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## Prefectural Governors and Populism in Japan (1990s–2010s)

### Abstract

Populism has become a recurring issue in Japanese politics, particularly at the local level. In a time of general discontent with traditional politics and politicians, the prefectural governor, chief executive of the larger local government body and elected by popular suffrage, occupies a political office which seems to offer large opportunities for populist behaviors. In the past two decades, various governors have been labeled with the term ‘populist’ for political styles built on appeals to the people and the use of mass media. However, the diversity and continuous increase in the number of such situations may, albeit sometimes in an extreme, deformed way, indicate the emergence of a new kind of democracy in Japan.

### 1. Introduction

The typical image of a Japanese governor, the directly elected chief executive head of the prefectural level, is that of a highly competent but rarely charismatic former bureaucrat, “above politics”<sup>1</sup> and considering “local government in terms of technical administration”.<sup>2</sup> Since the early 1990s, however, amid a growing sense of mistrust of Japanese citizens toward the traditional political elites, politicians and other individuals with original discourses and career-paths have been regularly elected to this particular political office. Candidates with backgrounds as media celebrities and no political experience have emerged victorious, while seasoned or amateur politicians elected as governors have also brought a deeper emotional approach to the way they conduct politics. ‘Populism’ (*popyurizumu*) has since become common in Japanese journalism’s vocabulary to designate not only the electoral success of candidates from the world of entertainment and television, but also that of numerous of these atypical political positions or propositions, principally to cast a

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<sup>1</sup> Steven R. Reed, ‘Gubernatorial Elections in Japan’, in *Parties, Candidates and Voters in Japan*, John C. Campbell (ed.), Ann Arbor: The Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1981, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Terry E. MacDougall, ‘Political Opposition and Big City Elections in Japan, 1947–1975’, in *Political Opposition and Local Politics in Japan*, Kurt Steiner, Ellis S. Krauss and Scott C. Flanagan (eds.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 80. MacDougall is writing about Japanese local chief executives, not uniquely about prefectural governors.

negative light on them. Starting with the concept of ‘populism’ itself and the difficulty of defining it, this article attempts to offer a deeper and more neutral analysis of the relationship between the Japanese prefectural governorship and populism, and how this relationship can be connected to the broader transformations of Japanese politics since the 1990s. While several candidates and governors had been accused of populism before the 1990s, such as Minobe Ryōkichi (Tokyo, 1967–1979) and Hosokawa Morihiro (Kumamoto, 1983–1991), the double elections in Tokyo and Osaka in April 1995 of two former actors surprised experts and commentators, who expressed increasing concerns on the evolution of the Japanese democracy and fear of the rise of populism. The changes in Japanese politics and society during the 1990s and 2000s, combined with the institutional features and particular historical construction of the governorship, have laid down even more favorable conditions for the election of various kinds of populist politicians as governor, such as Ishihara Shintarō (in Tokyo, 1999–2012) and Tanaka Yasuo (in Nagano, 2000–2006), as well as the development of populist behaviors. Yet these as well may be extreme signs of an extensive transformation process for Japanese democracy. But first, how should we understand the term ‘populism’?

## 2. What is populism?

Numerous attempts have been made by social scientists and historians to offer a more precise, scientific definition or even a typology of populism. The Dutch scholar Cas Mudde, for example, provides a relatively short presentation of populism as:

An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt’ elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most famous works on the subject is the 1981 book by the political scientist Margaret Canovan, simply entitled *Populism*. Canovan distinguishes between an “agrarian populism”, itself divided into three different types, and a “political populism” with four ideal types.<sup>4</sup> Among the latter she lists the populist dictatorship<sup>5</sup>, the populist democracy which stresses the importance of direct democracy mechanisms (referendums...)<sup>6</sup>, the reactionary populism, often with nationalist or racialist tones<sup>7</sup>, and the politicians’ populism appealing directly to the people beyond political parties or divisions.<sup>8</sup>

As useful as such typology can be, Pierre-André Taguieff, a French specialist on the issue, prefers to use Canovan’s typology only as a starting base, most of today’s populism being more like a syncretism of the various aspects defined by Canovan.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for the

<sup>3</sup> C. Mudde, ‘The Popular Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2004, p. 543.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, pp. 8–16.

<sup>5</sup> Like that of Juan Perón in Argentina (1946–1955) or Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930–1945). *Ibid.*, p. 13, and p. 128 and following.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197 and following.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225 and following.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260 and following.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Le populisme et la science politique’ [Populism and Political Science], in *Les populismes* [Populisms], Jean-Pierre Roux (ed.), Paris: Perrin, 2007, p. 42.

political scientists Yves Mény and Yves Surel, populism is a “dynamic ideology” that cannot be enclosed into a particular system. Nevertheless they propose a general framework to identify three major elements of the logic of specific populism<sup>10</sup>:

- the people forms the basis of the national and local community;
- the legitimacy conferred by the ‘superiority / anteriority’ of the people has been perverted by political actors or processes which must be denounced. The populist leader is the defender of the cause of the average people exposed to the exactions of the ‘enemy’. In Japan, the role of the ‘enemy’ of the people is generally played by traditional political elites and bureaucrats<sup>11</sup>;
- the return to the people as a fundamental political principle is the prerequisite for a ‘comprehensive regeneration of society’<sup>12</sup>.

However, Taguieff considers ‘populism’ less as an ideology but more as a political style, insisting on the fluidity of the term.<sup>13</sup> Even the political theorist Ernesto Laclau who tries to offer a comprehensive definition of ‘populism’ is forced to recognize how imprecise the concept is. Nevertheless it remains an important concept, in his opinion, midway between descriptive and normative statements.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the latter aspect, the normativity connected to the term ‘populism’, is essential to fully understand this concept. In their work on populism and democracy, Mény and Surel recall the negative connotations associated with this word. The term is generally used to provide a normative vision of a situation designed as a “pathology of democracy”.<sup>15</sup> An analysis of this kind implies the existence of a political normality which would be violated by those designated as populist. The risk of this approach is therefore to depreciate “anything that does not fit into the cozy repertoire of procedures receiving a certificate of democratic respectability”.<sup>16</sup> This is what can often be seen in regard to the case of local Japan, especially since 1995, and the results of the gubernatorial elections in two of the most urbanized areas of the country.

### 3. Populist governors in local Japan: emergence and factors of development since the 1990s

The eruption of populism as an issue in Japanese local politics is usually dated from the 1995 gubernatorial elections in Tokyo and Osaka. The same factors (contextual, institutional and structural) which explain this emergence have continued since then to nurture populist tendencies among prefectural governors.

<sup>10</sup> Yves Mény and Yves Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple?: le populisme et les démocraties* [By the people, for the people: populism and democracies], Paris: Fayard, 2000, p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Uchiyama Yū, *Koizumi and Japanese Politics: Reform Strategies and Leadership Style*, London; New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Mény and Surel, *Par le peuple...*, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusion populiste. Essai sur les démagogies de l'âge démocratique* [The Populist Illusion. Essay on the Demagogies of the Democratic Age], Paris: Champs Flammarion, 2007, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *La Raison Populiste* [On Populist Reason], Paris: Seuil, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Mény and Surel, *Par le peuple...*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

### 3.1. The 1995 Tokyo and Osaka gubernatorial elections: an eruption of populism at the cores of Japan?

On April 9, 1995 elections were held to the positions of the governors of Tokyo and Osaka. To the surprise of experts, the two candidates elected were two former actors, competing without the support of any party: in Tokyo, Aoshima Yukio and in Osaka, ‘Knock’ Yokoyama (Yamada Isamu). Immediately after the elections, the newspapers headlines expressed shock from “Voters reject existing parties”<sup>17</sup> to “The overwhelming victory of independents over bureaucrats”<sup>18</sup> Yet the respective profiles of the new governors revealed that these two celebrities had both occupied a seat in the House of Councilors as independents. But in both Tokyo and Osaka, it was the fame and popularity Aoshima and Yokoyama had gained through TV shows and movies that helped them to be elected. These elections triggered a volley of comments on their populism and the threat they represented. Critics from the intellectual sphere spoke out against these results and the attitude of voters, especially regarding the election in the national capital. For Sone Yasunori, the Aoshima vote was an opposition vote, without any specific expectations.<sup>19</sup> The former governor Suzuki Shunichi, who stepped down after four terms, attributed Aoshima’s success to the arrival of new populations in the city, uncertain of their length of stay and therefore for him, and who had little concern for the management of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG).<sup>20</sup> Nagasaki Kazuo castigated also the irresponsible behavior of the inhabitants of Tokyo, emphasizing that they had rejected the bureaucrats but elected a governor who would be unable to resist the behind-the-scene control of public affairs by these same bureaucrats.<sup>21</sup> Even more harshly, the rightist thinker Nishibe Susumu made the following observation:

The strange case of celebrities who find themselves at the head of major regional administrations illustrates the sad situation Japanese democracy is in: autonomous political entities for people who have lost their autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the issue of whether or not the term is accurate to describe the situation, the political and media coverage of the 1995 elections shows how ‘populism’ can also become an electoral or ideological weapon. It is a convenient way to rally voters by waving the banner of the rationality of one’s own camp against an opponent deemed ‘abnormal’ and therefore dangerous. During the 2002 Nagano gubernatorial election, Hanaoka Nobuaki, journalist and opponent of the incumbent governor and media personality Tanaka Yasuo, said: “(We need to) challenge and eliminate populists. Otherwise Japan will head in a terrible direction”.<sup>23</sup> To characterize what he considers the politicians’ demagoguery and

<sup>17</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, April 10, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, April 10, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> F. Hajime, S. Yasunori and N. Kazuo, ‘Mutōha-sō to shushō kōsen’ [Floating voters and the public election of the Prime Minister], *Shokun*, Vol. 27, No. 7, 1995, pp. 88–97.

