Shinzo Abe: Japan's new prime minister

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Shinzo Abe is due to be installed today as Japan's new prime minister, succeeding Junichiro Koizumi, after being elected as the president of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on September 20. He will continue Koizumi's right-wing agenda of reviving militarism to assert Japanese strategic and economic interests abroad, while continuing a relentless assault on the social position of working people at home.

Abe, just 52, was Koizumi's favoured heir and chief cabinet secretary. Unlike Koizumi, who traded on his unconventional, populist image, Abe is a scion of the traditional Japanese political establishment. As expected, he won the LDP presidency easily with 464 out of 703 votes, but he was not unopposed. He had two rivals—Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki with 102 votes and Foreign Minister Taro Aso with 136 votes.

"I declare that I will, as the first party president to be born after [World War II], take over the flame of reform," Abe declared, "I vow to devote myself in working with you all toward creating a new and beautiful nation." Abe's "flame of reform" is full-scale economic deregulation to boost the competitiveness of Japanese capitalism. His gospel of a "beautiful nation" is the promotion of ugly Japanese patriotism to divert mounting social tensions into reactionary channels.

Abe's emphasis on his postwar birth was to send a message that his government will no longer be hampered by the legacy of Japan's militarist past. He has explicitly ruled out any apology for Japan's wartime atrocities in Asia. In fact, Abe has pledged to carry out an "education reform" to promote Japanese patriotism based on "traditional values"—code words for the glorification of the wartime imperial regime, its symbols and record. He has also promised a major revision in the postwar "pacifist" constitution, which is a legal barrier of Japan's rearmament and the deployment of Japanese troops overseas.

Abe's economic policy is more cautious: an attempt to balance the pace of market reform against growing social discontent. He rejected Tanigaki's call for an increased consumer tax, but backed cuts to social security as a means of reducing mounting public debt. Abe's policy is more acceptable to the corporate elite than Aso's program of government bailouts for bankrupt firms.

LDP upper house member Seiko Hashimoto told Associated Press: "You cannot stop the reforms, but you have also to address the issue of the gap between rich and poor. Abe stands somewhere in the middle." The resignation of Koizumi's free market architect, Heizo Takenaka, just prior to last week's LDP election, points to doubts in business circles about Abe's economic credentials.

Nevertheless, Abe's clear victory indicated that he has powerful backing in the ruling elite for his overall agenda. His comfortable win was made possible by the withdrawal two months ago of his strongest rival, Yasuo Fukuda, former chief secretary to former prime ministers Yoshiro Mori and Koizumi. Fukuda has been critical of Koizumi for seriously damaging relations with China and South Korea and, by implication, Japanese business interests in the region. The significant votes for Aso and Tanigaki, both of whom advocate a more conciliatory stance towards Beijing and Seoul, indicate that sharp disagreements still exist within the LDP over foreign policy.

While he has expressed a willingness to resume top-level meetings with China and South Korea, Abe's promise is likely to be an empty one. Summits and visits were abandoned after Koizumi continued to visit the controversial Yasukuni war shrine, a potent symbol of Japanese wartime militarism. Abe publicly supported Koizumi's visits, regularly makes trips to the shrine himself and, if anything, is more open about his defence of Japan's wartime regime than Koizumi.

Prior to the party election, Abe described his foreign policy as follows: "Rather than wrestling a good round of sumo under the rules that foreign countries make and getting praised for it, as seen in the past, we should also join in making the rules." He called for a stronger Japan "asserting the points we would like to make," adding: "I think I can carry out that kind of diplomacy".

In his recent book *Towards a Beautiful Country*, Abe outlined his strategy of spreading "democracy" in Asia by enhancing the US-Japan alliance and establishing close partnerships with Australia and India. In other words, he intends to maintain the essential orientation under Koizumi: to maintain a strong alliance with the Bush administration as the means for rearming Japan and aggressively asserting Japanese interests in Asia, especially against China. At the same time, he will continue to back US wars of aggression and its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Abe comes from a long line of right-wing politicians. Under the postwar US occupation, his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, was initially under suspicion as a war criminal. He had been an official of the Japanese puppet regime in Manchuria and a minister in the wartime cabinet of Prime Minister Hideki Tojo. He was nevertheless rehabilitated, rose to prominence in the LDP and became prime minister in 1957.

In 1960, Kishi rammed through the renewal of US-Japan Security Treaty despite massive protests against the continuation of the Cold War military pact with Washington. Such were the size and intensity of the demonstrations that visiting White House press secretary James Hagerty was compelled to travel in a helicopter, US President Dwight Eisenhower cancelled his planned trip to

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Japan and Kishi himself eventually had to resign.

