

Koizumi's support to be tested in Japanese upper house elections

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Tomorrow's elections for Japan's upper house of parliament, the House of Councillors, will be the first significant test of the popularity of newly installed Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. A great deal is riding on the outcome for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), big business and of course Koizumi himself. In coming to power, Koizumi broke from the traditional mold of Japan's conservative party and promoted himself as a reformer and a maverick. He needs a decisive win to consolidate what remains a tenuous hold on the LDP leadership.

To date criticisms of Koizumi from his factional LDP opponents have been rather muted, in part because the party as a whole wants to capitalise on what has been dubbed "Koizumi-mania". Just four months ago, the LDP was staring an electoral disaster in the face. The cabinet was besieged with recriminations—in parliament, in the media and from within the party—over its policy paralysis in the face of the country's decade-long economic stagnation. Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori was derided as an idiot and had one of the lowest ever approval ratings—just 8 percent.

In a remarkable turn-around, the Koizumi cabinet has registered an approval rating as high as 90 percent, making it perhaps the most popular administration in postwar Japan. Posters, T-shirts and various items featuring his image are selling in the hundreds of thousands, with middle class housewives and teenage girls being the main purchasers. Over two million households have subscribed to "Lionheart", a weekly e-mail bulletin sent out by Koizumi's office. LDP election rallies where Koizumi is scheduled to appear draw crowds in the thousands.

Now the ruling coalition appears to have a chance not only of winning the 62 seats required to keep its upper house majority but of doing substantially better. A recent survey by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* predicted that turnout would increase from just 58 percent in the 1998 upper house poll to between 65 to 70 percent, with the bulk of the increase flowing to the LDP. The newspaper forecast the LDP could carry between 60 and 70 seats, while its coalition partner, the Buddhist-based New Komeito Party, could win up to 13.

The high level of support for Koizumi is even more striking considering his economic policies. He has called for a clear break from the previous policies of the LDP, which responded to Japan's economic stagnation with one government spending package after another. Koizumi argues for a program of free market restructuring, including bank debt reduction, privatisation and government spending cuts on the basis of "short term pain, long

term gain".

Koizumi's advocacy of drastic economic measures, which will lead to thousands of bankruptcies and dramatically increase unemployment, along with his willingness to challenge the vested interests and factional structures of the LDP, is why he has been backed by significant sections of big business and strongly promoted in the media. The pump-priming by previous LDP governments has done nothing to revive the economy and has left Japan with astronomical government debts amounting to 666 trillion yen or around \$US5.3 trillion on current exchange rates.

Business leaders are looking to Koizumi to implement a radical purge of inefficient businesses and for an aggressive assertion of Japan's economic interests against the US and other rivals. After the elections, pressure will intensify on Koizumi to carry out his economic plans and deal with whatever opposition emerges within the LDP and ruling coalition, as well as among voters.

Koizumi's unconventional image, his criticism of the LDP old guard and radical-sounding policies also underlie his popularity. The alienation of voters from Mori was symptomatic of a far broader dissatisfaction with the LDP and the political establishment as a whole. The economic stagnation of the 1990s has produced the highest levels of unemployment in the post-war period. Corporations have begun to dispense with lifelong employment guarantees and to cut wages and bonuses. All of this has added to the uncertainties of everyday life and heightened social tensions, which are manifest in rising levels of homelessness, suicide, mental illness and crime. In the sphere of politics, disgust with the existing political parties has translated into steadily falling voter turnouts—particularly among the young.

Under such conditions, Koizumi has functioned for several months as a vessel into which disparate social layers have poured their hopes for an end to their economic difficulties and for a change to a political system that has proven incapable of bringing about any remedy. Even at the most superficial levels of personality and appearance, he defies the somber and austere stereotype of a Japanese political leader. His hairstyle and dress are unconventional, he is single, likes rock music, is a capable orator and has a striking television presence. The combination of media hype and political alienation has given him virtual rock-star status among some younger Japanese.

He has a particular appeal to sections of the urban middle class, who were hard hit by the collapse of property and share prices at the beginning of the 1990s. Millions of people own or are paying

off real estate worth less than they paid for it. They are angry that their living standards have stagnated or declined while successive LDP governments spent trillions of yen building dams, roads and other public projects to shore up support in rural areas. Moreover, the rise of unemployment has heightened the anxiety of large numbers of managerial and white-collar workers who previously regarded their job as secure for life. Among these social layers, support for drastic measures to lift the Japanese economy is high.

