Japan's Post Offices: Full-Service Political Battlefields

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

JOETSU, Japan — Koichi Nakashima is the fourth generation of his family to own and run the post office in Makii, a village deep in the mountains near here on Japan’s rural west coast, at a battlefield in the general election in September.

As the postmaster, Mr. Nakashima, 59, handles the villagers’ mail and savings. His workers will even collect money and packages if villagers are too busy to visit the post office. “We know each other and they trust us,” Mr. Nakashima said.

Japan’s post offices, which have deep roots throughout the country, have grown into the world’s largest financial institution, Japan Post, with $3 trillion in assets. But they have also played another, little-understood role here, serving as the bedrock of Japan’s postwar political structure and the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party’s machine.

Another indicator of that role played by the post office was the 1956 resignation of Junichiro Koizumi, who was a minister in the cabinet of Prime Minister Kishi as the post office closed. Koizumi later went on to become president of the main opposition Democratic Party.

A mail service, bank, insurance company and rural welfare system, all in one.

Japan Post is actually providing a form of welfare, especially in rural areas with aging populations.

In Itakura, in Niigata, Makie Miyakoshi, 75, who works a small plot of farmland, tells of a household neighbor living far from the local post office. “Since her legs are weak,” Mrs. Miyakoshi said, “the post office workers come to her house and pack up the stuff she wants to send.”

Post savings accounts have also earned the trust of Japanese, with 85 percent of households holding such deposits. The assets allowed Japan’s leaders to finance national projects, from the war effort before 1945 to the country’s postwar high growth.

It was Katsuji Tsukuda, postmaster at Japan’s most powerful prime minister and a native of Niigata, who put the money held by the post office to use as a huge cash fund for the Liberal Democrats, said Kent Calder, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. First as postal minister in the 1950s and then as prime minister in the 1970s, Mr. Calder said, Mr. Tsukuda protected postal services from oversight by other ministries, so the Liberal Democrats could freely use the assets to reward their backers.

Small businesses that pledged to back the Liberal Democrats were given loans with no collateral and later the defection of post offices as they passed the election to their member of Parliament. Japanese could also take up to 80 percent of their deposits as loans.

Japan Post workers are also significant as influential members of their communities, played a crucial role as vote-getters for the Liberal Democrats.

Koizumi Tatsuyuki, 70, chairman of the national Retired Special Postmasters Association, said each branch of the association had a formal relationship, including financial support, with the local chapter of the Liberal Democratic Party.

His association recently announced that it would no longer support the Liberal Democrats, though it would give local chapters the freedom to decide.

Mr. Calder, said of the former prime minister, Mr. Tanaka: “This was Tsukuda’s heritage. It is akin to Socialism. Japan is the only Socialist country that worked; it’s sometimes said. But Koizumi says it’s no longer working and that’s why he’s serious about privatizing it.”

The defenders of the system say it fostered egalitarianism by giving small businesses and individuals in areas like this easy access to credit. To them, Mr. Koizumi’s reforms and implicit vision of a new Japan are unsettling.

“American efficiency has its merits,” said Mr. Rinodo, the special postmaster. “But I wonder if it is necessary to introduce it to such an extent that we’ll end up losing our Japanese culture.”

Photograph by K. A. BERRIER for The New York Times

Naoa Shinnpo, right, a post office employee in Makii, near Japan’s west coast, handling a life insurance transaction for Sanei Hiramatsu.