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South Korea leaves Japan in the dust

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South China Morning Post, June 07, 2010

Contrasting political events in South Korea and Japan underline a fundamental shift: South Korea is rising; Japan continues to fall. In Japan, four prime ministers have resigned in four years, and public support for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), at 14 per cent, signifies repudiation of the second ruling party in eight months.

Outgoing prime minister Yukio Hatoyama's fumbling of the Okinawa military base controversy and South Korean cohesion after North Korea sank the ship Cheonan are only ripples on top of deeper tidal movements. South Korea's leaders have been coaxing a reluctant public into the modern world while Japan's leaders have been cultivating reactionary interest groups and cosseting bad habits. A dozen years ago, both Japan and South Korea were melting down financially. Both had low birth rates and prospective population declines. Homogeneous populations displayed an insular mentality that endangered their previous success because of competition from more cosmopolitan societies like China and India.

In both, traditional Confucian paternalism kept women largely out of the workforce. South Korea was poorer, with deeper social and economic problems and the special dilemma of North Korea.

From their weaker position, however, Korean leaders have dragged their country forward while Japanese leaders have not. Former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi reformed sufficiently to avert Japanese economic catastrophe and got strong public support in an election that repudiated opponents of reform. But his successors empowered the most reactionary factions of his party, eschewed further fundamental reforms and re-employed legislators earlier expelled for opposing reform.

By contrast, in South Korea, former president Kim Dae-jung's successors have built on his reforms. The country evolved into a true competitive democracy, with an actively engaged citizenry. South Korean presidents have steadily pressed economic reform and globalisation on a reluctant public. South Korea has enriched its labour force with Vietnamese, Pakistanis, Indians and others. Large numbers of science and technology PhDs have helped turn Korea into a regional research and development centre. Meanwhile, Japan strongly resists foreign workers, and advanced foreign degrees can hinder a Japanese career.

The South Korean government has been empowering women; in Japan, women who want a career must largely eschew family life.

Wide-ranging consequences follow. Korea has stable, purposeful government while Japan has unstable, directionless leadership. The South Korean economy has begun to eat Japan's lunch. Hyundai cars are displacing Toyotas at the top of the reliability charts. Samsung and Apple are crushing Sony. China can't begin to approach Korean levels in research and development, patents and sophisticated services.

South Korea's rising influence is as consequential as Japan's decline.



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