<sup>20</sup> Takeda Tōru, ‘Tōkyō o seijuku saseru tame shutto wa iten seyo’ [Tokyo is sufficiently developed, we should relocate the capital], *Ronza*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1997, pp. 110–117.

<sup>21</sup> Funada, Sone and Nagasaki, ‘Mutōha-sō to shushō kōsen’, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> N. Susumu, ‘La politique japonaise: une nef des fous’ [Japanese politics: a ship of fools], *Cahiers du Japon*, Winter 1995, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by I. Takao, ‘Aoshima Yokoyama bumo no haikai’ [The Background of the Aoshima Yokoyama boom], *Chuo Koron*, Vol. 110, No. 9, 1995, pp. 108–109.

the voters' unconsciousness, Nishibe Susumu devised a new word: "What we have today is a mixture of democracy and totalitarianism – what I would call 'popularism'".<sup>24</sup> These exaggerations, among several others, were also regularly addressed to progressive governors of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>25</sup> In January 1973, a former university professor labeled Ninagawa Torazō, the then governor of Kyoto, a "fascist" and a "dictator".<sup>26</sup> The latter term was also often used in the discourse of Tanaka's opponents in 2002.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Ōmura Hideki, elected to Aichi prefecture in February 2011, his ally during the election campaign Mayor Kawamura Takashi of Nagoya, and particularly Hashimoto Tōru, governor of Osaka, were repeatedly accused of populism.<sup>28</sup>

The recurrent apparition of populism, or at least accusations of populism, among elected governors since the 1990s is due to series of circumstantial and structural factors which have contributed to an environment more open to new political styles, and notably populism.

### 3.2. Gubernatorial populism: factors of development since the early 1990s

Various conditions have favored the expansion of populism: the erosion of ordinary channels of mediation (traditional political parties, local or national politicians), the growing importance of the media (especially television) in politics, and the personalization of power (direct elections, bans on holding multiple mandates, etc.).<sup>29</sup> These elements are found to greater or lesser extents in the Japanese situation and the public disaffection against its political representatives since the early 1990s, as well as in the institutional and structural characteristics surrounding the gubernatorial position, which have helped the election of several candidates with original political profiles in the particular circumstances of the last two decades.

#### 3.2.1. Contextual factors

Contextual factors<sup>30</sup> have played a decisive role in the rise of populist behaviors in local Japan since the 1990s. This decade was marked by Japanese citizens' increasing disaffection towards their political environment. This trend was not unique to Japan, and has also been noted in the United States or in Europe. Yet, according to Yoshida Shin'ichi, Japan stands out among the developed countries in the magnitude of popular discredit with its political

<sup>24</sup> Nishibe, 'La politique japonaise...', p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Progressive (*kakushin*) governors were candidates, often with no prior political experience, who were elected as the chief executives of the prefectural governments with the support of the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ) or the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) during the late 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>26</sup> Gotoda Teruo, *The Local Politics of Kyoto*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Center for Japanese Studies, 1985, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> *The Japan Times*, September 3, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, headlines like 'Populist pair «overcome» politics as usual', *The Japan Times*, February 8, 2011 for the double election of Ōmura and Kawamura, and how "current and former politicians, academics and others ... warn Hashimoto's brand of populism will lead to a form of dictatorship" according to *The Japan Times*, February 12, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Mény and Surel, *Par le peuple...*, pp. 85–124.

<sup>30</sup> 'Contextual factors' here means the political, economic and social evolutions occurring more prominently since the 1990s, in contrast to institutional (the institutional, administrative and legislative framework) and structural factors (the long-term construction of the Japanese post-war political environment).

representatives.<sup>31</sup> Why such a disaffection? The treatment of the economic recession in Japan which arose in the early 1990s following the bursting of the speculative bubble proved the poor ability of the Japanese political and administrative elite to efficiently manage a crisis for which they were at least partly responsible. The sluggish state of the economy also demonstrated the failure of the State to carry out a global project that would make sense for the entire population in a country where economic development had been central in the post-war period. The national government's slow and inadequate response to the human catastrophes that resulted from the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in 1995 and the Aum sect's gas attacks in the Tokyo subway the same year confirmed for many Japanese that their elected officials and bureaucracy were unable to resolve the economic and social dysfunctions of the country. Other major reasons related to the ethics of elected officials have also fueled the disavowal of political parties by the Japanese electorate: the maintenance of a government by money (*kinken seiji*)<sup>32</sup>, widespread structural corruption<sup>33</sup>, and finally the questionable relationship between part of the conservative establishment and members of the Japanese underworld and extreme right-wing groups.<sup>34</sup>

The discredit of the political world as a result of these events increased the volatility of Japanese voters who identify themselves less and less with one single party. Since the beginning, the Japanese political parties, with the exception of the JCP, were never mass parties. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is well-structured at the national level, is far more loosely organized at the prefectural level. It is mainly a party of executives, which derives most of its financial resources from the business world and its electoral support from the influence of its members' support groups (*kōenkai*).<sup>35</sup> Yet the 1990s experienced a major change, with the formation of a powerful voting bloc which not only had no party membership but also refused to attach itself to a specific party: the non-affiliates (*mutōha*). 1997 saw the highest amounts of people defining themselves as non-affiliates in the decade, according to a compilation of quarterly surveys of the *Asahi Shimbun*, with 52% of respondents on average, and occasional peaks up to 60%.<sup>36</sup> Other studies have shown that the electorate did not refuse to support any party, but instead frequently changed its choice. From 1997 to 1999, among those classified in this category, 60% had

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<sup>31</sup> Yoshida Shin'ichi, 'Distrust in Politics: Will Voters Transform the Nature of Governance?', in *Governance for a New Century: Japanese Challenges, American Experience*, Thomas E. Mann and Sasaki Takeshi (eds.), Tokyo, New York and Washington, D.C.: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2002, pp. 14–28.

<sup>32</sup> See Matthew Carlson, 'Money in Japanese Politics: Regulation and Reform', in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics*, Alisa Gaunder (ed.), London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 70–81.

<sup>33</sup> For example, the Recruit (1988) and *Sagawa Kyūbin* (1992) affairs were two major scandals of the late 1980s–early 1990s. See Masumi Junnosuke, *Contemporary Politics in Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, p. 432 and following.

<sup>34</sup> See Gerald L. Curtis, *The Logic of Japanese Politics: Leaders, Institutions, and the Limits of Change*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> See H. Mika and O. Naoko, 'Mutōha-sō no seiji ishiki to seiji sankā – Chihō seiji ni okeru Mutōha-sō no aratana yakuwari' [Political Participation and Political Consciousness of the Floating Voters – New Role of the Floating Voters in Local Politics], *Toshi Mondai – Journal of the Tokyo Institute for Municipal Research*, Vol. 92, No. 10, 2001, pp. 39–54.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Iwami, 'Aoshima Yokoyama...', pp. 108–109.

supported at least one party during these three years. Moreover, the electorate which described itself as supporting a specific party was also very volatile. In 1995, only 20–30% of them said they had supported the same party the previous year.<sup>37</sup>

Since the 1990s, a growing number of voters have therefore not been linked to a particular political party, but have a ‘fluid’ or ‘floating’ vote (*fudo-hyō*), regularly moving from one party to another at their own discretion. While in electoral decline in the 1990s and 2000s, the LDP was able to clearly win two major elections in 2001 and 2005 against its main challenger the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), both times by efficiently capturing the floating vote.<sup>38</sup> Four years later in 2009, the situation was nearly reversed as the LDP lost many of the floating voters which had moved from the DPJ to the party in 2005, resulting in the victory of the DPJ.<sup>39</sup>

This volatility does not mean that Japanese voters have a total lack of political consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Many keep themselves informed about Japanese politics through the news media. Even now television plays an influential role in the electorate’s choices by quickly creating or destroying sympathies toward a particular candidate or political party. The Hosokawa Morihiro cabinet (1993–1994), the first without the participation of the LDP since 1955, was considered by some observers as a product of hostility towards the LDP generated by television programs.<sup>41</sup> In the past two decades, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō (2001–2006) has been acknowledged as the national politician most gifted at using television and other media (such as the Internet) to increase his own popularity and political influence.<sup>42</sup> Acting like a “superstar”<sup>43</sup> or a populist<sup>44</sup>, Koizumi and his political

<sup>37</sup> Yoshida, ‘Distrust in Politics...’, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Steven R. Reed, ‘Winning Elections in Japan’s New Electoral Environment’, in *Japanese Politics Today: From Karaoke to Kabuki Democracy*, Inoguchi Takashi and Purnendra Jain (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 74–76. The 2005 LDP victory was the result of the gain of rural floating voters who had previously been attracted by the DPJ, as well as the large swing to the LDP of urban floating voters, despite urban voters being ‘traditionally the weakest LDP constituency’ (Ellis S. Krauss and Robert J. Pekkanen, *The Rise and Fall of Japan’s LDP. Political Party Organizations as Historical Institutions*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 249–250).

