

# Japanese election result sets stage for political instability

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The result of last weekend's lower house election in Japan testifies to the alienation and frustration felt towards the entire political system. Despite widespread hostility to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-led coalition government and contempt for Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori personally, the opposition parties proved incapable of attracting sufficient support to win office.

The turnout of 63.1 percent was only a small increase compared to the 1996 lower house election. As a general pattern, the LDP vote held up in rural areas but in urban areas, especially in Tokyo, voting went against the coalition toward the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and parties aligned with it.

The LDP no longer holds its own majority in the House, as its representation has fallen from 271 to 233 seats in the 480 seat House of Representatives. Among those who lost their seats in urban areas were two cabinet ministers and three former ministers. The LDP's coalition partners based more in urban areas had worse results. The Conservative Party collapsed from 20 seats to only 7. The Buddhist-based New Komeito now holds 31 seats, down from 42 in the previous parliament. For the first time since 1993, the LDP is dependent upon other parties for the passage of legislation in both houses of Japan's parliament, the Diet.

A factor in the hostility toward the ruling coalition were last month's declarations by Mori that Japan was "a divine nation headed by the emperor"—a phrase that invoked the pre-1945 Japanese state. Large sections of the population are deeply suspicious and hostile to any hint of a revival of the militarism that stripped the Japanese working class of their democratic rights and plunged the country into the horrors of World War Two.

More significant was the opposition to the LDP's

economic policies. The Democratic Party sought to appeal to concerns over unemployment and falling living standards by charging the LDP with bankrupting Japan to protect the vested interests of its rural voter constituency, the construction industry and the banks. While Japan's economy has stagnated throughout the 1990s, successive LDP administrations have pumped billions into bank bailouts, agricultural subsidies and public works programs, pushing public debt over \$US6 trillion or more than 130 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Despite the deficit spending, joblessness is continuing to rise to record levels.

However the DPJ, which stood 262 candidates, was only able to increase its seats from 95 to 127. The alternative to the LDP advanced by the Democratic Party was unmistakably that of sections of Japanese big business. It called for the income tax threshold to be lowered, tax rises, cuts in public works spending and the further deregulation and restructuring of the economy. For workers in both urban and rural areas, already confronting layoffs and financial hardship, the DPJ solution was not an attractive one. DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama himself only narrowly won his seat on the island of Hokkaido, which has relied heavily on public works projects to avoid large-scale unemployment.

Significantly, the Japanese working class did not turn to either the Communist Party (CPJ), or back to the former Socialist Party—the Social Democratic Party (SDP)—that had enjoyed mass working class support in the post-war decades. Both the CPJ and the SDP had promoted the Democratic Party as the foundation of an anti-LDP governing coalition, joined it in denouncing public works spending and made only token criticisms of its big business agenda. Recognising that a vote for either was a vote for a Democratic Party government,

large numbers of workers, especially younger layers, simply did not vote at all.

The CPJ actually recorded a lower vote than 1996, did not win any single seat constituencies and saw its overall representation fall from 26 down to 20. The SDP, which regularly won 30-35 percent of the vote in the 1970s and 80s, only increased its seats marginally, from 14 to 19. The Social Democrats remain deeply compromised in the eyes of the working class for entering a coalition government with the LDP in 1994.

The LDP secretary-general Hiromu Nonaka, a representative of the dominant factions within the LDP that installed Mori after the death of former prime minister Obuchi, declared to the media: “The result means that we’ve received the approval of the public. Therefore it’s only natural for Mr. Mori to stay as prime minister”. Claiming a mandate for its policies, the LDP has made clear it intends to push ahead with another round of public works spending.

However the losses suffered by the LDP coalition, and the untenable character of its economic policies, place a question mark over both the political survival of Mori and the ability of the LDP to hold together.

Key sections of corporate Japan are not satisfied with the election result and will not rest until there is a change of course. They have viewed with alarm the penetration of US and European firms into its Asian markets since the economic turmoil of 1997-1998. They now face increased challenges within Japan itself, with foreign investment reaching \$23 billion as international rivals buy up struggling Japanese corporations, including icons such as Nissan and Mazda.

In its June 27 editorial *Mainichi Daily News* declared: “As Japan is swept by the information revolution and internationalisation, bold new policies that depart from the policies of the past will be needed. Our politicians and political parties must begin with the important task of building trust. To do this, they must stop pandering to voters and come up with policies that build bridges to the future.”

The “bold new policies” called for amount to the wholesale dismantling of Japan’s post-war corporate structure and the mergers, job destruction and restructuring of working conditions that have swept the United States, and are now sweeping Europe.

The issue is also being debated within the LDP itself.

Factional pressures have been accumulating within the LDP between the dominant factions, and ones headed by Koichi Kato and Taku Yamasaki. Before the election, Kato had been an outspoken critic of the coalition with New Komeito and had made proclamations on the rise of state debt that broadly coincided with those of the DPJ.

According to Japanese press reports, some LDP figures hold Mori responsible for the party’s loss of a parliamentary majority. Speculation is rife that attempts to unseat him will be made after the G-8 meeting in Japan during July and certainly before next year’s election for the upper house of parliament.

If a change of policy cannot be implemented by an internal leadership coup, other means may be utilised. Large-scale defections from the LDP to the Democratic Party—which itself was formed by a split from the LDP in 1993—and a parliamentary transfer of power is one of the other options.



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