

〈Editorial〉

Populism in Japan: Fascist, neoliberal, and leftist variants (2)

Ulv Hanssen

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5. The emergence of neoliberal populism after the end of the 55 system

(Continued from the previous issue)

The LDP's loss to a shaky eight-party coalition in 1993 marked the end of the 55 system. The end of this system also loosely coincided with two other momentous collapses: the collapse of Japan's bubble economy, and the collapse of the Soviet Union which brought an end to the Cold War. The first collapse marked the beginning of a long period of slow growth that continues to this day. The second collapse had a disastrous impact on left-wing parties around the world, as their policies were discredited and the neoliberal policies of the Cold War winners gained momentum. Japan was no exception to this trend. The once-mighty Socialist Party suffered a string of disastrous election losses in the 1990s and was relegated to insignificance. The LDP quickly regained its political hegemony, but it now had to contend with new forces

inside the party that were heavily influenced by the *zeitgeist* of neoliberalism, and which pushed the party in the direction of market liberalization and small government. Such policies, they claimed, had helped the USA win the Cold War, and could also save the ailing Japanese economy. It was these forces that would spur the emergence of populism in Japan. Unlike the ethnocentric populism in Europe and the left-wing variants in Latin America, the populism that emerged in Japan around the turn of the millennium was strictly of the neoliberal type.¹⁾ Japanese populism thus demonstrates Mudde's point that populism is itself no more than a 'thin-centered' ideology and needs to be combined with other, thicker ideologies, such as neoliberalism, to find a concrete expression.

The first and most famous example of this kind of neoliberal populism in Japan was the politics propagated by the highly popular Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (2001-2006). Koizumi railed against the bureaucrats who, he felt, were steering Japanese policymaking despite being unelected, as well as politicians within the LDP, his own party, who were beholden to special interests, such as the farmers. In the 2001 LDP presidential election, he famously vowed to 'destroy' [*bukkowasu*] the old LDP. His neoliberal program consisted of reducing the size and role of the government, eliminating wasteful spending, ending subsidies to unproductive industries, increasing competition, and privatizing budget-draining public corporations. The old LDP, he argued, had created all these problems, so his political target was just as much the old guard of his own party as it was the opposition parties. Two of his most important political goals were the privatization of the public corporations in charge of construction and maintenance of Japan's highways, and the privatization of Japan's postal services. The first goal ended in failure as Koizumi eventually had to compromise with the powerful 'highway tribe' [*dōro-zoku*] inside the LDP, but on the second goal, Koizumi refused to budge and went to previously unimaginable lengths

1 Nakakita, Kōji (2020) 'Chiiki kara no popyurizumu' [Populism from the districts], in Mizushima, Jirō (ed.) *Popyurizumu to iu chōsen: Kiro ni tatsu gendai demokurashī* [The populist challenge: Modern democracy at a crossroads], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, p. 285-313; Yoshida, 'Populism "made in Japan,"' p. 288-299.

to get his way. Just like the highways, the postal services had many powerful defenders inside the LDP, so Koizumi's privatization project met resistance at every step of the way. In 2005 Koizumi sent his privatization bill to the Diet where it narrowly passed the Lower House, with 37 LDP members voting against it, but was defeated in the Upper House. An outraged Koizumi expelled those who had voted against the bill from the party and called a snap election in which he fielded so-called 'assassins' [*shikaku*] – young and popular candidates – to go after the dissenters in their districts. Koizumi made it clear that the election would be centered solely on the issue of postal reform, and thus would function as a popular referendum on the issue: 'I want to clearly ask all the people (through the election) whether (they are) for or against postal privatization.'²⁾ Koizumi vowed to step down if the LDP and its coalition partner Kōmeitō failed to win a majority, thus showcasing his resolve. Many LDP members were appalled by Koizumi's theatrical and vengeful tactics of deploying 'assassins' against dissenters. The strategy was a great success, however, as Koizumi's unconventional grit and determination appealed to a public that had gotten increasingly tired of bland politicians who only talked but never acted. The LDP won 296 of 480 seats, its biggest electoral win ever. Koizumi naturally took this as a mandate to carry out his postal reform, and the privatization bill passed both houses in 2006.

From the above, it should be clear that Koizumi was an adherent of a thick-centered neoliberal ideology, but to what extent was this combined with the thin-centered ideology of populism?

Ōtake Hideo has characterized Koizumi as a populist because of his 'binary and theatrical style of politics.'³⁾ If we consider Koizumi's tendency to draw a sharp divide between the 'reform forces' and the 'resistance forces,' and his dramatic decision to

2 Kajimoto, Tetsushi (2005) 'Koizumi calls election for Sept. 11: Seeks voter mandate to resurrect postal reform,' *The Japan Times*, August 9, retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2005/08/09/national/koizumi-calls-election-for-sept-11/#.X0oV64uRVPY>.