<sup>39</sup> Steven R. Reed demonstrates that “(i)n 2009 the LDP lost the urban votes it had gained in 2005, but those votes did not necessarily go to the DPJ. The LDP lost to the DPJ, but lost more when voters were offered the option of voting for Watanabe’s party (*Minna no Tō*).” (Reed, ‘Winning...’, p. 83).

<sup>40</sup> Hashimoto Akikazu, ‘*Shin mutōha*’ no shōtai: shiji seitō nashi o dō yomu ka [The Identity of the ‘New Floating Voters’: How to Read the ‘Do Not Support a Political Party?’], Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha, 1995, pp. 15–25.

<sup>41</sup> Yoshida, ‘Distrust in Politics...’, pp. 16–18.

<sup>42</sup> Christian Schafferer and Kawakami Kazuhisa, ‘Electoral Campaigning in Japan’, in *Election Campaigning in East And Southeast Asia: Globalization of Political Marketing*, Christian Schafferer (ed.), Ashgate, 2006, pp. 25–27. On Koizumi and his influence on Japanese politics, see in particular Uchiyama, *Koizumi...* and Glenn D. Hook (ed.), *Decoding Boundaries in Contemporary Japan: The Koizumi Administration and Beyond*, London: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> E. Seizelet, ‘Koizumi Jun’ichirō, superstar de la vie politique japonaise’ [Koizumi Jun’ichirō, Japanese political superstar], *Le Temps des médias*, No. 10, 2008, pp. 125–126.

<sup>44</sup> See Uchiyama, *Koizumi...*, p. 8 and Uchiyama Yū, ‘Leadership Strategies: (Re)drawing Boundaries among and within Parties in Japan’, in *Decoding Boundaries in Contemporary Japan: The Koizumi Administration and Beyond*, Glenn D. Hook (ed.), London: Routledge, 2011, p. 126.

style represented an intense moment of political and mass media marketing in Japanese politics, which formed the base of the LDP's electoral success during those years (notably in 2001 and 2005).<sup>45</sup> Despite several attempts to copy Koizumi's success and a slow, long-term dynamic in this direction<sup>46</sup>, the structure of national politics in Japan seems to have prevented a complete and immediate general shift towards this kind of political style after the Koizumi experience.<sup>47</sup> On this matter, the post-war local government system does offer some advantages to prefectural chief executives.

### 3.2.2. Institutional and structural factors

Along with a favorable context gained through the rise of floating votes and media popularity, populism has also found great potential for development in regard to governorship in Japan and the post-war characteristics of this office (strong legitimacy, personalization of power, local leadership and a supra-partisan approach among others).

One of the major transformations of the Japanese local government system during the post-war period was the introduction of a direct election mechanism for local chief executives (governors, mayors). The legitimacy of a governor, elected by the inhabitants of the territory he represents, is definitely more solid than that of the prime minister, who nominally represents the entire nation but is chosen solely by the Diet's members.<sup>48</sup> This election of governors by direct popular suffrage is the key component of a strong personalization of power at the local level which results from the combination of three elements around the local chief executive.<sup>49</sup> First, the mode of election creates a direct channel between voters and the elected official. Along with it, the prohibition of holding more than one mandate at a time<sup>50</sup> ensures guaranteed availability and proximity from the governor for the residents. Lastly, the governor is provided with a right of representation, making him the natural spokesman of the prefecture at both the national and international levels. In the eyes of the population, this combination of factors bestows an essential legitimacy on these local politicians and shapes the foundation of the governor's leadership capabilities.

The double process of legitimation and personalization of the gubernatorial position works mainly through direct election, the rule of non-accumulation and the right of representation. These factors cement the commitment of the governor to the territory, which offers him a solid foundation to build a political leadership at the local level. Such leadership is made possible by the predominance of the executive in the local government system. Post-war legislation has granted governors a wide scope of discretion in local

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<sup>45</sup> See Reed, 'Winning...', pp. 81–82. Koizumi's strong stance of on postal reform was positively received by urban floating voters (Ellis and Pekkanen, *The Rise...*, p. 249).

<sup>46</sup> Inoguchi Takashi and Purnendra Jain, 'From Karaoke to Kabuki Democracy: Japanese Politics Today', in *Japanese Politics Today: From Karaoke to Kabuki Democracy*, Inoguchi Takashi and Purnendra Jain (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 1–9.

<sup>47</sup> According to Reed, the LDP mostly went back to 'politics as usual' and to its old self after the retirement of Koizumi as prime minister, while efforts to mimic Koizumi's electoral strategies by LDP leaders were without 'substance'. These were some of the main reasons for the 2009 defeat (Reed, 'Winning...', p. 82).

<sup>48</sup> Constitution of Japan, art. 67.

<sup>49</sup> E. Seizelet, 'La fonction préfectorale au Japon' [Gubernatorial Functions in Japan], *Revue Française d'Administration Publique*, No. 96, 2000, p. 640.

<sup>50</sup> Local Autonomy Law, art. 141.

affairs (the appointment of high-ranking prefectural officials, self-regulatory authority, submission of the executive budget bill, etc.). While the local assembly is endowed with greater power than in the pre-war era, the governor remains historically the dominant force in prefectural politics.<sup>51</sup> The governor generally enjoys a stable position, especially in comparison with the national executive, as this stability is related almost solely to the decision of the electorate.<sup>52</sup>

Some particular characteristics connected with how the post of governorship was devised in post-war Japan<sup>53</sup> have also favored the regular emergence of populist behaviors. Candidates for the governorship and governors themselves tend to refuse any public display of connection with a specific political party. They prefer to appear officially under the banner of Non-Political Affiliation (*mushozoku*, NPA) during the electoral campaign. This generally translates not as candidates refusing any political support, but instead as a large coalition of almost all the principal local parties supporting one particular name (*ainori* in Japanese). The elected governor then adopts a supra-partisan approach in the prefectural government, acting for the good of the community (or at least the local establishment).<sup>54</sup> The development of localism, especially since the late 1970s<sup>55</sup>, has also promoted the idea that the local chief executive must be the exclusive representative of the locality, and not be part of a partisan system.

Japanese governors are therefore provided with vast political power, a strong potential for local leadership and popular legitimacy while the ongoing decentralization process since the mid-1990s has in fact mostly reinforced the local executive, notably after the revision of the Local Autonomy Law (LAL) in 1999.

Despite some limitations, the combination of these different factors periodically opens up opportunities for the election of populist candidates, and also to greater transformations of local politics in which populism is just one part.

#### 4. Two famous populist governors (late 1990s–2000s): Ishihara Shintarō and Tanaka Yasuo

Among the various atypical governors that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, the two most emblematic figures are certainly Ishihara Shintarō, governor of Tokyo, and Tanaka Yasuo, governor of Nagano. Elected to their positions for the first time in 1999 and 2000, both successful novelists, they represented two ideological extremes for governorships during the first half of the 2000s. Even today, Ishihara is internationally known for his nationalist

<sup>51</sup> See Machidori Satoshi and Soga Kengo, *Nihon no chihō seiji?: ni-gen daihyōsei seifu no seisaku sentaku* [Japan's Local Politics. Continuity and Change inside the Presidential System], Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Kurt Steiner, *Local Government in Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 372.

<sup>53</sup> On this subject see Ioan Trifu, *Prefectural Governors in Post-War Japan: A Socio-Historical Approach*, Ph. D. in Political Science, University of Lyon and Tohoku University, 2013, notably pp. 220–244.

<sup>54</sup> This attitude of public distance from political parties stems largely, in a path-dependent way, from the pre-war period when governors were appointed bureaucrats. See *Ibid.*, pp. 62–69 and 237–244.

<sup>55</sup> See in particular the 'age of localities' (*chihō no jidai*) movement launched by Kanagawa Governor Nagasu Kazuji (1975–1995) in 1978: Nagasu Kazuji, '«Chihō no jidai» o motomete' [An Appeal for an 'Age of Localities'], *Sekai*, No. 395, 1978, pp. 49–66.

discourse, while Tanaka nurtures his image as a representative of a new front of progressive reformers<sup>56</sup>. However, despite their differences, these governors' political attitudes have all been labeled as 'populist' in the media and by their opponents to denigrate them.

