Japanese prime minister faces sharp fall in opinion polls

John Chan
13 December 2006

After just three months in power, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is confronting a sharp drop in his approval ratings. Questions are already being raised in ruling circles about Abe's ability to push ahead with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) agenda of militarism and free-market economic reforms.

A poll in the *Asahi Shimbun* showed Abe suffered a 10 percent fall in support during November. The downward trend was particularly sharp among people in their 20s—dropping from 53 percent in early November to 42 percent.

Another major Japanese newspaper, *Mainichi Daily*, said Abe's approval rating had plummetted by 14 points, from 67 percent in September when he took office. Those who still supported Abe preferred his "youthfulness and fresh image". Those who disapproved, expressed their opposition to various government policies.

According to the *Mainichi* poll, one concern was the government's failure to respond quickly to a series of highly publicised suicides of students subjected to school bullying. The most controversial issue, however, was Abe's decision to readmit 11 "postal rebels" into the LDP. Koizumi expelled the MPs last year and called a snap national election after they opposed his planned postal privatisation—the lynchpin of the government's economic deregulation.

Other polls by the Kyodo news agency and the corporate daily*Nihon Keizai* confirmed these findings. Both found a large slide in support for Abe and identified the readmission of the "postal rebels" as the key issue. The Kyodo poll showed the largest fall—from 65 percent in November to 48.6 percent early his month. Some 68 percent of respondents opposed his decision on the "rebels".

In fact, Abe did not make the decision to readmit them. He simply endorsed the proposal by LDP Secretary-General Hidenao Nakagawa, who was concerned that the LDP could lose control of the parliamentary upper house in elections next year. The "rebels" were likely to hold their seats, meaning any further losses could end the narrow majority held by the LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito.

That this issue was a major factor in Abe's slide in public standing highlights a basic difference—of style rather than substance—between the prime minister and his predecessor. Koizumi came to power in 2001 based on a carefully cultivated personal image as an anti-establishment figure who rejected the LDP's factional system and dour conservative habits of the LDP partymen. He exploited this image and the promotion of right-wing nationalism to ram through his policies of re-militarisation and economic reform, which had no substantial popular base of support.

Koizumi's victory on postal privatisation relied heavily on this method. His attempts to push through the legislation were blocked in the upper house by the opposition parties and a group of LDP lawmakers. The huge savings deposited in postal accounts had long been used by the LDP as the means for financing projects and programs, particularly in its own electorates.

Rather than accepting defeat, Koizumi embarked on a high-risk strategy that horrified many LDP leaders, including Abe. He called a snap national election on the single issue of postal privatisation and launched an aggressive campaign not only against the opposition parties, but against the LDP rebels. Koizumi expelled them from the party and sent out high profile "assassin candidates," including female professionals and young businessmen, to appeal to urban middle-class voters and the young.

Against the odds, Koizumi won the election, not because of, but despite, widespread opposition to postal privatisation and the impact of other economic reforms. He appealed to the widespread alienation among young people in particular from the entire political establishment. He wooed significant layers of the urban middle class by promising that Japan would be reborn as a dynamic economic power, offering the false hope of personal success and opportunity under a free market. Koizumi was hailed in the media and by corporate leaders for appearing to pull off an impossible electoral coup.

Koizumi used similarly brash, aggressive tactics to promote the revival of Japanese nationalism and militarism. Every year he made a highly provocative visit to the Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead, triggering a storm of opposition from China and South Korea. Rather than caving in to the protests as previous prime ministers had done, Koizumi cast himself as "unorthodox" by bluntly declaring that the visits were an internal matter and other countries had no right to interfere.

In the eyes of Japan's ruling elite, Koizumi, who for years had been dismissed as a political eccentric, suddenly became their saviour. He had carried through policies where previously LDP leaders had failed. As well, instead of his poll rating plummetting, he appeared to perform a political miracle—maintaining popularity and getting people to vote for policies which were antithetical to

their interests.

The intense hostility of the majority of people to Japanese militarism was evident in the opposition and protests to the commitment of troops to the US-led occupation of Iraq. There is also widespread antagonism to cutting government budgets and slashing services. In the 2004 upper house election, the LDP won only a small margin after Koizumi made the highly unpopular decision to cut state pensions as part of his fiscal reform.