3 Ōtake, Hideo (2006) *Koizumi Junichirō Popyurizumu no Kenkyū: Sono Senrayku to Shuhō* [A study of Koizumi Junichirō populism: Its strategies and methods]. Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha, p. 4.

call a snap election over postal reform, we can certainly say that Koizumi's political style was both binary and theatrical. However, if we follow the conceptualization of populism outlined in this article, style is not sufficient to make someone a populist. Slightly reformulating the populist characteristics mentioned in the beginning, this paper understands a populist as someone who draws up a sharp division between a morally superior people and a morally inferior elite, and passionately sides with the former in a struggle to reclaim democratic powers that have been unjustly monopolized by the latter. In Koizumi's case, there can be no doubt about his antagonistic attitude towards the elites. For Koizumi the elites were the old guard in the LDP who nurtured close relations with a myriad of particular constituents, as well as the unelected bureaucrats who exercised undue influence over policymaking and often ended up in jobs in the very industries they had regulated as public servants. His invocation of a pure and morally superior people, on the other hand, is far less obvious. Koizumi did certainly frame his neoliberal agenda as an attempt to restore the people's trust in politics by offering a more transparent type of politics. In his inauguration speech, he stated that 'everyone who is involved in politics or administration must solemnly accept the criticism of the people, and by sincerely carrying out our duties, we must rebuild a relationship of trust.'⁴ Moreover, his decision to essentially turn the 2005 snap election into a referendum on postal reform was in line with populists' preference for direct rather than indirect democracy, as the former offers the people unmediated participation in the decision-making process.⁵ Nonetheless, it is hard to find any consistent message in Koizumi's rhetoric that seeks to frame him as a unique defender of the people. Of course, Koizumi makes frequent references to the people, but he does not seem to claim any unique ability to represent them that exceeds that of other politicians. Moreover, he openly admitted that his structural reforms would hurt the people in the short-term and asked them to 'endure the pain.'⁶ This departs from typical

4 Koizumi, Junichirō (2001) Statement made on May 7, Diet session 151, Lower House, Plenary Session 27, statement 3, retrieved from the *Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shisutemu* [Diet debate search system], <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=115105254X02720010507¤t=1>.

5 Taggart, *Populism*, pp. 103-105.

populist messaging in which immediate salvation for the people is often a key promise. In summary, one could say that Koizumi scores high on antagonism against the elites, but lower on taking the side of the people. The latter characteristic does not disqualify him from the populist label, however. In line with Laclau, we should conceptualize populism as a matter of degree, so Koizumi was less of a populist than the definitional ideal type, but still considerably more so than standard, consensus-oriented LDP prime ministers of the past. In other words, Koizumi's populism was of the weak variety.

5.1. The second wave of neoliberal populism

The next wave of neoliberal populism took place in the 2010s, with the emergence of Osaka Governor and later Mayor Hashimoto Tōru and Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko. What is particular about this populist wave is that it mainly played out in local rather than national politics. Hashimoto, a celebrity lawyer, became the governor of Osaka in 2008, and established the local party Ōsaka Ishin no Kai (OIK, Osaka Restoration Association) in 2010 with the primary policy of changing Osaka's prefectural status from an urban prefecture [*fu*] to a metropolis [*to*]. The goal of this policy was to elevate Osaka to the same status as Tokyo, Japan's only officially designated metropolis, and thus increase the former's competitiveness. Hashimoto's OIK was strongly motivated by neoliberalist market principles, and Hashimoto explicitly pointed out Koizumi as an ideological source of inspiration.⁷⁾ Much like Koizumi, Hashimoto lashed out against ineffective bureaucrats and beholden politicians (especially in the LDP), as well as 'local councils, labor unions, and school councils,' which he saw as inhibiting the effectiveness of governance, business, and education.⁸⁾ In 2012, Hashimoto (this time as Osaka mayor), together with former Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō, formed Nippon Ishin no Kai (NIK, Japan Restoration Association) to compete at the national level. The party has enjoyed some electoral success nationally, but generally struggles

6 Ōtake, *Koizumi Junichirō Popyurizumu*, p. 4.

7 Nakakita, 'Chiiki kara no popyurizumu,' p. 289.

8 Yoshida, 'Populism "made in Japan,"' p. 290.

to garner support outside of Osaka.⁹⁾ NIK has also been riven with internal divisions and undergone a series of mergers and splits with other parties. Today NIK has 11 (of 465) seats in the Lower House and 16 (of 245) seats in the Upper House. After Hashimoto's big plan of giving Osaka metropolis status narrowly failed to pass a 2015 referendum, he stepped down from politics.

