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Another bright young hope

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Can the youthful Katsuya Okada lead Japan's Democrats to power?

HE INHERITED a mess and turned it into an opportunity. After taking over the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in May, when his predecessor, Naoto Kan, stepped down over a pension scandal, Katsuya Okada led the party to an impressive showing in last month's upper-house elections. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) remains in power, but no longer looks dominant. And if the 51-year-old Mr Okada can build on his good start, he might have a chance to do what previous opposition leaders could only dream about and become prime minister.

First, however, Mr Okada must keep his grip on his own party, which will hold leadership elections next month. The DPJ's interest in sticking with Mr Okada seems obvious. Because he eschews factional politics, he can work with warring DPJ clans. He is young by Japanese standards, and telegenic. He has also shown that he can deliver on election day. Still, the LDP has ruled almost continuously for the past half-century, partly because Japan's other opposition parties have self-destructed. The DPJ, which retains an awkward mix of refugees from some of those parties, must prove that it is different. "The most important thing", Mr Okada told *The Economist* in an interview, "is that we have to work together [towards] the same goal of changing the government and gaining power."

Fortunately for Mr Okada, the DPJ now has many first- and second-term lawmakers who agree. Unlike some of the older lags, they are more interested in winning power, while they are young enough to enjoy it, than in fighting tired factional battles. During the upper-house campaign, Mr Okada showed them that he can deliver by focusing adroitly on two winning issues—one domestic, one foreign.

Domestically, Mr Okada turned a seeming disaster over pensions into a moral victory. Mr Kan had lambasted LDP leaders for missing payments into the national pensions scheme, only to

resign when he was found to be guilty of the same delinquency. The DPJ's next choice, Ichiro Ozawa, turned out to have missed payments too. Such hypocrisy and incompetence could have left the party reeling. But Mr Okada, then secretary-general, stepped in as leader and used the pensions scandal to highlight the twin themes of transparency and accountability. He contrasted the DPJ's courageous purge with the LDP's failure to disclose which of its own members had missed payments (including Junichiro Koizumi, the prime minister, who confessed only when a weekly magazine was about to expose him). When the ruling party pressed ahead with a scheme to overhaul pension finances, Mr Okada accused it of ramming through changes without democratic debate.

The claim stuck, partly because it resonated with the DPJ's attacks on Mr Koizumi's foreign policies. In March, the prime minister's decision to send non-combat troops to Iraq earlier in the year was supported by about half the population. But Mr Okada focused on a subsequent decision, taken without a vote, to relabel the troops as part of the new UN-authorized multinational force. This force may have to engage in combat, albeit without Japan being involved. Once again, Mr Okada argued, Mr Koizumi was arrogantly bypassing the democratic process.

Mr Okada is still cagey about how much he would overhaul security policy. He thinks approval from the UN Security Council should be required for all Japanese peacekeeping missions, although he concedes that "the UN does not always work as effectively as we would like". So long as Japan confines itself to UN-sanctioned missions, Mr Okada says, he would relax the self-imposed restrictions that limit its peacekeepers' usefulness. The DPJ is now debating whether this requires mild tweaks to the law or bigger changes to the constitution.

Although he has internal battles ahead, Mr Okada's early knack of exploiting the LDP's weak spots should be enough to persuade potential young challengers, such as Seiji Maehara (a rising star on foreign policy) and Yoshihiko Noda (a favourite among young lawmakers two years ago), to hold off. Nor do leftish members of the party's old guard have anywhere else to go. Japan's two left-wing parties, the Socialists and Communists, were devastated in lower-house elections last November, and put in another poor showing in the upper-house poll.

Mr Okada must cast a wary eye to his right, however, where Mr Ozawa heads a group from the Liberal Party, which the DPJ absorbed last summer. Although he missed his chance to succeed Mr Kan, Mr Ozawa is a proven party-wrecker. But instead of finding a proxy to challenge Mr Okada, Mr Ozawa may prefer to back him in exchange for concessions. Mr Ozawa favours deregulation and smaller government, and constitutional changes that would loosen restraints on the military.

All of this could lead to an appealing realignment inside the DPJ. Mr Ozawa may remain influential enough to keep nudging the DPJ towards reform, of both the economy and security policy. But a base of young lawmakers will want Mr Okada to go about this in a pragmatic manner. Many will urge him to stick with his formula. Look for a few chinks in the LDP armour, and strike there. Then wait for the LDP to self-destruct for a change.