Abe's great uncle Eisaku Sato—Kishi's brother—was prime minister from 1964 to 1972. Abe's own father, Shintaro, was also a leading LDP politician, who was slated to become prime minister but died suddenly in 1991. Abe was an executive with Kobe Steel and became his father's secretary after Shintaro was made foreign minister in 1982. After Shintaro died, Abe took over his father's parliamentarian seat in the Yamaguchi Prefecture two years later.

Abe's heritage goes back to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. His Yamaguchi Prefecture was the base of the Choshu clan—one of the feudal clans that joined with elements of the rising bourgeoisie to overthrow the Shogunate and install or "restore" the Meiji emperor as the head of the new, rapidly modernising, capitalist state. While the post-World War II constitution formally established Japan as a constitutional monarchy, the most right-wing elements of the Japanese establishment always regard the emperor as the essential ideological linchpin for the revival of Japanese patriotism and militarism.

The necessity for such a program emerged following the end of the Cold War and the recognition in ruling circles that Japan would have to more aggressively prosecute its interests amid deepening Great Power rivalry. The first Gulf War in 1990-91 came as a sharp shock to Tokyo. Like other countries, Japan backed the US war to legitimise its own imperialist ambitions. However, prevented by its constitution from sending troops, Japan ended up paying for the costs of the war and gained few of its benefits.

The 1990s proved to be a decade of false starts for the Japanese ruling elite, which required a complete refashioning of the political apparatus. The catastrophic collapse of the property and stock market bubbles in late 1980s produced persistent economic stagnation. The LDP, which had ruled since the early 1950s, was completely inadequate for the agenda of market reform demanded by big business. The party had retained power through an electoral gerrymander and hefty subsidies particularly to its base in rural electorates.

Sharp disputes within the LDP over political reform produced a seismic split in the party in 1993, which lost power briefly for the first time in 38 years. What followed was a series of relatively short-lived LDP governments, including an alliance with the largest postwar opposition party—the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ)—in 1996, which effectively destroyed the SPJ, now the Social Democrats. None of these governments, however, was able to overcome widespread popular opposition to the agenda of reviving militarism and imposing market reforms and thus proved to be highly unstable.

Koizumi's installation in to power in 2001 was a rather desperate gamble. With his unorthodox image, he had previously been regarded a maverick, even a lunatic. However, staring electoral defeat in the face, the majority of the LDP backed Koizumi despite his refusal to wheel and deal with the party faction bosses—the traditional route to office. Koizumi exploited his unconventional persona to the hilt, posturing as a rebel and opponent of the staid establishment, to win layers of disaffected voters, particularly among alienated youth.

Behind the populism, however, was a very right-wing agenda. Koizumi immediately began his annual public visits to the Yasukuni shrine and his government authorised school history texts that were unapologetic about Japan's wartime record. In response to protests from China and South Korea, he refused to back down, unlike previous prime ministers, declaring these were internal matters.

The September 11 attacks on the US proved to be a key turning point. Koizumi immediately threw his lot in with the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" as the means for realising his own ambitions to convert Japan into a "normal nation"—that is, one prepared to use its armed forces uninhibited by a "pacifist constitution". He pushed through legislation to allow the dispatch of Japanese warships to support the US invasion of Afghanistan and decisively broke with his foreign minister and key ally Makiko Tanaka, who was critical of the US and advocated a more independent stance. In 2004, despite overwhelming popular opposition, he dispatched Japanese troops to Iraq—the first time that Japanese military personnel had been sent to an active war zone since World War II.

At home, Koizumi dramatically accelerated the process of market reform. In 2005, he called and won a snap election after LDP rebels blocked his plans for the privatisation of Japan Post in the upper house of the Diet. His government's notorious slogan that no company was "too big to fail" echoed American-style corporate restructuring and ended the business culture of government bailouts. He introduced new laws further undermining Japan's system of life-long employment and savagely cut social welfare. As a result, Japan's economy "recovered" by producing a widening gap between rich and poor.

Although comparatively young, Abe was given a key post in Koizumi's cabinet—deputy chief cabinet secretary—and became one of the prime minister's key aides. He emerged to national prominence in 2002, when he pressed Koizumi to take up the issue of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s—a longstanding hobbyhorse of right-wing Japanese extremists. Abe accompanied Koizumi to Pyongyang in 2002 and pressed for an admission of, and apology for, the abductions.

Abe became LDP secretary general in 2003 and chief cabinet secretary in 2005—positions that marked him out as a potential prime minister. He is well known for his aggressive stance on foreign affairs, including backing for the joint US-Japan missile defence system and sanctions against North Korea. During the so-called North Korean "missile crisis" in July, Abe called for Japan to take pre-emptive military action against North Korea if Pyongyang tested more missiles.

Koizumi has paved the way for the emergence of an even more right-wing LDP figure whose policies will inevitably have politically explosive consequences in Japan, throughout the region and internationally.

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