Soon after Hashimoto retired, a new neoliberal populist movement formed in Tokyo, centered on the city's governor, Koike Yuriko. In January 2017, Koike founded Tomin Fāsuto no Kai (TF, Tokyoites First), a local Tokyo-based party espousing a type of neoliberal policies that were similar to those of Hashimoto, but perhaps somewhat milder (for example, Koike does not attack labor unions). Koike, who was one of Koizumi's hand-picked 'assassins' in the 2005 snap election, entered politics in 1992 and worked her way up the ranks of the LDP, serving in several ministerial positions, and was open about her aspirations to become Japan's first female prime minister. In 2016 Koike successfully ran for Tokyo governor, against the wishes of the LDP which threw its weight behind another candidate (she was reelected in 2020). In 2017 Koike left the LDP and established the aforementioned Tokyoites First. In the May 2017 local election, the TF and TF-endorsed candidates secured an overwhelming majority of the seats, ending the LDP's dominance in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly. As Tokyo governor, Koike has halved the governor's salary and pledged to increase the office's level of transparency,¹⁰⁾ thus differentiating herself from the previous Tokyo governors who often were criticized as lacking in this regard. She was especially critical of the opaque process that led to former Governor Ishihara's decision to move Tokyo's famed Tsukiji fish market to a new and reportedly polluted location. Koike accused Ishihara of jeopardizing the health of Tokyo citizens and even set up an investigative committee in which Ishihara was interrogated. Koike is officially only a special advisor to the TF, but the party is far more centered on her persona than was the case with Hashimoto and his OIK/NIK.¹¹⁾ Her image appears on the party's posters and she is heavily involved in the

9 Nakai, "Hashimoto gekijō."

10 Yoshida, 'Populism "made in Japan,"' p. 290.

shaping of its policy agenda and organization. Its platform reflects Koike's ideological orientation, focusing on spending cuts and transparent politics. Similar to Hashimoto, Koike also tried to impact national politics by establishing the national party Kibō no Tō (KNT, The Party of Hope) in 2017. KNT brought onboard a number of members from the opposition Democratic Party, but ultimately failed to make a splash in the October 2017 general election. Koike subsequently resigned as party leader.

Both Hashimoto and Koike displayed populist traits, but in both cases it must be said that their anti-elite antagonism is far clearer than their celebration of the morality of the people. Nakai Ayumu has written about the populism of both Hashimoto and Koike, and a similar impression emerges upon reading his analyses. The antagonism is certainly present. Hashimoto railed against an ineffective bureaucracy, corrupt establishment politicians, and unfair media. In the words of Nakai, 'after assuming the post of Osaka prefectural governor in 2008, Hashimoto Tōru began using populist, political methods, whereby he would designate the various special interests that opposed "reform" as "enemies" and sought to delegitimize them by assuming a confrontational stance.'¹²⁾ A similar pattern can be seen in the case of Koike. As Tokyo governor, Koike sharply criticized the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office and labelled its decision-making process as a 'black box' which she promised to pry open with transparent politics. Her attacks against former governor Ishihara over his shadowy decision to move the Tsukiji fish market were particularly tough, even going as far as to summon him to hearings. In the 2017 Tokyo metropolitan election, Koike lashed out against the pork-barreling LDP veterans, or the 'assembly mafia bosses' [*togikai no don*], as she labeled them.¹³⁾ Hashimoto and Koike's confrontational stance against the old guard, does indeed reflect the anti-elite antagonism that is characteristic of populism, but, as with Koizumi, the elevation of the people as morally superior

11 Nakakita, 'Chiiki kara no popyurizumu,' p. 295.

12 Nakai, "'Hashimoto gekijō,'" p. 354.

13 Nakai, Ayumu (2020) 'Popyurisuto chiji to iten no seiji: Tōkyō, Tsukiji Shijō no iten no jirei' [A populist governor and the politics of transfer: The case of the transfer of the Tsukiji market in Tokyo], *Sandai Hōgaku* 53(3/4), pp. 159-160.

is not a strong feature of their politics. Although Nakai highlights ‘references to the people’ as a primary characteristic of populism,¹⁴⁾ there are only a few examples of such references in his analyses of Hashimoto and Koike. He points out that Hashimoto was the first Japanese politician to use social media effectively, and this enabled him to communicate directly with the people in a way that no other politician had done before.¹⁵⁾ Moreover, Hashimoto’s success in turning elections into de facto referendums for or against the singular issue of metropolis status, is in line with the populist proclivity for direct democracy. In the case of Koike, the most obvious reference to the people is the name of the local party she created, Tokyoites First. Its resemblance to former US President Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan is arguably a big reason why Koike has been given the populist label by the media. However, a more substantive populist trait is her prioritization of ‘the gut feeling of the people (Tokyoites)’ and the “‘common sense’ of ordinary people’ over expert advice.¹⁶⁾ This was most apparent in her decision to delay the transfer of the fish market from Tsukiji to the reportedly polluted site in Toyosu, despite the conclusion of an expert panel that the site was safe. However, her trust in the people’s ‘common sense’ only went so far, as she eventually allowed to transfer to take place. Apart from these token acclamations of the moral superiority of the people, there is little in Nakai’s analyses that suggests that Hashimoto and Koike’s reverence of the people was particularly deep-rooted. Arima Shinsaku has argued that Koike gained broad support from Tokyoites by ‘fighting against the LDP members in the local council, while positioning herself and the TF on the side of the ordinary Tokyo residents.’¹⁷⁾ However, he offers few examples of how this side-taking was reflected in her language and actions, and concedes that, ‘while there is a populist aspect [to Koike] in which she stands on the side of the people and skillfully exploits ordinary people’s

14 Nakai, ‘Popyurisuto chiji,’ p. 161.

15 Nakai, “‘Hashimoto gekijō,’” p. 359-361.

16 Nakai, ‘Popyurisuto chiji,’ p. 181.

17 Arima, Shinsaku (2017) ‘Gekijō-gata popyurizumu no shiten kara Koike tochiji o yomitoku’ [Analyzing Governor Koike from a perspective of theatrical populism], *Seikatsu Keizai Seisaku*, June, p. 20.