#### 4.1. Ishihara Shintarō in Tokyo (1999–2012)

Ishihara Shintarō was born in Kobe in 1932. While still a law student at Hitotsubashi University, he became famous in 1955 after publishing the novel *Season of the Sun (Taiyō no Kisetsu)*<sup>57</sup>. Despite a reputation as a provocative writer, he entered the Diet in 1968 under the banner of the conservative LDP. He rose gradually in the party hierarchy<sup>58</sup> until 1988 when he failed in the race for the presidency.<sup>59</sup> The following year was published *The Japan That Can Say No (Iie to ieru Nihon)* written by Ishihara with the help of Morita Akio, then president of Sony. In this pamphlet, the authors insisted that Japan regained its independence from the United States, arguing that the technical knowledge and capacity of the country was the foundation of the US military arsenal.<sup>60</sup> After his resignation from the Diet and the LDP in 1995, Ishihara seemed to have brought his political career to an end. However, in 1999, he won the governorship of Tokyo as an independent candidate, 24 years after his first unsuccessful run against Minobe Ryōkichi in 1975. With about 1.6 million votes, he won twice as many votes as his direct competitor from the DPJ, Hatoyama Kunio, and far more than the 690,000 votes of the LDP candidate.<sup>61</sup>

Among the 47 Japanese governors, Ishihara was certainly the best known outside of Japan in the late 1990s and 2000s. This international interest in Ishihara comes less from his ability to manage Japan's capital city than for his countless outrageous remarks. The man which the *International Herald Tribune* described, too quickly, as the "Japan's Le Pen"<sup>62</sup> regularly issues verbal provocations against Asian neighbors, but also against foreigners, women and even the French.

Ishihara qualifies himself as a "nationalist".<sup>63</sup> One year after his election, he declared in front of a unit of the Ground Self-Defense Force: "Atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin* and other foreigners. We can expect them to riot in the event of a disastrous

<sup>56</sup> See Ishihara Shintarō's official website: <http://www.sensenfukoku.net/> and Tanaka Yasuo's official blog: [http://blog.livedoor.jp/dream\\_yassy/](http://blog.livedoor.jp/dream_yassy/) (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>57</sup> The book was a huge success, and Ishihara won the Akutagawa Prize, the most prestigious of the Japanese literary prizes (*The Japan Times*, July 14, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Most notably, he was appointed Director of the Environment Agency (with ministerial rank) in the Fukuda Takeo cabinet (1977–1978), and Minister of Transport in the Takeshita Noboru cabinet (1987–1989).

<sup>59</sup> Yawata Kazuo, *Rekidai chiji 300-ni: Nihon zenkoku 'gendai no tonosama' retsuden* [300 Historical Governors: Biographies of the 'Contemporary Feudal Lords' of all Japan], Tokyo: Kobunsha, 2007, pp. 132–134.

<sup>60</sup> Ishihara Shintarō and Morita Akio, *Iie to ieru Nihon: shin Nichi-Bei kankei no (kādo)* [The Japan That Can Say 'No': The New U.S.–Japan Relations Card], Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1989.

<sup>61</sup> Yawata, *Rekidai chiji*..., p. 133.

<sup>62</sup> *The International Herald Tribune*, April 29, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> "I'm certainly a nationalist; what's wrong with that? Unless Japan is nationalist, it won't be taken seriously on the world stage. I'm very proud of my identity." quoted by Matt Frei, 'Japan's nationalists relive the past', in *BBC News*, August 18, 1999. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/424386.stm> (accessed 20.08.2013).

earthquake”.<sup>64</sup> In this speech, it was the term *sangokujin* that struck the commentators. Literally ‘people from third countries’, the term was used to describe colonized Korea and Taiwan in the pre-war period, and remains extremely insulting for these populations. Ishihara expressed regret that this expression had shocked the large Korean minority in Japan, but he refused to apologize. Moreover, he regularly continues to accuse the foreign population, this time illegal residents, of being the source of the surge in new crimes in the capital.

Ishihara also maintains a troubling attitude towards Japan’s militarist past. Thus, each year on August 15, the anniversary of Japan’s surrender in 1945, Ishihara has visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which houses the spirits of the soldiers who have died for their country since the Meiji era, including some Class-A war criminals.<sup>65</sup> In October 2003, he justified the colonization of Korea on the pretext that the Korean people would have preferred Japanese rule to an annexation by Russia or China.<sup>66</sup> As for the Pacific War, it was a necessity for him as the Japanese were able to save Asia from colonization by “white people”.<sup>67</sup> These sweeping assertions and speeches are part of the construction of a nationalist revival in Japan. Ishihara is also often accused of having links with extreme right-wing groups such as the *Seiryūkai* (Blue Dragon Society).<sup>68</sup> He comments frequently and virulently upon the foreign policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the two Koreas. In May 2000, Ishihara caricatured the PRC President Jiang Zemin as Adolf Hitler for his desire to reclaim Taiwan by force.<sup>69</sup> When Roh Moo-hyun, South Korean president, criticized Japanese claims to the islets known as Takeshima in Japanese and Dokdo in Korean, Ishihara slammed Roh as a “third-rate politician”.<sup>70</sup> In 2003, he decided to tax the *Chongryun*, the General Association of Korean residents in Japan, which until then had been tax-exempt as the *de facto* embassy of North Korea in Japan.<sup>71</sup> In 2012, he made a yet bolder move; on April 16, at a think tank forum in Washington, Ishihara said that the TMG was starting negotiations with the private owners of the disputed Senkaku Islands<sup>72</sup> to buy them.<sup>73</sup> The national government was forced to directly intervene to prevent the nationalist governor’s plan. The government finally purchased the islands, causing the anger of the Chinese and Taiwanese authorities, and a series of violent anti-Japanese protestation movements in mainland China<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted by *The Japan Times*, April 11, 2000.

<sup>65</sup> *The Japan Times*, August 6, 2005. War criminals judged by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1948. The most famous of these Class A war criminals is General Tōjō Hideki.

<sup>66</sup> *The Japan Times*, November 1, 2003.

<sup>67</sup> *The Taipei Times*, October 10, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> According to a specialist interviewed by Michel Tenman, Japan correspondent of the French newspaper *Libération*, May 31, 2006.

<sup>69</sup> *The Japan Times*, May 21, 2000. Ishihara is a personal friend of the former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui, architect of the democratization of the island, and close to the pro-independence parties (*The Japan Times*, May 20, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, April 4, 2005.

<sup>71</sup> *The Japan Times*, September 10, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Groups of inhabited islands under the administrative control of Japan but disputed by the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. Their Chinese names are Diaoyu (PRC) and Tiayutai (Taiwan).

<sup>73</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, April 18, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> *The Japan Times*, October 8, 2012.

Japan's neighbors are not the only targets of the governor of Tokyo. Ishihara puts little value on older women and the French language. In an interview with a weekly newspaper in 2001, he expressed support for a statement made by a physicist that "old women who no longer have the ability to reproduce are useless and their lives represent a crime against civilization".<sup>75</sup> Regarding the French language, Ishihara said: "I have to say that it should be no surprise that French is disqualified as an international language because French is a language that cannot count numbers".<sup>76</sup> In both cases, legal proceedings were initiated, but Ishihara avoided being found guilty each time.

The actions of the governor of Tokyo have not been limited to such provocations, however, and Ishihara has conducted several reforms in the prefecture, from trying to improve local public finances<sup>77</sup>, developing Haneda Airport<sup>78</sup>, and relocating the Tsukiji fish market.<sup>79</sup> His several re-elections were due more to favorable opinions of his administration than to his nationalist and xenophobic image as spread by the international press after each of his outrageous comments.<sup>80</sup>

After his decision to resign from the post of governor in October 2012, Ishihara established a new party *Taiyō no Tō* (The Sunrise Party) on November 13, 2012.<sup>81</sup> Four days later (November 17), the party merged with *Nippon Ishin no Kai* (the Japan Restoration Party) of the former Osaka governor Hashimoto Tōru. Ishihara was selected as the new leader of this political party, and was elected to the Diet in the December 2012 general election.<sup>82</sup> Ishihara's move from the governorship to national politics evokes the less successful career transition of another governor labeled as 'populist' during the 2000s.

#### 4.2. Tanaka Yasuo in Nagano (2000–2006)

Tanaka Yasuo had no real political experience at the time of his election in 2000 in Nagano; his success was the result of a grassroots movement (the *katteren*), born from a myriad of small groups (from local artists to small business owners and local SMEs), in the midst of strong suspicion of financial mismanagement by the previous administration.<sup>83</sup>

Born in Tokyo in 1956, Tanaka became famous, like Ishihara, while studying at Hitotsubashi University, when in 1980 he was awarded the Bungei prize<sup>84</sup> for his novel

<sup>75</sup> Quoted by *The Japan Times*, September 20, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted by *The Japan Times*, September 10, 2004. One week after several French-language teachers sued Ishihara over that remark, the TMG ordered the *Lycée franco-japonais* (a Tokyo-based French school operated by the French government) to pay about 100 million yen in taxes, as the school is not eligible to receive tax exemptions (*The Japan Times*, July 23, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> *The Japan Times*, November 17, 1999.

<sup>78</sup> *The Japan Times*, October 16, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> *The Japan Times*, February 4, 2011. The new location, the site of a former factory, is however believed by some to be full of pollutants.

<sup>80</sup> For a French example, see Jean Daniel, 'Du bon usage de l'antiaméricanisme' [On the good use of anti-Americanism], *Nouvel Observateur*, No. 1854, May 18, 2000.

<sup>81</sup> *The Japan Times*, November 14, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, December 17, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Jean-Marie Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs apprennent à danser* [When sumō wrestlers learn to dance], Paris: Fayard, 2003, p. 436.

<sup>84</sup> *The Japan Times*, September 4, 2005.

