw from the work of political scientist David Leheny, who argued in *Empire of Hope* that if one wants to be attentive to how emotions move through politics, one needs to account for them through representation and narratives (2018, p. 7). In doing so I move away from questions of political outcomes and instead look at how narratives define the opposition, its actions, the meanings they produce, in ways that they themselves cannot always have a say in. This means being attentive to how narratives may work through actors more than be consciously employed to specific ends, because they affirm certain expectations, or a need for catharsis. They, in sum, fulfill desires before they do ends. This paper will introduce one of these narratives and then focus on how the opposition contributed to building and sustaining this narrative.

The story-line this paper focuses on goes something like this: when Abe came back to power with the backing of a conservative support-base that included the vociferous backing of right-wing print media and a shady cabal of elites, it was strongly suspected he would try to make good on his well-known personal ambitions to change the constitution. His goals were almost painfully transparent, although strategically softened by his new-found interest in economic revitalization. As Abenomics distracted a population desperate for political and economic stability (the intervening years under the DPJ had been particularly hellish, as the LDP will repeatedly remind the public), Abe set out to undermine his remaining opposition with anti-democratic tactics such as strategically timed elections, parliamentary ramrodding, and a widely contested

constitutional reinterpretation. Protests erupted, starting with the anti-nuclear movement and evolving into a demand a more unified progressive opposition to stand up to Abe as his rhetoric and actions further polarized Japan between his supporters and his enemies. The opposition began to uncover scandal after scandal (described by Tsujimoto Kiyomi once as a “game of wack-a-mole” [Tsujimoto 2020]) which each confirmed the character of Abe as a venal politician who looks out for himself and his friends above all else. By the end of his tenure he had, if not the constitution, changed the nature of power in Japan from one that respected minority opinion to one that reflected only those forces who are in charge.

This account is what I call, borrowing a concept from Anker (2014), part of the “melodramatic political discourse” of the opposition from 2012 to 2020, and perhaps beyond it. With regards to the parliamentary opposition which is the narrow focus of this paper, it served to stake their identity to a melodramatic representation of Abe Shinzo as a venal, slightly villainous individual – a bad apple and its bunch – who can be understood on the level of personal character. According to Peter Brooks (1976) and reaffirmed by cultural theorists and political scientists such as Lauren Berlant (2001, 2008, 2011) and Elizabeth Anker (2014), melodrama is described as a mode of manichaeistic good-vs-evil conflict and exaggerated gestures meant to signal emotional truths. Another theorist calls it an “aesthetic of the impossible situation” (Goldberg 2016) which evokes the archive of situations and feelings the opposition is left with under conditions of one-party dominance. More specifically, melodrama has been described as politically useful because it creates affectively-charged understandings of complicated situations. It divides between virtuous sufferers of spectacular injuries and

creates a sense of moral imperative that fits the highly mediated environment election cycles occur in (Anker 2014). With regards to the anti-Abe opposition – which consists of an assemblage of elements not limited to the parliamentary opposition – it helps to explain how a story-line became such a convincing and enduring rallying cry even as it visibly failed to lead to increased interest in the parties that espoused it.

### **The (Melo-)Drama of the Liberal Opposition**

For the sake of economy this paper will limit itself to a few representative strands of discourses, starting with that of the current leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Edano Yukio. The decision by liberal politician Edano Yukio to run in a leadership election for the DP in 2017 was the beginning of this melodrama becoming the official register of the opposition. Edano, known in particular for his media appearances during the Fukushima nuclear power plant crisis, would go on to lose the election to Maehara Seiji, who would then disband the party later that year, but the election serves to highlight through their comparison what Abe should signify, using for instance more heightened language for emotional effect. His campaign video promises that the party, for instance, “will end a politics of greed that privatizes the political system, hides the truth, and turns a deaf ear to the voice of the people.” They would then lead Japan back to establishing “a sensible democracy,” putting Japan back on a track that Abe had derailed it from (Minshintô 2017b). In Edano’s telling, Abe’s government is not mistaken nor incompetent in his role, but acting in a self-interested manner. In Maehara’s telling, Abe simply failed to govern effectively and now it is time for the DP to take over. Naturally, Edano’s ultimate goals are the same, but moral clarity overshadows competence in how he envisions getting to that point. When Edano

declared his intention to run to the press he tied it to a personal call to duty impelled by “anger and a sense of crisis” (Minshintô 2017a). Edano’s discursive style is at this stage already laden with an attempt to not just bring gravity to the situation and an opportunity to the opposition, but to create an affective sense of crisis that would translate to a moral imperative that bridges divisions.

After becoming the de facto leader of the opposition, Edano took this style of discourse into a 2018 speech arguing for a vote of no confidence. Edano takes aim in that speech, for example, at the unique crisis that Abe presents, inflating his presence as a corrupting factor.