By its very nature, the support for Koizumi is rather ephemeral. He has not implemented his plans, the “pain” has yet to hit, and the realisation has not dawned for many that the consequences for their lives will be anything but “short-term”. Nevertheless, there are already indications that “Koizumi-mania” is beginning to wear off—both in the corporate world and among voters.

Within sections of big business, there is growing concern that Koizumi’s victory over the major party factions may not have been as complete as they had hoped. The Democratic Party (DPJ), which derives from a split in the LDP and draws its support from big business and the urban middle class, has made that accusation the centre of its election campaign.

DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama told the *Japan Times* on July 11: “The LDP is made up of two conflicting layers—those who support reforms and those who want to stick with the old system... We have consistently been a reform force, while Koizumi is just a face atop the LDP’s resisting forces beneath.” This week he told the *Yomiuri Shimbun*: “What will the prime minister do if the anti-reform forces within the LDP regain power? Will he side with them or quit the LDP?”

This week the Nikkei stock market index plunged to its lowest level in 16 years, in part due to the lack of detail about Koizumi’s plan to eliminate bad debts in the banking system. The DPJ immediately declared it a sign “the market does not trust Koizumi’s reform program... it has no content, is dangerous and has no future”. Moody’s downgraded Japan’s credit rating this month, an indication that it put little confidence in the Koizumi government’s ability to carry through restructuring.

Summing up the fears within international and Japanese financial circles, Karel van Wolferen, a Dutch commentator on Japanese politics, told the *Asahi Shimbun* this week: “If Koizumi stays in the LDP and stays as the prime minister—which we don’t know because some factions want to get rid of him—there will be so much disappointment by the end of this year or the beginning of next year. A government with the LDP in a dominant position cannot be an effective government.”

To shore up big business backing amidst such criticism, Koizumi has been compelled to make a series of threats that he will split from the LDP if the major factions attempt to block his economic policies.

There are also signs of opposition toward Koizumi brewing within the Japanese working class. As well as alarm that workers will bear the brunt of the unemployment produced by the proposed restructuring and austerity measures, there is deep suspicion toward the new government’s nationalist orientation.

Koizumi’s cabinet is a marriage of populist independents and free market advocates within his own ultra-nationalist Fukuda group, which has traditionally aspired to repudiate Japan’s pacifist

constitution and rebuild the Japanese military.

Koizumi has made clear his desire for a revision of the constitutional clause that prohibits Japan possessing a military capable of offensive operations. He has also signalled that the government will “re-interpret” the constitution to permit the deployment of combat troops into UN peace-keeping interventions or operations alongside the US, with whom Japan has a formal military treaty.

This month his government endorsed a right-wing school history textbook, despite Korean and Chinese opposition, and he has repeatedly declared he will worship in an official capacity at the Yasukuni war shrine on August 15—an action viewed both in Japan and internationally as a provocative glorification of the wartime militarist regime.

Opinion polls show that less than a quarter of the population support removing the pacifist clause of the constitution and only one third support a visit to Yasukuni. The widespread opposition to Koizumi’s nationalist course has also been shown by the public reaction to the school textbook issue. School boards across the country have rejected using the book, some after parental protests that it praises war. The school board in Tochigi prefecture reversed an earlier decision to use the text on the grounds that it distorts reality. To this point, the textbook has only been selected for use in a small number of private schools.

The discredited Social Democratic Party (SDP), which once drew mass support from the working class, is seeking to retain its upper house representation by tapping into sentiment against Koizumi. The SDP is advancing what it calls an “anti-Koizumi” platform, denouncing him as a right-wing extremist and defender of big business. In a similar effort to win working class votes, Japanese Communist Party (JCP) chairman Kazuo Shii attacked Koizumi this week for planning to “hurt family budgets”, defending “the interests of large banks” and attempting to “scuttle the constitution”.

The hypocrisy of the SDP and JCP pronouncements is underscored by the fact that both parties support either directly or indirectly the DPJ, which if it ever came to power would implement economic restructuring policies every bit as devastating for ordinary working people as those of Koizumi. The SDP has formal electoral arrangements with the DPJ and the rightwing nationalist Liberal Party. While maintaining an “independent” stance, the JCP has indicated its willingness to support, or even participate in a DPJ-led government.

Whatever the outcome of tomorrow’s election or the immediate fate of Koizumi, all the signs are that Japanese politics is not going to settle back into the previous predictable channels.



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