“frustration and anger” towards established politics and local politics,’ what ultimately won her popular support was her ‘theatrical style of politics.’¹⁸⁾ This seems like a reasonable observation. As for Hashimoto, it could be said that his obsession with ‘self-responsibility’ [*jiko sekinin*] sometimes made him sound more elitist than populist. In a tense debate with high school students concerned about his plans to cut education subsidies, Hashimoto scolded the students in a decidedly non-populist manner, telling them that if they wanted change, they should ‘become politicians’ because ‘in today’s world self-responsibility is the principle. No one’s going to save you.’¹⁹⁾

This means that the key cases that have been labeled Japanese populism by Japanese academics – from the right-wing terrorists in the 1930s, through Koizumi in the 2000s, to Hashimoto and Koike in the 2010s – have lacked a real notion that the people should be the source of political power. This does not necessarily disqualify Koizumi, Hashimoto and Koike as populists, as populism should be seen as a matter of degree, but their populism should be considered as rather weak. Its weakness notwithstanding, populism represents a break with the traditional, consensus-oriented politics of postwar Japan and, as such, requires explanation.

5.2. Why did (neoliberal) populism emerge in the 2000s?

Japan has avoided the more extreme forms of right-wing populism that have plagued Europe and the USA in recent years, but the emergence of (weak) neoliberal populism in Japan is still an unusual phenomenon that requires explanation. Why did populism emerge on the political stage in Japan in the 2000s after being absent throughout the entire Cold War, and why was it neoliberal? One general explanation for the emergence of populism can be found in the end of the Cold War structure. The Cold War provided an ideological framework with capitalist and communist blocs in which it was easy to know who were friends and enemies. In this structure, the communist bloc was the

18 Arima, ‘Gekijō-gata popyurizumu,’ p. 20.

19 Fumin (2016) ‘Hashimoto chiji, yōsha nai tōron, joshikōsei o nakaseta’ [Governor Hashimoto in merciless debate, makes high school girl cry], *YouTube*. April 28, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NS3IxrA8Co.

undisputed enemy in most democracies around the world. This framing was accepted by a majority of the population in democratic states, so the establishment parties were generally seen as defending the nation from this enemy. When the Cold War ended, however, it was no longer clear who the enemy was, and this ideological uncertainty²⁰⁾ opened up a space for populists to reformulate new enemies internal to the state. It was no longer enough for establishment parties to champion anti-communism to secure support. Domestic issues, such as inequality and immigration, took on renewed importance. Kunisue Norito has argued that, by identifying new enemies, populists offer to ‘bring back the order of blocs that was lost with the end of the Cold War.’²¹⁾ In other words, by pointing to lazy immigrants and corrupt politicians, populists can offer ontological security and a sense of superiority to people who, to their shock, discovered that their social standing had slipped while they were occupied with the Cold War rivalry.²²⁾

While this explanation perhaps tells us something about the emergence of populism around the world, it says little about the particular circumstances in Japan, and even less about why Japan’s populism was neoliberal. In order to understand the rise of Japan’s neoliberal form of populism, it is necessary to look closer at the particular developments in Japan. We may recall that Mizushima Jirō pointed out that Japan’s high membership rate in intermediary organizations, such as neighborhood associations, labor unions, and interest groups, tied most Japanese, formally or informally, to the mainstream parties under the 55 system. In the post-Cold War period membership in these organizations has dropped dramatically. While only 17 percent of adults did not participate in any such organization in 1989, the percentage of non-members had increased to over 44 by 2018.²³⁾ This means that the mainstream parties

20 Mudde, ‘The populist zeitgeist,’ p. 555.

21 Kunisue, *Popyurizumu-ka suru sekai*, p. 43.

22 Yoshida, Tōru (2018) ‘Popyurizumu seiritsu no rekishiteki jōken: Kisei erito wa inobeshon wo okoseru ka’ [The historical conditions for the formation of populism: Will the established elites be able to bring about innovation?], *Chūōkōron*, December, pp. 46-47.

23 Mizushima, ‘Chūkan dantai no suitai,’ p. 33.

have become increasingly unable to rely on their affiliated organizations to mobilize support. Populists, Mizushima claims, are now able to solicit support from a growing pool of unaffiliated [*musoshiki-sō*] voters who have no particular loyalties to the mainstream parties. This possibility is particularly evident in the big cities, where organizational membership is lower than in the districts.