*Nantonaku Kurisutaru* ('Somehow crystal').<sup>85</sup> After having worked briefly in a business company (Mobil), he became a media commentator, famous throughout the country for his provocative articles.<sup>86</sup> His political activity began in 1991 when he was one of the initiators of a petition against Japanese involvement in the first Gulf War. But above all, like many Japanese, it was the revelation of the terrible situation of the survivors of the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake that prompted him to get involved in activism. He then participated in the local opposition against the construction of Kobe airport. From this experience, he drew mixed conclusions on the effectiveness of this type of action and on the intentions that motivate these groups.<sup>87</sup>

In this sense, even though he was supported by citizens' movements, during his campaign he promoted the notion of a government for all the population, without presenting any specific programs or projects.<sup>88</sup> This political vagueness as well as his fame and the mobilization of the *katteren* helped him win over public opinion. Nagano's residents were especially impressed by this candidate, with his different background and his roots outside of the traditional political game. On October 15, 2000, Tanaka was elected, winning nearly 116,000 votes more than his opponent, and became the fourth governor of Nagano since 1945.

Tanaka's first and most symbolic action when he came to power was to transfer his office to the ground floor of the prefectural building in a glass-walled room to make his work as transparent as possible for local citizens. Tanaka nurtured the image of a man accessible to all and with nothing to hide; he regularly toured the prefecture, and he published his travel and foods expenses on the prefectural official website. His popularity was one of the highest among Japanese governors in 2001.<sup>89</sup> In May of the same year, he abolished the press clubs' system (*kisha kurabu*)<sup>90</sup> and replaced them by regular press briefings, opened to all journalists.<sup>91</sup> Through his frequent appearances in television shows,

<sup>85</sup> Translated by the author, as there is no translation in English of this novel.

<sup>86</sup> Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 436.

<sup>87</sup> Interviewed by *The Japan Times* (November 2, 2000), he declared: "The people who protested the Nagano Olympic construction and some of those involved in the campaign against Kobe airport were opposing the projects just for the sake of opposition. Such groups aren't working for the taxpayers but for themselves, the Japanese Communist Party and labor unions. They're as insular as the construction companies and government officials they criticize".

<sup>88</sup> Just after the election, he stated: "I have no intention of saying what I'm going to do or what I'm going to make. What's important is the principle of how it should be". (Quoted by *The Japan Times*, October 16, 2000).

<sup>89</sup> Ōnami Aya and Yamaguchi Kazuomi, 'Au Japon, la révolution Tanaka est en marche!' [In Japan, the Tanaka Revolution is moving!], *Courrier International*, No. 539, March 1, 2001 (First published in Japanese in *Shukan Asahi*, February 2001).

<sup>90</sup> The press clubs are one of the characteristics of the Japanese press and media system. They are implemented by public bodies (such as ministries), political parties, business companies, etc. to provide information to its members in exchange for the payment of a fee. The main criticism of these clubs is that they help to maintain a closed relationship between journalists and official sources. Journalists are tempted to reproduce the information obtained in these clubs at the expense of more thorough inquiries and investigations. For more, see Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss (eds.), *Media and Politics in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.

<sup>91</sup> *The Japan Times*, October 1, 2001.

he continued to refine his image, becoming almost as famous as Koizumi. He carefully chose his clothing, avoiding the classic dark suits of bureaucrats and politicians.<sup>92</sup>

However, the real challenge laid for the governor in Nagano's 1.6 trillion-yen deficit, the second largest of Japan's 47 prefectures. To reduce the debt, Tanaka decided on a plan to reduce salaries by 6–10%, a progressive reduction according to the position within the prefectural hierarchy.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, Tanaka addressed the prefecture's public works program from both the financial and ecological perspectives. In November 2000, he suspended the construction of the Asakawa dam on the outskirts of the city of Nagano, a project which had been ongoing for 23 years.<sup>94</sup> On February 20, 2001, he released a declaration of "No More Dams" (*Datsu damu*). In this text, he declares his desire to preserve the rivers and lakes of Nagano for future generations. He also discusses the environmental and financial cost of the water reservoirs formed by dams, which must be regularly checked to prevent the accumulation of sediment.

The dam became the core issue of the struggle between Tanaka and the Nagano local assembly. The tension reached its peak in the first days of July 2002. At the end of June, Tanaka declared his intention to cancel the construction of the Asakawa and Shimosuwa dams. On July 5, 2002, a motion of no confidence against the governor was passed by the prefectural assembly. This was a rare event, whose only precedent since the introduction of the measure during the Occupation period was in 1976, against the Gifu governor Hirano Saburo for corruption.<sup>95</sup> The adoption of such a measure demonstrated the extent of exasperation among local politicians, who felt their electoral machines were threatened by Tanaka's actions.

In response to the motion, Tanaka chose to remain at his post. Automatically removed ten days later, he decided to seek a new term in the following election on September 2002.<sup>96</sup> In this campaign, Tanaka found himself more isolated than for his first election. His main opponent, the lawyer Hasegawa Keiko, received the unofficial support of almost all political parties and numerous other organizations. Confronted with this situation, Tanaka led a campaign based solely on volunteers and civic movements.<sup>97</sup> This election attracted the attention far beyond the limits of the prefecture. On September 1, 2002, the election drew a turnout of 73.8%, four points higher than in 2000 (69.7%) and the highest among all the gubernatorial elections of the 2000s. Tanaka won a landslide victory with more than twice the votes of his opponent Hasegawa (805,201 votes to 379,200).<sup>98</sup> The campaign, however, avoided addressing many essential areas, above all the dam issue, but also Tanaka's ability to manage the prefectural administration. These two issues were central to the conflict

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<sup>92</sup> Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 445.

<sup>93</sup> *The Japan Times*, February 2, 2003.

<sup>94</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, February 6, 2001.

<sup>95</sup> *The Japan Times*, July 6, 2002. Since 2002, two other motions of no confidence have been voted on at the prefectural level: in March 2003 against Ōta Tadashi, governor of Tokushima, and in December 2006 against Andō Tadahiro, governor of Miyazaki. Both were forced to leave office.

<sup>96</sup> *The Japan Times*, July 16, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Hatsuko Hoyano, 'Nagano: Japan's First Citizens' Revolution', *Znet*, December 4, 2002. Available at: <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=2705> (accessed 20.08.2013). (Original version, in Japanese, published in *Shukan Kinyōbi*, September 6, 2002).

<sup>98</sup> *The Japan Times*, September 2, 2002.

between the governor and his assembly.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the success did little to change the situation at the local level, and the governor remained relatively isolated in the prefectural assembly.<sup>100</sup>

Tanaka's victory offered him a higher political profile in the country, and the governor of Nagano started to think seriously about more national ambitions. On August 21, 2005, Tanaka and four LDP dissidents created the New Party Nippon (*Shintō Nippon*) which emphasized decentralization. Yet, only one of the three former LDP members was re-elected after the election of September 2005 and the overwhelming victory of Koizumi's LDP. This failure at the national scene somewhat weakened the governor's credibility at the local level, where he faced an assembly unfavorable toward his policies, unlike Ishihara who had benefitted greatly from the support of the local conservatives in Tokyo.<sup>101</sup> To cope with his assembly, Tanaka continued to rely on the legitimacy conferred upon him by the direct election, and tried to convince his opponents that these initiatives went in the direction desired by the population itself.<sup>102</sup> However, this situation gradually undermined the governor's position, and Tanaka eventually lost his seat in the 2006 election, despite his populist stance.<sup>103</sup>

### 4.3. Different kinds of populism?

Although radically different in their political style, these two governors put forward the support of the population as an argument to justify their policies. This attachment to relying on the citizens' confidence has led many observers and critics to classify them and other governors as 'populist'<sup>104</sup> while not using this term with much precision.

While Professor Yoshida Tōru of Hokkaidō University considers Ishihara more as a far-right politician than a populist<sup>105</sup>, other scholars of Japanese politics<sup>106</sup> have also

<sup>99</sup> *The Japan Times*, September 3, 2002.

<sup>100</sup> Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 448.

<sup>101</sup> This was partly due to Ishihara's policy program and his political connections with the LDP and conservative politicians. His sons Ishihara Hirotaka and Ishihara Nobuteru are both members of the LDP (See Trifu, *Prefectural...*, pp. 330–331).

<sup>102</sup> See his public speech to foreign correspondents in August 2002: Tanaka Yasuo, 'Speech addressed to Foreign Correspondents', *Nagano Prefecture Press Conference*, August 12, 2002.

<sup>103</sup> Maruyama Masao, Kubota Shigeru, Higuchi Naoto, Takaki Ryōsuke, Matsutani, Mitsuru and Yabe Takuya, 'Popyurizumu to teihen minshushugi no airo: 2005 nen Nagano-ken chiji senkyo de no Tanaka Yasuo no haiboku o meguru tōhyō kōdō' [Why was populist governor defeated? An analysis of voting behaviors in the Nagano gubernatorial election in 2006], *Annual report of the Regional Studies Institute*, Ibaraki University, No. 40, 2007, p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> Among the foreign press articles, for Ishihara see for example: Olivier Weber, 'Le samourī de Tokyo', *Le Point*, No. 1435, March 17, 2003 (Available at: <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-voyages/2000-03-17/le-samourai-de-Tokyo/1088/0/911>) ; and for Tanaka, Tim Larimer, 'The Grooviest Guv', *Time Asia*, May 21, 2001 (Available at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,127303,00.html>) (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>105</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, November 30, 2012.

