Why Japan Seems Content to Be Run by One Party

TOKYO, Sept. 6 — The Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan nearly continuously for half a century, appears headed for another victory in the general election on Sunday — a big one, if polls are correct.

And this will delay, again, the start of a new political era as power is transferred gradually from one party to another, as it is in other democracies.

Japan's democracy is East Asia's oldest, but its ruling party has held power almost as long as the Communist parties in China and North Korea. Younger democracies in South Korea and Taiwan have already experienced changes in ruling parties, and the underpinnings of democracies, from vibrant civil societies to strong, independent media, appear to be flourishing there more than they are here.

Since calling an early election last month, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has shrewdly refashioned the image of the Liberal Democrats into the party of reform by fielding telegraphic women as candidates and portraying opponents of his signature postal privatization bill as reactionaries. The main opposition Democratic Party, whose gains in recent years now face erosion, has looked on helplessly.

In the past, when issues were rarely raised in campaign, politicians ran simply by promising favors to supporters, said Masayasu Kitagawa, a former Liberal Democratic lawmaker and independent governor of Mie Prefecture and now a professor at Waseda University.

"The relationship was that of patron and client," Mr. Kitagawa said. "This was not actually democracy, but rather the opposite of democracy."

To encourage political accountability and voter awareness, Mr. Kitagawa has been the leading proponent of election "manifestoes" detailing parties' agendas. The word and concept was little understood in the general election two years ago, but it has taken root this time, with both main parties professing their manifestoes.

"I'd be satisfied if the introduction of manifestoes made Japanese realize that what they had believed to be democracy was an illusion," he said.

The illusion was formed in 1953 with the foundation of the Liberal Democratic Party, which focused single-mindedly on turning Japan into an economic power. With strong support from the United States and the powerful bureaucracy, as well as effective pork-barrel politics, the party's grip on power went unchallenged for decades.

\[\text{LETTER FROM ASIA/ Norimitsu Onishi}\\
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Campaign posters of the Democratic Party, the government's main opposition.

\[\text{Internal factions vie for power, but decisions were made and some prime ministers even chosen in backroom deals. Because of the cold war and Japan's military dependence on the United States, the long-time opposition, the Socialists, were never taken seriously. Voters feared that 'the friendly Japan-U.S. relationship would be destroyed and Japan would become poor once more if the LDP, government collapsed and the Socialists came to power,' said Eiji Ogata, an associate professor of policy management at Keio University. A split inside the party led to a 16-month quitter from power in 1983. During that brief period, however, a coalition of minor parties pushed through far-reaching reforms, including changing multi-seat districts into single-seat ones, that would eventually weaken the dominance of the Liberal Democrats. The present main opposition Democratic Party, which was formed in 1960, has been gaining votes in recent years, especially in urban areas. But the half-century rule by a single party has stunted the growth of Japanese democracy, experts say, and its effects are still being felt today. Civil society remains weak. Although private organizations focusing on welfare and international aid have mushroomed in recent years, those delving into delicate issues, like human rights, freedom of information and the workings of government, wield little influence. Japanese feel little personal connection with their country's democracy, said Yukito Miki, executive director of Information Clearinghouse Japan, a private group that fights to gain access to government-held information. "Japanese citizens are ultimate free riders," Mr. Miki said. "Supporters from the opposition are necessary to form a base for democracy, but Japanese people don't seem to feel they are the ones who should support it." The Liberal Democrats' grip on power has also limited the dissemination of information. For instance, the Internet has raised interest in elections elsewhere and was widely credited with helping propel South Korea's president, Roh Moo Hyun, to power in 2003. But here in one of the world's most wired countries, election law bars Web sites from promoting candidates for a specific election and candidates from renewing their home pages during the 10-day campaign period. The Liberal Democrats have maintained the restrictions because their core supporters tend to be older and are not likely to be heavy Internet users. Yoshihito Hori, an entrepreneur, recently created the YES! Project, a Web site that encourages young Japanese to vote and discuss politics. "By using the Internet, you can reach people in their 20's to their early 40's, people who were uninterested in politics," Mr. Hori said.

With no history of power alternation, the mass media tend to stick to the Liberal Democratic Party's line. In this election, the press has ignored issues like Mr. Koizumi's policy toward Asian countries or his deployment of troops to Iraq that likely hurt the party at the ballot box. (The opposition Democratic Party has said it would withdraw Japanese troops from Iraq and repair relations with its Asian neighbors.) Since April 2004, no major Japanese news organization has sent a journalist to cover the Japanese troops in Samua, in southern Iraq. Just as these pillars of Japanese democracy tend to be temorous, experts doubt the soundness of the main Democratic Party's opposition. The party, made up of former Liberal Democrats, Socialists and other groups, famously lacks unity and could dogmatize as it loses votes. But Park Cheol Hee, an expert in Japanese politics at Seoul National University, said a more mature democracy was set to emerge here.

"This is the last stage of one-party rule," Mr. Park said. "I don't think the LDP will rule for another 50 years — possibly another 3 or 10. The Democratic Party might fail this time, but they will try again. This will eventually produce a competitive, two-party system and lead Japan to a true democracy."\]