Mizushima also points to the diminishing importance of Japan's traditional media as a factor that creates possibilities for populists. As the Japanese population becomes less dependent on newspapers, TV and radio for news coverage and instead turn to the internet for information, it becomes possible for populists to use the internet to bypass traditional editorial processes that tend to give precedence to the established parties.²⁴⁾ This is certainly not a Japan-specific phenomenon, but given Japan's extraordinarily high newspaper readership, the media in Japan has arguably created a bigger hurdle for political outsiders than elsewhere in the world. In 2008 as much as 90 percent of the adult population reported that they read morning newspapers, but a decade later this number had fallen to 68 percent and newspaper readership was surpassed for the first time by online news readership (71 percent).²⁵⁾ Mizushima writes further that the increased dissemination of populist messaging on the internet has created spillover effects, whereby mainstream media is increasingly compelled to report on populist parties and politicians due to the general interest they have sparked through their internet outreach.

The diminishing role of intermediary organizations and mainstream media are unquestionably important factors behind the rise of Japanese populism, but given the widely reported connection between populism and economic crises,²⁶⁾ it is also worthwhile to investigate this relation in a Japanese context. The bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s marked the definite end of the Japanese economic

24 Mizushima, 'Chūkan dantai no suitai,' p. 37-51.

25 The Japan Times (2018) 'More Japanese read news online than in newspapers for first time, survey finds,' January 20, retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/20/national/media-national/japanese-read-news-online-newspapers-first-time-survey-finds/>.

26 E.g. Kriesi, 'Populism.'

miracle which had seen annual double-digit growth rates in the 1960s, and lower, but still impressive, growth rates in the 1970s and 1980s. Ironically, it could be argued that some of the policies that had kept populism at bay under the 55 system – privileged treatment of the rural districts and vulnerable industries – carried within them the seeds of populism, particularly the neoliberal variant. As the economy slowed, there was naturally a need for an explanation of what had gone wrong. Neoliberals pointed to lack of transparency, wasteful budgets, subsidies to unproductive industries, government control, and regulations on the corporate sector as the culprits. The old LDP-led ‘developmental state’ with its administrative guidance and economic plans became an easy target. Neoliberals had an easy solution to Japan’s economic woes: let the market work its magic without government interference. The neoliberal logic enjoyed unprecedented appeal after the Cold War since it was widely seen as the ideology that had defeated communism, and if it could flaunt such an impressive achievement, it surely could fix the Japanese economy too. This was at least the point people like Koizumi tried to sell:

‘Generally speaking, there is socialism and liberal economies. There is the idea that the government should intervene and the state should do everything, and there is the idea that government will not be allowed to intervene. [...] Look at East and West Germany, look at North and South Korea, look at the former Soviet Union and the USA. [...] It is clear for everyone to see that the countries that insist on government and taxes, and insist that bureaucrats must be involved, these countries have lowered people’s living standards far more than the liberal economies. That is why I’m making the point that new prospects will emerge if we let the private sector do what it can on its own.’²⁷⁾

Japanese people were, moreover, beginning to lose patience with the seemingly nev-

27 Koizumi, Junichirō (2002) Statement made on January 24, Diet session 154, Lower House, Budget Committee 3, statement 78, retrieved from *Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shisutemu* [Diet debate search system], <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=115405261X00320020124¤t=3>.

er-ending string of corruption scandals in the political world. While many Japanese were willing to look through their fingers at corruption scandals during the years of high growth, such scandals became increasingly hard to swallow when the economy ground to a halt. A huge influence-peddling scandal in 1988 (the Recruit scandal) involving not only politicians, but also bureaucrats, seemed to be the last straw and greatly damaged public trust in the LDP-led order, while it simultaneously increased the appeal of neoliberal calls for transparency. Koizumi's highly popular promise to 'destroy' his own party and end the era of clientelist politics took place in this context. Neoliberal diagnoses of Japan's economic problems were just a short step away from populist criticisms of the particular elites that had created these problems. The 'illiberal'²⁸⁾ policies Japan had followed under the leadership of the LDP made the LDP elites vulnerable to attacks from a neoliberal angle once the economy stagnated and people were looking for someone to blame. The 'lost decade' of the 1990s thus made neoliberalism a natural companion of populism in Japan.

Finally, Toru Yoshida has offered a convincing institutional explanation for why much of Japan's neoliberal populism has taken place at the local executive (governors and mayors) level in the big cities rather than at the national level. Yoshida attributes the existence of neoliberal populism at the local executive level to what is called the dual representation system [*nigen daihyō-sei*] under which local assembly members and executives are elected in separate elections. While local assembly members are elected in a multitude of smaller administrative districts, governors and mayors are elected in prefecture-wide or city-wide elections. This is different from the national level where the executive (prime minister) is elected by the Diet members. The dual representation system means that local assembly members and executives often try to appeal to different constituencies. Yoshida argues that local assembly candidates tend to demand more spending in order to channel it to localized interests through pork-barrel methods. On the other hand, '[c]andidates for executive office must appeal to geographically dispersed constituencies, and especially to voters in urban areas, who tend to be