As with all political confidence tricks, the "Koizumi effect" has worn off over time. In part, the disaffection with Abe is simply a product of the growing hostility to the government's policies. However, the fact that support has dropped so quickly demonstrates that Abe, while relatively young, is incapable of making the same populist appeal.

Far from being a political maverick, Abe comes from a long line of LDP leaders and has been schooled in its factional ways. By allowing the LDP rebels back into the fold, Abe sent a clear message to the party of a return to business as usual. For many voters who backed Koizumi, it was also a signal that the conservatively dressed Abe would do nothing, even symbolically, to challenge the status quo.

Abe also appears to have alienated a small, but key section of Koizumi's support among the extreme Japanese nationalists. In campaigning to succeed Koizumi in September, Abe stood on his record of backing Koizumi's aggressive stance on North Korea and refusing to compromise with China over visits to the Yasukuni shrine. He called for a new constitution that ditched the so-called pacifist clause, enabling Japan's re-militarisation to be accelerated. He also called for education "reform" to promote Japanese patriotism in schools.

In office, however, Abe has bowed to pressure from sections of the LDP and business to mend relations with China. He pointedly visited Beijing and Seoul on his first trip abroad, rather than making the traditional first visit to Washington. In Beijing, Abe pledged to keep any visit to the Yasukuni shrine out of the public spotlight and to settle Sino-Japanese disputes over borders and gas fields in the East China Sea.

In domestic policy, Abe has been reluctant to challenge the LDP old guard, which retained political influence through big government spending programs, particularly rural construction projections. The economic implications of embracing the 11 "postal rebels" immediately became clear when Abe proposed a mid-term plan next year to allocate fixed portions of tax avenues to build roads. The media and corporate elite strongly criticised the proposal as a rejection of "market reform" and the encouragement of wasteful public works.

Abe, however, defended the plan declaring that he was reforming a system set up in 1950s and which had kept the party on power for half a century. "It is natural to build truly necessary roads, but it is also necessary to change the system that automatically allocates all the revenues to roads," he said. In part, Abe fears the political consequences of market reforms that have already had a terrible impact on the lives of many Japanese.

An article on the *Bloomberg News* website on December 7, entitled "Poverty on the rise in Japan," noted sharp increases in homelessness, unemployed youth and working poor after five years of Koizumi's rule. The number of Japanese living on an income of less than a million yen a year, or $8,700, has reached 3.6 million—up 16 percent from when Koizumi came to power in 2001.

Youth unemployment reached 8.7 percent in 2005, double the overall jobless level. There are about 4 million people aged 15-34 working in part-time and temporary jobs who earn less than the official minimum wage. Even in Tokyo, the minimum wage is just 129,216 yen or $1,100 a month, which is less than government welfare payments. In the past 10 years, the number of Japanese households on social welfare has jumped 66 percent to one million in 2005.

Toshiaki Tachibanaki, an economics professor at Kyoto University, told *Bloomberg*: "Abe is a conservative and is unlikely to deviate from Koizumi's free-market policies, which indicates the income divide will increase. That might change if there is political backlash and Abe thinks he may lose the next election."

Tachibanaki warned of the prospect of a "lost generation" with no full-time jobs, ineligible for marriage, unable to raise children and without access to pensions or healthcare. "The consequences for Japanese society are going to be very tragic. We will see a huge inundation of poor people in Japan in the coming decades," he said.

There is no doubt that Abe intends to pursue the same right-wing agenda as Koizumi. His government has already unveiled three major bills. An education reform bill to promote Japanese nationalism in schools is likely to pass without any significant opposition in the parliament this month.

Last month Abe pushed forward two military bills. A revision of the Defence Agency Establishment Law will upgrade Japan's defence agency to a ministry, for the first time since World War II. If passed, the defence ministry will be established in January. The largely symbolic move was an effort to restore the "normal" status of the Japanese military. A revision of the Self-Defence Forces Law will further expand the military's ability to join overseas missions such as UN "peacekeeping" or regional emergency assistance operations with the US military—a process already begun under Koizumi.

It is clear, however, that Abe has not pushed ahead as rapidly as the Japanese ruling elite would wish. The sudden publication of unfavourable opinion polls is in part a warning to Abe to get on with the job of economic reform and aggressively asserting Japanese interests on the international stage.