

# Japanese government holds power, but with reduced majority

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The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi retained control of Japan's lower house of parliament in the November 9 elections, but with its majority substantially cut.

Campaigning on a platform of continuing economic reforms, including the privatisation of public services and utilities, pension reforms, and the deployment of Japanese Self Defense Force (SDF) troops to Iraq, the ruling LDP lost 10 seats. This means it has just 237 in the 480-seat lower house of the Diet, and has lost its previous stand-alone majority.

The LDP will once again be obliged to rely on its coalition partners—the Buddhist based New Komeito Party, which won 34 seats, and the recently merged coalition partner, the right-wing New Conservative Party which won 4 seats—to give it a sizable majority in the parliament. Following the poll, three independents joined the LDP, giving the ruling coalition a total of 278 seats, down from its pre-election total of 286.

The biggest gains were made by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which won 40 seats and now holds 177 in the Diet. The DPJ campaigned on the basis that it was the party that business needed in order to push ahead with economic changes. It also opposed the dispatch of SDF troops to Iraq. Its success led several commentators to conclude that Japan had moved into a new political period, with a genuine “two party system” after a half-century of political domination by the LDP.

But any conception that such a “new period” will be one of stability is contradicted by other election statistics. Voter turnout dropped almost 3 percent from the 2000 election—from 62.9 percent to 60 percent—reflecting the growing alienation felt by workers and young people towards the official political parties. Many ordinary people have become

increasingly frustrated with the stagnant economy and job cuts, as well as the threat of increased taxes to finance corporate bailouts and the severely under-funded pension and health system.

This dissatisfaction has not led to a rise in support for the traditional parties of the labour movement. In fact, they were among the biggest losers, with the Social Democratic Party being reduced to 6 seats from its previous level of 18, and the Communist Party losing 11 of its 20 seats.

While the DPJ was able to capitalise, to some extent, on widespread opposition to any revival of Japanese militarism and the deployment troops to Iraq, its position was not of a principled character.

The DPJ argued that Japanese troops should only be sent to Iraq under the framework of the United Nations, not under conditions where the US military controls the country. As one of the DPJ candidates told the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper: “If a new UN resolution is adopted, and a reconstruction support system is established with the UN at the centre, then I think there is room to consider an SDF dispatch for non-combat roles.”

This position reflects concerns in ruling circles that Japan's interests in the Middle East, above all its dependence on oil supplies from the region, are not served by the present domination of the US and Britain.

The Koizumi government is displaying some nervousness on the issue as well. After postponing the announcement of the date on which it would send troops until after the election, it delayed the date again after a number of Italian military police were killed in Nasiriya in southern Iraq—an area where Japanese forces could be sent.

One of the most significant results was the election of Makiko Tanaka, the former foreign minister in the

Koizumi administration, as an independent. She resigned from the LDP to stand for Niigata No. 5 district and defeated the incumbent LDP candidate who took over her seat when she resigned from the Diet last year.

Once considered one of the most popular politicians in Japan and likened to a potential Japanese Margaret Thatcher, Tanaka, the daughter of a former prime minister, has called for the LDP to be knocked out of power.

Prime Minister Koizumi sacked Tanaka in January last year. After a 14-month political absence, she has made a political comeback, aiming for a political alignment with “like minded lawmakers”.

Tanaka, who contributed to Koizumi’s rapid rise to prominence and popularity in the first place, and who shares his economic reform agenda, was removed as foreign minister as differences began to emerge over the US alliance. Tanaka is representative of a section of Japanese business that sees the country’s future as being bound up with closer relations with China and other Asian states, where Japan has large investments and important trade relations.

Tanaka is also critical of the Koizumi government’s lack of progress in implementing the economic restructuring program demanded by big business and international finance capital. She claims Koizumi is still restricted by his lack of will in taking on the vested business interests that factionally dominate the LDP.

Speaking after her victory, Tanaka told reporters: “I want other parties to take the reins because in the current situation under the Liberal Democratic Party, outdated and insidious politics will continue.”

In line with this agenda, Tanaka could align herself with the DPJ at some point.

Big business and foreign investors have welcomed the emergence of the DPJ as an opposition capable of toppling the LDP in the future and, at least in the period before next July’s upper house elections, of maintaining pressure on the government to carry through the demands of finance capital.

Morgan Stanley economist Robert Feldman described the election outcome as the “best result possible for investors.”

The prospect of a “more vigorous opposition party” would help quell “old guard rebellion” within the LDP before next year’s election, he said, predicting that the

Koizumi administration would “continue with a somewhat accelerated reform program.”

The future of the LDP coalition itself remains uncertain. The Buddhist backed New Komeito Party, which increased its parliamentary strength, could push for more influence in the ruling coalition’s political decisions. An ostensibly pacifist organisation claiming to represent the voice of the “weak and underrepresented”, it could very soon come into conflict over issues such as the deployment of SDF troops to Iraq as well as further amendments and changes to Japan’s pacifist constitution, which Koizumi is seeking to abandon. Differences could also arise over the impact on small business and the working class of further economic restructuring.

New Komeito MP Kiyohiko Toyama commented that, “we do not think the present framework of coalition government will last forever.”

The election results indicate that the “Koizumi Revolution” and “Koizumi mania”, in which heavy media promotion saw his approval ratings soar to 80 percent, are over. Sections of the Japanese ruling class and foreign capital are beginning to look toward a political alternative which will pursue the highly contentious economic restructuring program that is certain to produce increased social and political tensions in the coming period.



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