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Viewpoint

Get This Party Started

Japan's political opposition needs a fresh start so voters can have a real choice

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FRANCK ROBICHON / EPA

Ozawa is an old hand at party politics, but does he have what it takes to reform the DPJ?

Winning election as president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) may have seemed like cause for jubilation. But after landing the job two weeks ago, Ichiro Ozawa, 63, now faces a historic challenge: For the DPJ to become a relevant political force, he must reinvent the party he helped to create. If Ozawa succeeds, it will have a crucial impact on the future of democracy in Japan. But is he up to the job?

When Ozawa's Liberal Party joined forces with the DPJ in 2003, many believed that Japan's opposition had finally gained the critical mass it needed to challenge the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has had a chokehold on power for nearly half a century.

Commentators boldly predicted that true two-party politics had finally arrived in Japan. They were wrong. The DPJ has not yet proven to be a political equal of the LDP. It has consistently missed opportunities, failed to

define a coherent message, staked its reputation on trivial issues and repeatedly imploded amid avoidable public embarrassments. Seiji Maehara, 43, whom Ozawa now succeeds, was the most recent casualty. He committed political seppuku when a scandalous e-mail introduced by a DPJ member purporting to prove an LDP member's corruption turned out to be fake.

Once an LDP member himself, Ozawa's 37 years in national politics demonstrate that he is a survivor. He has reigned for years as one of the country's most prominent political outsiders. In 1993, he engineered the formation of the only non-LDP government in Japan's postwar history (though it crumbled in less than a year). In 1993, he wrote *Blueprint for a New Japan*, a book espousing the "normal nation" theory—now very much in vogue—asserting that Japan needs to develop the political, military and diplomatic power commensurate with its economic might in order to become a global leader.

That he has held important positions throughout most of his career is no accident—it's the result of careful planning and lots of backroom deal making. The ability to create stable alliances, avoid alienating former and future supporters and adjust strategies as circumstances require are essential traits of a strong political leader. Ozawa has all of these skills. In taking over the DPJ, his willingness to retain members of Maehara's executive team and appoint another former party president, Naoto Kan, as acting president are smart moves that preserve leadership continuity and keep the DPJ's younger members energized by letting them occupy top positions.

But to make the party viable, Ozawa has more serious work to do than maintain unity and continuity. He must now transform the DPJ from an organization with a very large and fractured platform into a focused campaign-victory juggernaut. Like Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who set out to reinvigorate the LDP by destroying it, Ozawa may need to demolish his party to make it competitive. Koizumi showed that political campaigns can be more than party functionaries reciting platitudes or minivans packed with white-gloved young women waving at pedestrians. He proved that policy can be made and victories achieved not through Japan's much-mythologized "consensus," but with bluster and determination. Most important, Koizumi showed that to stay on top, the game can and must be changed.

Now it's up to the DPJ to undertake a similar transformation, rebuilding itself from the ground up. Ozawa needs to strengthen the party media machine, assemble large and vocal grassroots support organizations and nurture third-party advocacy programs that reinforce the DPJ's own programs and policies.

With an April by-election looming, voters still don't know where the party stands on important issues—nor do many of its members. That's because efforts to forge internal consensus among diverse factions have left the DPJ manifesto vague and diluted. Ozawa must repackage that platform into clear messages that resonate with voters. Does "tax reform" mean tax increases or more money in taxpayers' pockets? Tell the voters which. People want elected officials who say what they mean and do what they say. Ozawa's recent denunciation of Koizumi's controversial annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine is a start. But to regain credibility and win, Ozawa must imbue the party with an identity and a sense of purpose that is greater than official LDP nagging.

Democracy requires partisan debate and conflict. Voters choose between clear alternatives. If the DPJ embraces this concept, it could one day become Japan's ruling party and finally demonstrate how a genuine bipartite political system can work in Japan. In his acceptance speech, Ozawa said: "I will reform myself as well as the party." Although Japanese voters have heard this type of pabulum from politicians countless times in the past, it is vitally important for Ozawa to keep his word. For without the DPJ to keep the LDP on its toes, Japan suffers.

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