<sup>106</sup> For example Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 442; Maruyama Masao, Kubota Shigeru and Matsutani Mitsuru, 'Nihon gata popyurizumu no ronri to shinjō: 2007 nen Tōkyō-to chiji senkyo ni okeru yūkensha no tōhyō kōdō no bunseki' [The populist governor and the citizens' support structure: analyzing the voting behaviors in Tokyo metropolitan gubernatorial election in 2007], *Annual Report of the Regional Studies Institute*, Ibaraki University, No. 41, 2008, p. 81.

employed the term to refer to both of these governors. As previously described, Tanaka refused to participate in party politics and preferred to appeal directly to the people.<sup>107</sup> Jean-Marie Bouissou states that the governor of Nagano opposed the wisdom of the “good people of the towns” (*Machi no oji-san to obā-san*) to the condemnation of the intellectuals. Tanaka did not hesitate to accuse the former governor of transforming his official residence in “a palace à la Marcos [...] where he feeds ponies and peacocks”.<sup>108</sup> But unlike Ishihara, who was embedded in extreme right-leaning and rigid populism, Tanaka Yasuo, according to Bouissou, expressed a populism in a “soft, almost feminine version”; Tanaka avoided raising his voice or appearing too manly or ‘macho’. He protected the environment, the quality of life and constitutional pacifism, while his policy platform focused on participatory democracy, a question of growing interest at that time.<sup>109</sup>

The use of various kinds of populism among these governors illustrates the more offensive approach of several governors in their political style and policy objectives, which have actively influenced the transformation of local politics in Japan since the 1990s, along with the political innovations of some prefectural executives and the election of candidates with new profiles.

## 5. Populism in local Japan: an extreme form of a new democracy?

### 5.1. Populist behaviors on the rise

Along with governors labeled as populist by most media and scholars, populist behaviors appear to have been rising since the 1990s, notably with the success of TV celebrities (*tarento*) in gubernatorial elections, the clear opposition by elected candidates to any support from established parties, and the populist remarks made by various governors.

The surprising results of the 1995 Tokyo and Osaka gubernatorial elections were strong signals of the importance of non-affiliated voters and the growing irritation of citizens toward the traditional political establishment. Other candidates with similar *tarento* backgrounds to Aoshima and Yokoyama, who sometimes had no political experience at all, emerged victorious in gubernatorial elections during the 2000s. In March 2009, Morita Kensaku was elected governor of Chiba after Dōmoto Akiko’s decision to retire after two terms. Defeated in the 2005 gubernatorial election, Morita, a popular actor and singer of the 1970s, was a former Diet member (1992–2003) for the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) and the LDP. Despite his political background and the support of the local LDP, he decided to run both campaigns as a NPA, minimizing the role of the LDP and partisanship in his candidacy.<sup>110</sup> In 2008, Hashimoto Tōru, a lawyer and regular guest on national TV shows,

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<sup>107</sup> Maruyama et alii, ‘Popyurizumu to...’, p. 41.

<sup>108</sup> Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 442. The following quotes are also extracted from the same page.

<sup>109</sup> For example, according to a poll published just before the 2002 elections in the Nagano local newspaper, the *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun* of August 12, 2002, when asked how the next governor should act to ensure the will of the population, 79% of the respondents said they would “prefer (the governor) ask the people of the prefecture their opinion directly”. Only 15% thought the governor should “listen to the opinion of the prefecture assembly and town and village mayors”. (Quoted by Hatsuko, ‘Nagano...’).

<sup>110</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, March 30, 2009.

ran with the support of the LDP in the Osaka gubernatorial election. He was elected with more than 54% of the vote against the DPJ-backed candidate.<sup>111</sup>

One year before, in January 2007 in Miyazaki, the entertainer and comedian Higashikokubaru Hideo won the governorship in a resounding victory as an independent when his predecessor Andō Tadahiro stepped down over a bid-rigging scandal and a subsequent vote of no confidence.<sup>112</sup> In late 2010, despite enjoying a high support rate in the prefecture, he decided to not seek re-election. Setting his goal beyond the borders of rural Miyazaki, he declared: “I’ve decided not to run in the next election in the belief that changing the nation’s system will serve the interest of Miyazaki”.<sup>113</sup> Higashikokubaru finally chose to run in the Tokyo gubernatorial election of April 2011 without the support of any political parties, but with 28% of the vote, he fared no better than Asano Shirō, the reformist-oriented (*kaikaku-ha*) former Miyagi governor, had done in 2007 (30.7%).<sup>114</sup> Asano was determined to win, and received the help of the DPJ, the SPJ and other smaller opposition organizations, and also tried to create the conditions for citizens’ mobilization. But as in 2009, these famous candidates failed to overthrow the powerful incumbent Ishihara Shintarō, who was supported by the local conservatives despite his populist stance and the criticism of the Japanese political elite.

During his terms as governor of Miyagi (1993–2005), Asano Shirō was one of the precursors of a new style of local electoral campaigning that some see as flirting with populism. In 1993, after what some called the ‘Battle of Miyagi’ (*Miyagi no ran*), Asano, a modest bureaucrat, managed to win the post of governor of Miyagi prefecture after a political campaign which served as a model for many other atypical candidates.<sup>115</sup> At that time, the political establishment in Miyagi was in a critical situation following the arrest of the governor and the mayor of Sendai, the prefecture’s major city, in connection with a vast corruption scandal. An independent candidate without the support of any large party<sup>116</sup>, Asano embarked on an original campaign while facing an opponent supported by the main local parties. Combining flexibility with enthusiasm, Asano’s official support organization, poetically called “the network to realize the dream” (*Yume nettowāku*)<sup>117</sup> relied largely on local activists and disability-related organizations, with which Asano had been in contact since his time as an official at the Ministry of Health. The campaign was organized on the principle of voluntary individual mobilization rather than groups (agricultural, construction, etc.) linked by client relationships to the candidate.<sup>118</sup> Asano’s speeches and activities

<sup>111</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, January 28, 2008.

<sup>112</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, January 22, 2007.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted by *The Japan Times*, September 30, 2010.

<sup>114</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, April 4, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> See Satō Yutaka, *Mutōha Miyagi no ran: Asano chiji asshō no himitsu* [The Revolt of Nonpartisan Miyagi: The Secret of the Complete Victory of Governor Asano], Tokyo: Hon no mori, 1998. The campaign served as a model for other candidates, most notably Fukuda Akio in Tochigi (2000), Dōmoto Akiko in Chiba (2001) and even more Tanaka Yasuo at Nagano (2000).

<sup>116</sup> Asano’s candidacy was only backed by small parties: the Japan New Party, the New Party Sakigake, the Japan Renewal Party and the Socialist Democratic Federation.

<sup>117</sup> See Asano Shirō’s official website: <http://www.asanoshiro.org/network/index.htm> (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>118</sup> Asano Shirō, *Shissō 12-nen?: Asano chiji no kaikaku hakusho* [12 Years of Sprint: White Paper of Governor Asano’s Reforms], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006, pp. 57–67.

were intended to give the bureaucrat all the appearance of a modest citizen: a candidate close to the people, who extolled the values of the local community and opposed a prefectural establishment plagued by corruption. However, the political amateurism did not mean inexperience in the campaign's management. Far from being novices, Asano's entourage consisted of professional political and communication specialists, some having assisted Hosokawa Morihiro at the time of his secession from the LDP and the creation of his own party in 1992.<sup>119</sup> Seven years before Tanaka Yasuo at Nagano, this electoral strategy, based on voluntary campaigning and in complete contradiction with traditional campaign habits, brought success for Asano against all odds. For Jean-Marie Bouissou, however, Asano's campaign of 1993 and his alleged amateurism can be seen as "the thematic and conventional positioning of populism".<sup>120</sup>

Finally, populist comments and statements have been made by several other governors. Ido Toshizō, governor of Hyōgo since 2001, made a controversial remark comparing a massive earthquake in Tokyo with a chance for the Kansai. During a meeting of the various governors of the Kansai region, he declared that "if something like a Great Kantō earthquake occurred, (the capital region) will be seriously damaged. This is an opportunity", and said that there is a need to prepare for the transfer of the functions of the capital city to the Kansai area.<sup>121</sup> Discriminatory remarks toward the foreign population in Japan are still often pronounced to some popular support, even by other governors than Ishihara. For example, Matsuzawa Shigefumi, governor of Kanagawa (2003–2011), proclaimed in a rally to support a candidate to the House of Representatives in November 2003 that "Foreigners are all sneaky thieves. As Tokyo Governor Ishihara has cracked down on them, they have flowed into Kanagawa Prefecture".<sup>122</sup> He apologized a few days later, however, on the grounds that this statement only concerned illegal immigrants who commit crimes.

These various examples of populist tendencies or attitudes seem, by their diversity and their increase, to signal a deeper evolution of Japanese politics at the local and even national level.

