

Japan Internet execs shy away from politics

Internet entrepreneurs are downright sexy in the United States, as glossy magazines such as Vanity Fair will testify. Yet while the founders of Google and eBay's chief executives are lauded by the glitterati as much as by computer geeks, Japan's startup entrepreneurs are finding that they are far less alluring to the public than their U.S. counterparts.

The latest elections make it clear that even as many voters seemingly are attracted to change, many remain fundamentally conservative in their attitude.

The Lower House elections on Sept. 11 were a major victory for Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who led his Liberal Democratic Party to increase its hold in the Diet chamber by nearly 20 percent. At the same time, the latest elections renewed the public's interest in the political process, due in no small part to the fact that Koizumi was able to convince some of Japan's most prominent figures to run for elected office for the first time.

As a result, nearly one-third, or 101 seats, of the incoming Lower House members are first-time members of the Diet, including over a dozen former fast-track career bureaucrats as well as renowned academics and a smattering of television personalities.

It was clear from the vigorous campaigning efforts by the rookie candidates that all wanted to be perceived by voters that they would be pushing for sweeping reform and promote themselves as a personification of change. Yet interestingly enough, entrepreneurs were poorly represented among the newly elected, with no chief executive of a famous startup being sworn into office.

That was not from lack of trying, however, as one of the most closely watched candidates was Takafumi Horie, the 32-year-old founder of LiveDoor, an Internet information and retailing company. The travails of the spiky-haired executive who favors a wrinkled T-shirt to a suit was followed by all the major Japanese television networks, and not just the local media of Hiroshima, where he fought for a seat and ultimately lost against Shizuka Kamei, one of the LDP's most long-standing members.

Voters in the southern province were gradually disenchanted by Horie, who has written a number of books with such titles as "How I Earned 50 Billion Yen" and "Earning Is Winning: Zero to Ten Billion Yen, My Way."

Granted, it's easy enough to understand why many in a conservative region were downright appalled by Horie's self-confidence, but the entrepreneur's drive certainly captured the public's imagination.

Yet Horie himself kept asking publicly, "Why are young brilliant Japanese people not in Japanese politics? Why aren't they entering the political world?" His loss may have put off many potential Internet high-flyers from entering into the race next time around.

For there is certainly no shortage of successful startup entrepreneurs.

A recent article by Mariko Hayashi, a popular Japanese writer who specializes in commenting on daily life, pointed out that some of Tokyo's most posh apartments belong to 30-something executives, living in the most exclusive residential areas with small children in tow. In fact, Hayashi argued that perhaps they were the only ones who could afford such flats these days.

For now, it appears that despite their wealth, Internet tycoons in Japan are not interested in entering politics but prefer to bolster their clout in other ways.

The current trend appears to be buying out baseball teams. Masayoshi Son, the head of computer software group Softbank, succeeded in buying out the team owned by supermarket group Daiei last year. Meanwhile, Rakuten, an online retailer, founded its own major-league baseball team last year as well under the leadership of its chief executive, Hiroshi Mikitani.

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