

One of the world's most interesting political stories unfolded without the world ever becoming aware of it. After decades of complaint from outside and inside Japan that this country is taking too long to develop genuine leadership, a new era appeared to have begun with the first real party political challenge in half a century to what had been in truth a one-party system. But the central figure behind it, Ozawa Ichiro, who had long been widely regarded as the one politician with the combination of vision and enough skills to initiate new political leadership, was an obvious threat to those who treasured the status quo and routine policies.

The first task for the masters of the status quo, with the public prosecutor in the lead, was to force Ozawa out of a position that would have made him prime minister. That was easy enough, with a trick frequently used to defuse threats, in the shape of ambitious figures in politics or business, to Japan's established power structure: a manufactured scandal. The scandal thrown at Ozawa before the 2009 elections concerned something that would have been treated at worst as an administrative misdemeanor, if indeed he had been found guilty of the charges involved. But senior editors of Japan's national newspapers plus NHK, who form a team with the public prosecutor in such matters, ensured that Ozawa was rendered politically invisible by the clouds of suspicion which surrounded him with an aura of criminality. After many months of newspaper innuendo, the judiciary officials conceded that they could not find any evidence as basis for prosecution.

The guardians of Japan's political order could of course not leave it there, and pulled something out of their hats that defies every standard of credulity. Under a recently passed law (based on a legal relic from occupation days) a committee of carefully selected (and coached) lay people may force the public prosecutor to prosecute after he has decided not to do so. With that process ongoing, two years of further character assassination and distraction away from politics were guaranteed. Until a year ago when Ozawa's acquittal became news that most national newspapers reported blandly. After all their earlier hysteria, no review emerged of what had befallen political Japan.

But that is not the full story. Two ordinary Japanese citizens, doing the investigative legwork that Japanese journalists have stopped doing quite some time ago, have come up with some amazing evidence of irregularities among the judiciary authorities. Their findings suggest that much of what passed for laymen judgment about the merits of an Ozawa prosecution was simply invented by the authorities to keep Ozawa away from policy making power.

The LDP of Prime Minister Abe won its supposedly "swing to the right" with as small a number of votes as it had received in the election of 2009 when it was clobbered by the DPJ. Those who had three years earlier voted for the reformist party stayed home; almost certainly out of disgust with what had become of it, to a large extent because of the machinations recounted here. It is worth turning our heads for another look at that quite important episode of recent Japanese history.

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