## 5.2. Development of emotional, theatrical politics

Starting in the early 1990s, the Japanese political world went through a series of scandals while the country entered a period of economic recession following the bursting of the economic bubble. These events stirred the electorate to a heightened sense of mistrust toward not only their political elites but also the bureaucracy. This trend manifests itself in a growing rejection of parties and traditional political practices that are radically transforming Japanese politics at the national level. Inoguchi Takashi and Purnendra Jain argue that in the 2000s, Japan has moved from a *karaoke* democracy to a *kabuki* democracy. In the old *karaoke* democracy, "bureaucrats provided political leaders with scripts on policy statements", and the politicians interpreted these scripts in their own way. Thus, although the political leaders changed frequently, "policy directions only mildly changed". Like a *karaoke* stage, "the singers behind the microphone came and went, but the song sheets

<sup>119</sup> Satō, *Mutōha Miyagi...*, pp. 58–125 and 142–159.

<sup>120</sup> Bouissou, *Quand les sumōs...*, p. 441.

<sup>121</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, November 12, 2008.

<sup>122</sup> *The Japan Times*, November 4, 2003.

remained unchanged”.<sup>123</sup> In a *kabuki* democracy, however, “the political leaders bring personality and emotions to their role on the national political stage”<sup>124</sup>, and offer a more transformative aspect to political action. At the national level, the volatility of the vote and the new electoral system<sup>125</sup> represent major changes in the Japanese electoral environment, most notably towards a greater role for politicians’ personal image (particularly the party leader) and less importance of the “organized vote” (*soshiki-hyō*).<sup>126</sup> But even before these changes happened in national politics, at the local level, the same factors of endemic corruption and economic crisis which started the national transformations led to the election of atypical prefectural governors who often took populist stances during the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>127</sup> Through them, the evolution of the gubernatorial position took a decisive step toward *kabuki* democracy years ahead of the national level.

Since the late 2000s, some elected local executives in Japan have displayed different attitudes from the traditionally elected governors. Called theatrical (*Gekijō-gata*)<sup>128</sup> or activist (*kōdō-ha*) local executives<sup>129</sup>, they seem to reinforce the *kabuki* aspect of local democracy by their populist stance and the construction of their media image, following the precedents set by Ishihara and Tanaka. And while reformist governors like Asano Shirō focused primarily on transforming the prefectural management and improving local autonomy, going against the habits and practices of the local and central bureaucracy, these governors have developed a more political perspective in both their actions and rhetoric. Yet rather than integrating more closely within national political parties like the DPJ and the LDP, they choose to position themselves as outsiders. This attitude fits with the space open for amateur candidates to join politics through the governorship as an alternative road into the Japanese political world.<sup>130</sup> If Tanaka may be considered as a precursor in this way<sup>131</sup>, among the incumbent or recent former governors included in this category, three names are prominent: Higashikokubaru Hideo of Miyazaki (2007–2011), Ōmura Hideaki of Aichi (since 2011), and principally Hashimoto Tōru of Osaka (2008–2011).

<sup>123</sup> Inoguchi and Jain, ‘From Karaoke to...’, pp. 1–2.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> The 1994 electoral reform replaced the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system by a combination of Single-Member Districts (SMDs) and Proportional Representation (PR).

<sup>126</sup> See Reed, ‘Winning...’, pp. 71–72, and Ellis and Pekkanen, *The Rise...*, pp. 285–287.

<sup>127</sup> Reed cites gubernatorial elections, and especially the election of Tanaka Yasuo as Nagano governor in 2000, as ‘the most dramatic evidence of the decline of the organized vote’ (Reed, ‘Winning...’, pp. 74–76).

<sup>128</sup> Arima Shinsaku, *Gekijōgata shuchō no senryaku to kōzai: chihō bunken jidai ni towareru gikai* [Merits, Demerits and Strategies of Theatrical Local Executives: Parliaments in the Era of Decentralization], Kyoto: Mineruba Shobō, 2011, pp. 1–6. Arima cites three governors of this type in his study: Tanaka Yasuo, Higashikokubaru Hideo and Hashimoto Tōru.

<sup>129</sup> Sasaki Nobuo, Toyama Kimiyoshi, Ushiyama Kunihiko, Doi Takerō, Iwai Tomoaki, *Gendai chihōjichi no kadai* [Contemporary Local Government Issues], Tokyo: Gakuyōshobō, 2011, pp. 245–254. Three governors are listed: Higashikokubaru Hideo, Hashimoto Tōru and (briefly) Ōmura Hideaki.

<sup>130</sup> Trifu, *Prefectural...*, pp. 226–229 and p. 291 in particular.

<sup>131</sup> Arima, *Gekijōgata...*, pp. 31–54. See also Reed, ‘Winning...’, pp. 74–76.

Hashimoto Tōru is probably the most famous local executive of the last couple of years. Born in 1969, Hashimoto became a lawyer after graduating from Waseda University, one of the top Japanese private universities. Registered with the Osaka bar, he took a large number of cases, notably those related to the entertainment world. These connections eventually offered him a chance to appear on various TV shows. He gained national fame by providing legal advice with a youthful and stylish appearance.<sup>132</sup> In late 2007, following Osaka Governor Ōta's announcement that she would not seek a third term<sup>133</sup>, Hashimoto declared his candidacy after having been assured of the support of the local LDP and *Kōmeitō*. He was elected with 54% of the vote on January 27, 2008.

Hashimoto's years at the head of Osaka prefecture were full of controversies, including his struggles with Governor Ido of Hyōgo about Itami airport, with the prefectural assembly about the relocation of prefectural buildings, and with the local administration about working conditions.<sup>134</sup> Hashimoto also often exhibited nationalistic or extremist tendencies similar to those of Ishihara. One of the most famous examples was his declaration that "strong power, almost dictatorial, is needed to change today's politics".<sup>135</sup>

However, his main conflict was probably his grand project to merge Osaka prefecture and Osaka city into an Osaka metropolis on the model of Tokyo. The objective was to reduce the cost of two large administrations on a small territory<sup>136</sup>, and to prevent the construction and management of similar infrastructure projects (such as stadiums or libraries) by municipal and prefectural administrations, both of which were heavily in debt<sup>137</sup>. The idea was met with skepticism by several academics<sup>138</sup> and by hostility from many local politicians, in particular Hiramatsu Kunio, mayor of Osaka since 2007. To curb the opposition and to reinforce his authority, Hashimoto made a bold move by establishing his own party: *Ōsaka Ishin no Kai* (Osaka Restoration Party)<sup>139</sup> in April 2010. One year later, in the 2011 unified local elections, the party won more seats than any other party in the assemblies of

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<sup>132</sup> Hashimoto Tōru, *Mattō shōbu!* [Complete Victory or Defeat!], Tokyo: Shōgakkān, 2006, pp. 1–5 and 256.

<sup>133</sup> Ōta was criticized by many for her retirement money and her attempt to become a *tarento* while the Osaka prefecture financial situation was in serious difficulties. See for example 'Taishokukin 8 senman en seshimeta Ōta zen-fuchiji no «tetsumenpi»' [The 'effrontery' of former governor Ōta who has obtained 80 million yen of retirement money], *Facta*, August 2008. Available at <http://facta.co.jp/article/200808049.html> (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>134</sup> See most notably Sakakibara Hidenori (ed.), *Jichitai popyurizumu o tou: Ōsaka ishin kaikaku, Kawamura-ryū? genzei no nagekakeru mono* [Question the Local Government's Populism: What Caused the Osaka Renovation Reform and Kawamura's Style of Tax Reduction], Tokyo: Jichitai kenkyūsha, 2012, pp. 163–196.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted by *The Japan Times*, December 1, 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Osaka prefecture is the second smallest prefecture in Japan with 1897 km<sup>2</sup>, just 21 km<sup>2</sup> more than the 1876 km<sup>2</sup> of Kagawa prefecture.

<sup>137</sup> Ueyama Shin'ichi, *Ōsaka ishin: Hashimoto kaikaku ga Nihon o kaeru* [The Osaka Renovation: The Hashimoto Reform Transforms Japan], Tokyo: Kadokawa SSC, 2010, pp. 164–170.

<sup>138</sup> See most notably Takayose Shōzō, *Kyokō Ōsaka-to kōsō eno hanron: Hashimoto popyurizumu to toshi shuken no taiketsu* [A Refutation of the Idea of Osaka Metropolis: Confrontation Between Hashimoto's Populism and Urban Sovereignty], Tokyo: Kōjin no tomosha, 2010.

<sup>139</sup> See the official website of *Ōsaka Ishin no Kai*: <http://oneosaka.jp/> (accessed 20.08.2013).