28 Lind, 'Nationalist in a liberal order.'

relatively highly educated and working in the service industry.²⁹⁾ These urban voters are generally disadvantaged by pork-barrel politics that redistribute wealth from the cities to the countryside, and tend to be critical of such practices. ‘Therefore,’ Yoshida continues, ‘a rational strategy for executive candidates is to criticize the local assembly and its councilors, blaming them for prioritizing the particular interests of a specific sector or industry that they represent.’³⁰⁾ This creates tensions between the executive and the local assembly members and, thus, opens up a space for neoliberal populism at the local executive level, particularly in big cities, such as Tokyo and Osaka.³¹⁾ While this may explain the emergence of populist executives, such as Hashimoto in Osaka and Koike in Tokyo, it also highlights the fact that there are still significant hurdles for populists outside of the big cities. Mizushima argues that it is unlikely that we will see populist success in the rural areas because the LDP still dominates the countryside and rural voters still benefit more from LDP policies than those of other parties:

‘Compared to other countries, local resentment towards the government is relatively limited in Japan. Even if there is some movement towards anti-establishment parties among the unaffiliated voters in the three major cities (Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya), it would be very difficult for this [trend] to spread nationwide.’³²⁾

In summary, there are various reasons for the emergence of neoliberal populism in Japan after the end of the Cold War. On a general level, populists around the world benefitted from the end of the stable Cold War structure, as the loss of the communist enemy facilitated the designation of new enemies internal to the state. In Japan’s case, populism was also boosted by the weakening of intermediary organizations that had

29 Yoshida, ‘Populism “made in Japan,”’ p. 295.

30 Yoshida, ‘Populism “made in Japan,”’ p. 295.

31 See also Nakai, ‘Popyurisuto chiji,’ p. 164-165.

32 Tahara, Sōichirō and Jirō Mizushima (2019) ‘Popyurizumu kara yomitoku minshushugi no genzai’ [Understanding the present state of democracy by analyzing populism], *Ushio*, April, p. 115.

affiliated voters to the establishment parties. This trend made it possible for populists to realistically compete for a growing pool of unaffiliated voters without specific party loyalties. Furthermore, the weakening of Japan's mainstream media and growing popularity of alternative online platforms for information dissemination allowed populists to bypass an institutional hurdle that previously had ignored their messages.

On the more specific question of why Japan's populism emerged in a neoliberal form, it is possible to point to the problems Japan was facing after the end of the Cold War. Unlike many other democracies, Japan's problems were not related to high levels of job outsourcing or immigration, but rather to economic stagnation. This made the pork-barrel politics that partly had created this economy a natural target for populists. The neoliberal populist appeal was further strengthened by the notorious presence of corruption in Japanese politics, as well as the momentum neoliberalism enjoyed around the world as an ideology that had defeated communism. Finally, neoliberal populism seems to be particularly well suited for governors and mayors of big cities, given that their constituents disprove of traditional pork-barrel politics that favor the countryside. Adopting neoliberal populism allows big city executives to distinguish themselves from the beholden establishment politicians on the national and local levels.

6. Whither Japanese populism? Reiwa Shinsengumi and a new left-wing populism

Yoshida argues that 'Japan has experienced only neoliberal populism,³³⁾' but in 2019 Japan was introduced to a new type of populism with the establishment of the small party Reiwa Shinsengumi (RSG). RSG's entry into the Upper House in 2019 arguably marked 'the first appearance of left-wing populism in Japan.'³⁴⁾ RSG is led by the charismatic ex-actor Yamamoto Tarō, who entered politics in 2013 singularly on an anti-nuclear power platform. While the opposition to nuclear power is still a key element of his agenda, RSG has a much more diverse policy platform that resembles

33 Yoshida, 'Populism "made in Japan,"' p. 290.

34 Nakakita, 'Chiiki kara no popyurizumu,' p. 285.

that of left-wing populists in Europe and the USA. RSG's top policy priorities are decreasing and ultimately abolishing the consumption tax, making the corporate tax more progressive, increasing the minimum hourly wage to 1500 yen through government subsidies, canceling student debt, and increasing social welfare in general. Despite his own popularity, Yamamoto chose to put two severely handicapped candidates on the top of the party's list in the 2019 Upper House election. Both candidates were successful, but the party did not get enough votes to secure a seat for Yamamoto himself. The prioritization of two handicapped candidates did, however, earn the small party far more media publicity than would otherwise have been the case, and this trend only continued after the election as the Diet had to be reconstructed to accommodate the special needs of RSG's wheelchair-bound parliamentarians. Yamamoto is thus currently without a Diet seat. He challenged Koike Yuriko in the 2020 Tokyo gubernatorial election, but finished in a distant third place.

As its policy priorities indicate, RSG is clearly on the left wing of the ideological spectrum, but can Yamamoto and his party be described as populists? Yamamoto himself has accepted this label, saying 'if saving people is populism, then, yes, I am a populist.'³⁵ Axel Klein has investigated whether RSG can be characterized as 'left populism' and concludes that RSG is not a left-wing populist party because, as he claims, 'there is neither a Manichean antagonism nor any anti-pluralist or illiberal element in RSG's texts.'³⁶ To use anti-pluralism and illiberalism as criteria for left-wing populism is problematic since such qualities are typically the staples of right-wing, rather than left-wing, populism. In fact, advocates of left-wing populism often differentiate themselves from right-wing populists by calling for pluralism and liberal values.³⁷ Under Klein's criteria one would be hard pressed to find an example of a left-

35 Nakamura, Kasane (2019) 'Reiwa, Yamamoto Tarō daihyō "watashi wa popyurisuto desu." Hatori Shinichi mōningu shō de "saha popyurizumu" to no shiteki ni sengen' [Reiwa party leader Yamamoto Tarō [says] 'I am a populist.' Declared [in response to] suggestions of 'left-wing populism' on Hatori Shinichi's morning show], *Huffington Post Japan*. August 1, retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story_jp_5d4241f9e4b0aca34118407d.

