

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ Social Science Study Group



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Social Democracy in Japan – What’s Left?

Since the 1980s it has been often argued that social democracy is in demise. On first sight Japan seems to be the best proof for it. From 1955 to the beginning of the 1990s, the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ) exerted considerable influence on Japanese politics and could collect about one third of the voters support. But since then public support for the party, which renamed itself into Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1993, has declined tremendously.

This presentation however will argue that social democracy is still alive in Japan. My hypothesis is that social democratic elements are not confined to the SDP but include also several inner-party groups inside the DPJ, the new Lifestyle Party of Ozawa Ichirō, and the small Future Party of Japan. Using the theories of social democracy as an analytical frame of reference, I identify elements of social democracy like the redistribution of welfare, welfare as social rights, and the inclusion of minorities within these parties. The analysis of official documents such as party manifestos and government declarations, as well as interviews with and texts by leading politicians allows me to expose which political actors in Japan actually exhibit these elements and can therefore be called social democratic. This research also helps to understand the structure, ideology and policy of the DPJ as a highly heterogeneous party. The findings suggest that some labour representation in the DPJ can be called a “fake” social democracy, and that the deep rift in the Japanese left, which can be retraced far back into the 20th century, still shapes politics in Japan. Finally, the possibility of a unification of the social democratic groups as a result of probable future party restructuring will be evaluated.

Felix Spremberg is a PhD candidate at the Japan Center of Munich University (LMU). Currently he is conducting research in Japan on a DIJ grant. His research interests center on Japanese politics and the social and intellectual history of Japan.

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is a forum for young scholars and Ph.D. candidates in the field of Social Sciences organized by Maren Godzik, Phoebe Holdgrün and Barbara Holthus.
All are welcome to attend, but registration (holthus@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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