Osaka prefecture, Osaka city and Sakai city.<sup>140</sup> While until then the governors had generally had a loose relationship with the political parties in the prefectural assembly, Governor Hashimoto innovated by creating his own political forces throughout the prefecture, to a larger extent than a *kōenkai* or traditional political support. Moreover, with the aim of advancing the Osaka Metropolis plan, in 2011 Hashimoto chose to abandon his governor's seat and compete against his principal local rival, Hiramatsu, for the Osaka mayorship. In the double mayoral and gubernatorial election of November 2011, Hashimoto's success was total as he not only won his electoral bid against Hiramatsu, but Matsui Ichirō, a member of the Osaka prefectural assembly and the secretary-general of *Ōsaka Ishin no Kai*<sup>141</sup>, succeeded him as head of the prefecture.<sup>142</sup>

On September 2012, Hashimoto announced the transformation of *Ōsaka Ishin no Kai* into a national party, *Nippon Ishin no Kai*<sup>143</sup>, gathering seven Diet members<sup>144</sup> and several former local executives, notably Higashikokubaru Hideo and Nakada Hiroshi (the mayor of Yokohama from 2002 to 2009) around him. In November 2012, Ishihara Shintarō merged his Sunrise Party with *Nippon Ishin no Kai* and became the official leader of the party. With the former Tokyo governor at its head, former Osaka Governor Hashimoto as acting representative, the incumbent Osaka governor as secretary-general and even the former Miyazaki governor as a top member of the party, *Nippon Ishin no Kai* is without doubt an original attempt by a group of individuals with experience in a local executive position<sup>145</sup> to play a direct role in national politics. While many academics and commentators consider these party figures mostly as populists<sup>146</sup>, there are also the representatives of a new kind of Japanese democracy with greater focus on charisma, emotions and personal qualities. Several of them were elected to the Diet in the December 2012 general elections.<sup>147</sup> The appearance of populist former local executives in national politics may indicate an increase of theatrical and emotional aspects on the national stage. Yet, despite this good start, the party has been plagued by internal friction and has faced many difficulties in 2013<sup>148</sup>, and the last electoral results of July 2013 were relatively disappointing.<sup>149</sup> Like former governor

<sup>140</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, April 25, 2011.

<sup>141</sup> Matsui was elected, not as a NPA, but with the official affiliation of *Ōsaka Ishin no Kai*.

<sup>142</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, November 28, 2011.

<sup>143</sup> See the *Nippon Ishin no Kai*'s official website: <http://j-ishin.jp/> (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>144</sup> From the LDP, the DPJ and *Minna no Tō*.

<sup>145</sup> Aichi Governor Ōmura was also an advisor for the party until late November, but now aims to get closer to Nagoya Mayor Kawamura's position in order to alleviate difficulties in the prefecture. See *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 21, 2012.

<sup>146</sup> For Hashimoto, see Takayose, *Kyokō...* Former minister Masuzoe Yōichi has severely condemned the populist stance of the members of this party, despite being close to their political program (*Asahi Shimbun*, December 1, 2012).

<sup>147</sup> Along with Ishihara, Higashikokubaru and Nakada were elected. The party, with 54 seats, became the third party in the House of Representatives, just below the DPJ (57 seats) but far from the 294 seats of the LDP. See *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 17, 2012.

<sup>148</sup> See Eric Johnston, 'Hashimoto: from third force to political farce?', *The Japan Times*, July 8, 2013.

<sup>149</sup> *Nippon Ishin no Kai* won 8 of the 121 renewed seats, as many as *Minna no Tō* and the JCP, making it the sixth largest party in the House of Councilors with a total of 9 seats. Media celebrities

Tanaka's attempt with his New Party Nippon, this demonstrates that Japanese national politics is still regulated by its own political rules and offers fewer opportunities than local politics for new challengers.<sup>150</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

“Nowadays populist politicians in Japan are basically local executives,” declared Professor Yoshida Tōru in a recent interview for the *Asahi Shimbun*.<sup>151</sup> Despite the polymorphic meaning and broad use of the word ‘populism’, several dynamics appear to have increased populist behaviors since the early 1990s in local Japan, particularly among prefectural governors. Media personalities such as Ishihara Shintarō, Tanaka Yasuo and Hashimoto Tōru (but less-known figures also) have displayed various kinds of populist attitudes. In a general context of dissatisfaction with traditional politics, the post-war particularities of the governorship in some aspects offers an even more favorable ground for populism than national politics.

At the national level, the ‘Koizumi moment’ (2001–2006) saw an evolution of Japanese politics toward “video politics”<sup>152</sup> with populist tendencies. Koizumi was able, more than anyone else before him and maybe even after him, to use the various media in the construction of his own political and public image, increasing the role played by the media in the Japanese political world as well as the personalization of power at the head of the country (two elements highly favorable to the expansion of populism) during his years as prime minister. Yet since Koizumi, the national trend has slowed down compared to local politics. Abe Shinzō, the newly elected prime minister and a politician close to Koizumi, has long been regularly described as populist<sup>153</sup> and he appears to have followed in some of the steps of Koizumi<sup>154</sup>, but it is still too early to correctly assess his impact on Japanese politics. Anyway, the development of populist behaviors in local Japan, especially among governors, predated these national transformations by several years.

There are, without doubt, potential dangers and risks posed by the spread of populism for any modern democracy. For example, the nationalist and populist postures periodically adopted by local executives like Ishihara and Hashimoto or prime ministers like Koizumi and Abe, in part to please some of their electorate, have further deteriorated the already

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such as Inoki Antonio (a former professional wrestler) and Shimizu Takayuki (a former television presenter) were among the party candidates elected. See *Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 22, 2013.

<sup>150</sup> See Reed, ‘Winning...’, pp. 74–76. Even if not as essential as before, the organized vote through *kōenkai* remains an important asset in national politics for the LDP (Ellis and Pekkanen, *The Rise...*, pp. 281–282). *Nippon Ishin no Kai*'s electoral success, for example, was concentrated in the Kansai area where it originated and in the proportional representation block with popular figures like Ishihara and former Yokohama mayor Nakada Hiroshi, both of whom had previous experience in national politics. See the official website of the party for a complete list of its Diet members: <https://j-ishin.jp/member/legislator/> (accessed 20.08.2013).

<sup>151</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, November 30, 2012.

<sup>152</sup> An expression devised by the Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori. Giovanni Sartori, ‘Video-power’, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1989, pp. 39–53.

<sup>153</sup> The ‘populist LDP poster boy Abe’ for *The Japan Times* (November 1, 2003).

<sup>154</sup> ‘Abenomics’ (a portmanteau of the name Abe and economics) and its worldwide fame may be seen as reinforcing the personalization of power.

tense relationships between Japan and its neighbors.<sup>155</sup> The consequences are not negligible for the image of Japan abroad, as well as for Japanese companies doing business in these countries (notably in China).<sup>156</sup>

Analyzing the current trend of populism in Japan only as a ‘pathology’ of democracy seems, however, to be reductionist. Various institutional, political and social constraints exist, particularly at the national level, to prevent serious endangerments to the current Japanese democracy by populists. The growing number of local and national politicians who focus intently on personality, charisma and emotion does indeed introduce these elements, connected generally to populism, more decisively into Japanese politics. Populism as a ‘dynamic ideology’ which puts the people at the center and stresses the direct connection between political leaders and the people against an ‘enemy’<sup>157</sup>, could thus develop more easily within this new dimension for Japanese democracy, but as a particular and more radical modality, and not necessary as a threat to democracy itself. This may also act as a partial solution to the problem of voter apathy, which is a major danger for a sane democracy as Tocqueville famously points out.<sup>158</sup> In gubernatorial elections, low voter turnout rates have been frequent since the 1990s: 63 of the 118 elections held in the 2000s had a turnout lower than 50%.<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, elections receiving large media attention, such as Nagano in 2002 or Osaka in 2011, attract more voters to the polls.<sup>160</sup> Original political styles and political innovations may also improve the image of elected officials and their support rates.<sup>161</sup>

Less than a sign of a dysfunctional democracy, the development of populism in local Japan can be seen as an extreme form of local and national political evolutions since the 1990s, indicating the general transition of Japanese politics toward a theatrical, *kabuki*-like democracy.

<sup>155</sup> On Ishihara, see above (part 4.1 in this article). On Hashimoto, his comments of May 2013 on the ‘comfort women’ issue led to domestic and international criticism, while South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se stated that “By making such remarks, Japan will be further isolated in the international community.” (*The Japan Times*, May 28, 2013). On Koizumi and, in particular, the results of his visits to the Yasukuni shrine, see Uchiyama, *Koizumi...*, p. 79. On Abe, the current Prime Minister has faced regular backlash from South Korea and China on the Yasukuni shrine issue and for his recent position apparently contesting the validity of the Murayama statement, a clear apology made in 1995 by then-Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi for Japan’s colonial rule and wartime aggression, and officially endorsed by the Japanese government since then (*The Japan Times*, April 24, 2013).

<sup>156</sup> The nationalization of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by the Japanese government was followed by huge anti-Japan rallies and a boycott of Japanese goods in China (*The Japan Times*, January 6, 2013).

<sup>157</sup> See Mény and Surel, *Par le peuple...*, p. 181 and Uchiyama, *Koizumi...*, p. 8.

<sup>158</sup> “It is, therefore, far more important to resist apathy than anarchy or despotism for apathy can give rise, almost indifferently, to either one”. Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* [On Democracy in America], Paris: Gallimard Folio Histoire, Vol. 2, 2004, p. 466.

<sup>159</sup> Based on data from newspaper reports after the elections. For more details on gubernatorial elections, see Trifu, *Prefectural...*

<sup>160</sup> 52.9% (+3.9) for the 2011 Osaka gubernatorial election. For the 2002 Nagano gubernatorial election, see above (part 4.2).

<sup>161</sup> The dynamic stance of Koizumi and the former Miyazaki governor Higashikokubaru was a key element sustaining their personal popularity while in office. However a new political style alone cannot guarantee electoral success without political and administrative efficiency, as proved by the last years of Governor Tanaka at the head of Nagano (Reed, ‘Winning...’, p. 75).