36 Klein, 'Is there left populism in Japan?', p. 13.

37 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

wing populist anywhere in the world, indeed it would be questionable whether left-wing populism could exist at all. Klein's point about the lack of a Manichean antagonism is debatable as well. Klein argues that RSG lacks 'the enemy image of a "corrupt elite" or "corrupt establishment,"'³⁸⁾ but this image is actually a recurring element in Yamamoto's rhetoric. For example, Yamamoto argues that raising the consumption tax was a scheme by establishment politicians to 'cover the deficits after reducing the [corporation and income] taxes on their most valued clients – the corporations and the rich.'³⁹⁾ He similarly states that the 'power-holders' have allowed a predatory student loan system as a 'kickback to their friends' in the 'financial institutions' who abuse education as a 'business tool.'⁴⁰⁾ He might not use the word 'enemy,' but there is no question about his antagonism toward the colluding and corrupt elites.

The other side of the populist coin – siding with the people – is also far more explicit in RSG's rhetoric than is the case with the neoliberal populists. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have argued that populists usually invoke 'the people' through a combination of three different understandings of the term: 1) 'the people as sovereign' (the people is seen as the only legitimate source of power), 2) 'the common people' (the people is equated with a particular socioeconomic class), and 3) 'the people as the nation' (the people is equated with a particular ethnicity).⁴¹⁾ Yamamoto's use of 'the people' combines the first and second meanings of this triad, but the socioeconomic focus is particularly strong. He paints Japan as a 'hellish' society that has been 'destroyed' by 20 years of neoliberal austerity politics, and claims to fight for the ordinary people who have been victimized in this process.⁴²⁾ He mainly focuses on the plight of the weakest members of the society, such as poor fishermen, debt-ridden

38 Klein, 'Is there left populism in Japan?', p. 13.

39 Yamamoto Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon (2020) Ele-King special issue, Tokyo: Ele-King Books, p. 21.

40 Yamamoto Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon, p. 28.

41 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, pp. 9-11.

42 E.g. Yamamoto, Tarō (2020) *#Anata o Shiawase ni Shitainda: Yamamoto Tarō to Reiwa Shinsengumi* [#I want to make you happy: Yamamoto Tarō and Reiwa Shinsengumi], Tokyo: Shūeisha, pp. 54-57.

students, part-time workers, small business owners outside of Tokyo, families living in poverty, the homeless, etc. He complains that ‘what is lacking in today’s politics is compassion for the people living in this country.’⁴³⁾ This heartless reality is contrasted to the ideal society he is striving to build, namely a society which ‘abandons no one’⁴⁴⁾ and which ‘extends a helping hand when you need it the most,’⁴⁵⁾ reflecting his preference for a generous state. Yamamoto laments that the age-old division between ‘lords’ [*okami*] and ‘commoners’ [*shomin*] is still very strong in people’s minds, so many Japanese are reluctant to criticize the elites even when the elites are to blame for the deterioration of their lives. He therefore implores the people to ditch this mentality and realize that the ‘commoners’ are, in fact, ‘the most powerful people in this country.’⁴⁶⁾ This is in line with the first populist meaning of the people outlined by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser: ‘The people as sovereign.’ The people must be the ultimate source of power. Yamamoto also invokes their second meaning of the people: ‘The common people.’ He clearly identifies with Japan’s ‘commoners’ and focuses on the socioeconomically disadvantaged layers of the population. This is also evident in his clothing and speaking style. He rarely campaigns in a suit, and when he does, he often wears sneakers. Moreover, compared to traditional politicians, his rhetoric also makes far less use of Chinese loanwords, which are typically considered more elitist than common Japanese words. His choice to place two severely handicapped people on the party list before himself can also be seen as an attempt to show that he is willing to sacrifice himself for ordinary and disadvantaged people. There is no particular invocation of the nationalist third meaning of the people (the people as the nation). He is generally opposed to immigration, but he expresses his anti-immigration arguments purely in economic language (immigration will push wages down and hurt both Japanese and immigrants).⁴⁷⁾ Both antagonism toward a corrupt elite and identity with a pure people are, thus, recurring features of

43 Yamamoto, #*Anata o Shiawase ni Shitainda*, p. 24.

44 Yamamoto, #*Anata o Shiawase ni Shitainda*, p. 61.

45 Yamamoto, #*Anata o Shiawase ni Shitainda*, p. 65.

46 Yamamoto *Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon*, p. 27.

47 Yamamoto *Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon*, pp. 31-33.

Yamamoto and RSG's rhetoric. But how should we characterize their ideology?

