

Why Junichiro Koizumi is being retained as Japanese leader

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Japanese leader Junichiro Koizumi faces a ballot today to determine whether he keeps the presidency of the governing, right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and thus his position as prime minister. Once its own leadership is settled, the ruling party is expected to dissolve parliament and call national elections for November.

Polling indicates that Koizumi will easily defeat the three LDP powerbrokers who have challenged for his position: Shizuka Kamei, Takao Fujii and Masahiko Komura. A total of 657 votes will decide the contest. The 357 LDP representatives in Japan's lower and upper houses of parliament each have one vote. The remaining 300 are delegate votes, allocated proportionally to the candidates based on ballots cast by party members in LDP branches around the country.

If a candidate does not receive a clear majority in the first round, a second round will be held in which only the members of parliament are eligible to participate. Koizumi, however, is believed to have the support of 60 percent of the parliamentarians and the overwhelming majority of rank-and-file members, making a second round unnecessary.

The unity around Koizumi in the lead-up to an election is deeply contradictory. Far from reflecting support for his agenda as prime minister, a recent poll by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* found that over 60 percent of LDP politicians and 79 percent of branch executives oppose his cabinet's economic policies. None of the leaderships of the largest party factions, which, in the past, decided all-important political matters behind closed doors, support him. Koizumi himself was derided in the 1990s as an eccentric due to his appearance, bachelor status, and his extreme right-wing nationalist and free market economic views.

It was precisely because of his lack of factional support within the party, however, that Koizumi was backed in the LDP leadership vote that followed the resignation of Yoshiro Mori in April 2001. After 13 years of stagnation and steadily accumulating crisis in the Japanese economy, the LDP factions were incapable of formulating a policy response that was agreeable to all the various vested

corporate and social interests they represent. The party was and remains wracked with bitter internal divisions and could break apart. In this situation, Koizumi, previously regarded as an unlikely prospect for prime minister, was able to gain power by declaring himself "independent" of the factions and promising to rule without consulting the factions.

His elevation was backed by the populist politician Makiko Tanaka and the right-wing media, which viewed him as the only short-term hope of breaking the policy gridlock and pushing through policies to deregulate the economy. At the same time, Koizumi galvanised the backing of the broader Japanese right with promises to remove the pacifist Article 9 clause of Japan's constitution, which curtails the deployment of the military, and by a highly-publicised visit to the Yasukuni war shrine—a key symbol of Japan's militarist past.

In 2001, Koizumi's victory over the candidates of the major factions was dubbed the "Koizumi Revolution". Two-and-a-half years later, little is left of such media hype. Nevertheless, his installation as prime minister was a turning point. It was followed by the marginalisation of the LDP factions and—by Japanese standards—a relatively stable period of government.

Before Koizumi, there had been five LDP prime ministers in seven years. Four resigned due to unpopularity and factional coups, while the other died in office before he could be removed. Reflecting the view within the ruling party that Koizumi's "non-factional" administration has been the most successful in recent memory, the upper house members of the party's largest faction, the Hashimoto group, intend to vote for Koizumi against their own candidate, Takao Fujii.

Koizumi has been able to keep the internal divisions in check primarily by appealing above the vested interests of the factions and uniting the Japanese right around the issue on which there is substantial agreement—the establishment of Japan as a global political and military power.

Like governments in Britain and Australia, Koizumi aggressively aligned Japan with the Bush administration's

“war on terror” following the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Japanese armed forces played a support role for the US invasion of Afghanistan—the first armed conflict in which Japan has actively participated since World War II. In order to cement the backing of the major factions, he watered down his economic agenda. In January 2002, he sacked Makiko Tanaka as foreign minister due to her opposition to his reconciliation with the factions and stronger relationship with the US.

Over the past year, Koizumi has manoeuvred to gain the maximum benefit for Japan from the US-led invasion of Iraq. Koizumi’s government fully endorsed the war and was included by the White House in the “coalition of the willing”. Mindful of the popular anti-war opposition in Japan, however, Koizumi declined to provide any military assistance, arguing that the constitution prevented it. He has since delayed the deployment of Japanese troops to join the post-war occupation of Iraq on the basis that the fighting is continuing.

As soon as the parliamentary election is concluded though, it is expected that at least 1,000 Japanese soldiers will depart for Iraq and Tokyo will provide several billion dollars to help finance the occupation. The Bush administration, for its part, is pushing for Japan to be granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council to offset the opposition to its foreign policy agenda from France and Russia.

Koizumi’s support for the confrontationist US policy toward North Korea has won him the greatest kudos from the Japanese rightwing however. He has exploited the ongoing crisis on the Korean peninsula to assert Japanese interests in North East Asia more aggressively, while creating a climate of fear at home to justify the removal of restrictions on the military.

His government has deliberately intensified the pressure on Pyongyang. In December 2001, the Japanese coast guard attacked and sunk an alleged North Korean spy-ship in Chinese-claimed waters. Koizumi has joined the Bush administration in refusing to provide any economic assistance to the destitute North Korean regime until it capitulates completely to the demands of the major powers.

The pressure directly led to Koizumi’s summit in Pyongyang in September 2002 at which North Korea, in the desperate hope of a détente, admitted it had kidnapped 13 Japanese citizens between 1977 and 1983. This diplomatic coup and the media-generated euphoria over the subsequent return of some of the surviving abductees to Japan strengthened Koizumi’s standing among the LDP rank-and-file.

Since Pyongyang indicated in April that it possessed nuclear weapons, the LDP has attempted to generate a climate of fear and hysteria, insisting that Japan could be the

target of another nuclear attack. Leading members of the cabinet have declared that Japan has the right—even under the current constitution—to launch a pre-emptive military strike on North Korea if a missile launch appears imminent.

On the domestic front, the government confronts a continuing slump. Despite every attempt to revive and restructure the Japanese economy over the past 13 years, it is still in the grip of deflation. The consumer price index fell for the 46th consecutive month in July and over 1,300 substantial businesses are going bankrupt every month.

The only positive economic indicator, exports, is precariously dependent upon demand from the deeply-troubled US economy. Tokyo share prices have fallen another 22 percent since Koizumi took office. Unemployment remains at an official rate of 5.3 percent—unofficially at three times that level—and wages are below pre-1995 levels. The Japanese government has been technically bankrupted by the massive deficit spending it has carried out to stimulate the economy, with a debt of over \$US6 trillion.

Koizumi and the LDP are attempting to divert attention from these intractable economic problems and the resultant social crisis by pursuing an agenda of militarism. This month, Koizumi has declared his intention to present a proposal to the parliament by 2005 for the official repudiation of Article 9 of the constitution and the removal of the legal barriers to Japan conducting wars of aggression.

Koizumi’s ability to implement this right-wing agenda while retaining a measure of support in the polls explains why he is virtually certain to retain the LDP leadership in today’s poll.



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