As such, morals fall apart if the people do not get a sense that their government is neutral and fair, and that responsibility lies squarely with PM Abe for the doubts he engendered [as a result of the morikake scandals]. (loc 921-923)

Abe’s evasion of responsibility and his plan to push through a series of criticized policies leads Edano to the arresting claim that the 196th session of the Diet was the “worst in the history of the postwar constitution” (loc 1765). Such inflations, to not say exaggerations, of alleged political hubris make up the animating drive of melodramatic political discourse within the progressive opposition. Far from appearing motivated by opportunism, these claims are consistently produced and help to elucidate the set of norms that to the opposition appear integral to Japanese democracy.

This discourse is not solely focused on attacking government but also aids in turning the opposition into the true bearers of a capacity for compassion. In doing so, melodramatic political discourse draws from traditions of liberal sentimentality that induce “*feeling* and with it something at least akin to *consciousness* that can lead to

*action*,” (Berlant 2001, p. 126) which Edano follows through with a pragmatic expression of compassion and what it is good for:

We should not fix disparity just simply out of pity. (...) It is directly correlated with increased domestic demand. That is the meaning of economic policy with a mind to increase the wage floor of low income people. (loc 569)

[Abe is] kind to the strong and wealthy, but strict to those in difficult circumstances. I must repeat that it is not just about feeling pity for those people. So long as we do not increase their wage floor and spur on more consumption, so long as the economic policies we have relied on so far continues to do nothing to raise consumption, our nation will not be able to have a stable recovery of its economy. (loc 711)

Melodrama and its sentimentalist modes became in this way a more essential part of the opposition’s claims, but why was it necessary? Ian Neary suggests that Abe’s 2015 policy speech “[claimed] ownership of all the policies in which a centre-left party might have an interest, thus restricting the room for manoeuvre of the DPJ” (section 9 para. 59). The moral weight of melodrama circumvents an interest-based politics of right-left politics to focus more on values of cultural identity that will come to fruition in Edano’s 2021 book, *Edano Vision*. But not everyone in the opposition was united under this particular inflection of melodrama. Even in the 2017 leadership election mentioned above, Edano’s liberal melodrama was seen as a threat to the conservative aspiration of being more like the LDP that Maehara represented.

An until recently relatively little known opposition politician from Kanagawa prefecture, Ogawa Junya is another example of the endurance of aspirational conservatism in the opposition. He became somewhat more known through his appearance in a documentary movie released last year called *Naze Kimi wa Sôri Daijin ni Narenai no ka?* (*Why Can’t You Be the Prime Minister?*). The movie tracks him across a pivotal part of the opposition during the Abe administration and the tumultuous

splits that plagued liberals at the time. The story-line mentioned above is presented in the film as as a problem for him personally, and as such the opposition's electoral chances as a whole. As a self-proclaimed "policy geek," Ogawa has the know-how and seriousness that Japan can benefit from, but the party form in the present day is to him and for his interlocutors an obstacle to his ambition. The movie laments that people like him ultimately lack what is needed of a politician and that he may be the PM that Japan needs *because* he lacks those qualities.

His concern was shared by many others. Since the end of the DPJ government, the LDP has been able to capitalize on the bad taste left in the public's collective mouths to prop up its hold over the government. What the movie showed was how this concern motivated political actors like Ogawa to appeal to their abilities to fix this image, to be fighting for the good of the opposition's future and do its duty towards the citizens of Japan by providing a politics that is positive, constructive, and refrains from ostentatious confrontation. This is repeated by other former DPJ-members like Tamaki who started his own party, the Democratic Party for the People, and kept it from completely merging back with the CDP while citing these sorts of concerns. In actuality, both of them plus others who followed suit had much more policy and ideology-oriented disagreements which were arguably more instrumental in shaping their incentives. But it was possible to justify wildly unpopular internecine battles in this way *because* of a central moral imperative which organized the entire opposition, including those who ostensibly rally against it.

## Conclusion

Melodramatic political discourse has as its core claim that the important thing is that one feels right about something. It is part of a sentimentalist tradition in liberal democracies that equates citizenship with a pedagogy of emotion: we detest inequality, we seek freedom, we want justice. And to repeat these emotions in the consumption of their representation means we do our duty vis a vis the social contract (Berlant 2008). In this case, it teaches citizens in a remarkably efficient manner the proper way to feel about a political leader and the position that places its critics in. Reception is difficult to track, but the continued unpopularity of Abe (the LDP's resilience notwithstanding) during the latter period of his tenure, and with its waxing and waning being ostensibly synchronized to the opposition parties' charges in the Diet heavily imply that the melodramatic political discourse of the progressive opposition shaped people's understanding of the government. That it nevertheless did not translate to support for the opposition parties highlights that its outsize influence does not depend entirely on its credibility as a government-in-waiting. This paper proposes melodramatic political discourse as an interpretive method to understand what we mean when we say that the opposition fails to inspire voters or that it is stuck in an oppositional role.

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