According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, populism is itself only a thin-centered ideology, and, as such, requires a thicker host-ideology to amount to a political project. Klein argues that 'RSG does not draw on any host-ideology' and that 'the idea of ideology is conspicuously absent from its rhetoric.'⁴⁸⁾ This is partly correct. Yamamoto vehemently tries to avoid ideology labels, arguing that such labels only lead to ideological opposition, which complicates his mission to 'improve people's lives and to bring the economy back on track.'⁴⁹⁾ In a recent interview, he stated that 'I have not even once considered myself to be on the left. I don't label myself. What is important is to help people who are struggling, so ultimately such things [labels] don't matter. I'm tired of ordering things into right and left.'⁵⁰⁾ This certainly gives the impression that RSG is not bound to a host-ideology. But even if there is no mention of socialism, Marxism or progressivism, it is not actually the case that RSG's rhetoric is devoid of 'anti-system ideas.'⁵¹⁾ In fact, if there is one ideological position that drives RSG's populism, it is anti-neoliberalism. RSG's populism can be seen as a direct repudiation of the neoliberal populism of Koizumi, Hashimoto and Koike. When Yamamoto paints Japan as a 'hellish' society, he does not refer to the entire postwar period, but rather the neoliberal period of the past 20 or 30 years.⁵²⁾ He explicitly attacks neoliberalism as an ideology, stating that 'due to the influence of neoliberalism everyone has become poor.'⁵³⁾ He especially criticizes the neoliberal idea of 'self-responsibility':

'The word "self-responsibility" began to appear as austerity policies were mounting up. I believe it began around the time of the Koizumi period. [...] There is this idea that if you live poorly and you can barely get by, this is because you didn't work hard enough,

48 Klein, 'Is there left populism in Japan?', p. 18.

49 Yamamoto *Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon*, p. 34.

50 Yamamoto, *#Anata o Shiawase ni Shitainda*, p. 64.

51 Klein, 'Is there left populism in Japan?', p. 18.

52 Yamamoto *Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon*, p. 33.

53 Yamamoto *Tarō Kara Mieru Nihon*, p. 23.

or because you've been incompetent. [...] For the ruling powers, this is like a magical word, it's a very powerful word. The "self-responsibility argument" ensures that people involved in politics and the ruling powers are never held accountable.⁵⁴⁾

Ideology is ultimately a conviction about where the battle lines should be drawn in a society, about who is friend and who is foe. While RSG's ideology might not contain sophisticated theories about the workings of society, it does contain clear battle lines. The common people, particularly society's weakest members, are pitted against the neoliberal elites who have turned Japan into an unfair and heartless society. In this struggle, RSG presents itself as a staunch defender of the people. In sum, RSG can be described as an anti-neoliberal populist party – a new political phenomenon in Japan. In fact, its populist traits are far stronger than those of its neoliberal counterparts, as both the anti-elite antagonism and the identity with the people are unmistakably present.

Neoliberal populism can be highly antagonistic, but it will perhaps always struggle to claim strong bonds to the people since its prioritization of market principles often hurt many of those the neoliberals claim to represent. There is inherently something elitist about neoliberal populism that is at odds with the populist idea of people's sovereignty as its policies unflinchingly lead to a concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a few wealthy elites at the expense of the broad masses.⁵⁵⁾ In that sense, RSG, whose ideology is based on opposition to neoliberalism and support for its victims, can be categorized as Japan's first case of strong populism.

7. Conclusion

Using a framework that conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, this arti-

54 Yamamoto Tarō *Kara Mieru Nihon*, pp. 23-24.

55 Hopkin, Jonathan (2020) *Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

cle has analyzed three cases of Japanese populism: fascist populism in the 1930s, neoliberal populism in the 2000s and 2010s, and leftist populism in the present. It found that the first two cases, despite their strong anti-elitist character, must be considered as relatively weak variants of populism due to their lacking or limited invocations of the will of the people as the basis of governance. The fascists wanted political power to reside with the Emperor rather than the people, while the neoliberals generally did not claim to represent the people's will in a way that significantly distinguished them from mainstream politicians in the democratic system. The article argued, however, that the emergence of Yamamoto Tarō and his Reiwa Shinsengumi in 2019 constitutes the first case of strong populism in Japan. This is because, in addition to taking an antagonistic stance toward the elites and their neoliberal project, the party also clearly sees the common people as the only legitimate source of political power and portrays itself as the true representative of these neglected people.

The emergence of strong populism in Japan does not, however, mean that the country is on the doorstep of a new age of populist politics. RSG only has two representatives in the Diet, and Yamamoto failed to make a splash in the 2020 Tokyo gubernatorial election. Moreover, the LDP's grip on power looks likely to continue even after the long reign of Abe Shinzō. This indicates that the Japanese electorate is still quite content with elite rule and hesitates to take a chance on populist alternatives. However, as inequality is on the rise and immigration is set to increase as a countermeasure to Japan's demographic problems, it appears reasonable to assume that the potential for both left and right populism will grow in the years to come.

