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## Inherent Difficulties of Standing in "Middle of the Road"

By OGATA Rintaro

Such phrases as "centrism" or "middle of the road" in politics may be pleasing to the ear. But they are sometimes liable to be confused with innocuous eclecticism. Unless quite unbending in their convictions, proponents of "centrism" or "middle of the road" would be easily carried away with an atmosphere of the time. I clearly remember an interesting episode once told by Prof. BABA Yasuo in his class on "European Political History." There was a phenomenon called "surenchere" (overbid), which became quite manifest in French politics from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. That is, in France in those days, politicians and political parties whose initial standing was "far-left" increasingly shifted rightward as time went by. Probably, leftist values were considered "intellectual" at that time. New-born political factions occupied the far-left position one after another, thereby driving away the established far-left forces into "relatively right" positions.

Georges CLEMENCEAU, then Prime Minister of France, who played a leading role in the World War I and made possible the Treaty of Versailles may be a lucid example. He began his political career from the far-left position and shifted to the right at the end of his life. Besides, there were some conservative political parties which bore names including such words as "radical" or "progressive." Those parties were initially leftist but were eventually driven away to the right.

It seems that "surenchere" can also be observed in today's Japanese politics. This time, however, political dynamics flow from the right to the left, though it is difficult to explain why so. In Japan, with rise of rightist parties of new kinds, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) seems to have been pushed toward the "centrist position." Such being the case, the Abe administration is, to some extent, successful in accommodating the centrist dint, while clearly based in the rightist position. Accordingly, centrist parties come under pressure toward the left. But at the farthest left sits the Japan Communist Party (JCP). Easy commitment to centrism without any efforts to resist this pressure of "surenchere" in

today's Japan would end up narrowing the range of activities of the centrist force between LDP stretching to the center and JCP anchored at the left end.

Frankly speaking, I would rather not align any political creeds in a line of political spectrum stretching from the right to the left. Nor, would I be willing to commit to such positioning. Nevertheless, I introduced this model as an analytical tool, as it seems applicable to examine the current Japanese politics. In conclusion with some supplement to the foregoing, I would suggest that the essence of centrism is (1) to avoid eclecticism, (2) to define clearly what the centrist values are, and (3) (in view of the current Japanese politics) to resist the leftward pressure coming from the right.

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