

Former Japanese PM advises unpopular Abe to ignore public opinion

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Amid plummeting support in opinion polls for Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi had a word of advice for the incumbent. He told a top-level meeting of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on February 20 that Abe had to defy public opinion and press ahead with the government's unpopular policies.

Koizumi, who had been invited to offer tips to younger party leaders, told his audience: "You don't need to pay attention to the ups and downs of Cabinet support ratings every single time. Be less sensitive to the effects of the things just before your eyes. The capacity to be insensitive is important... The most important thing is the prime minister holding onto his faith, and that has to be upheld."

Koizumi specifically advised the government to ignore public criticisms of the country's deepening divide between rich and poor. Abe, like Koizumi, is committed to a policy of economic restructuring and privatisation that has produced growing unemployment and social inequality over the past two decades.

Dismissing the hardship such policies have created, Koizumi declared: "Why not say clearly that such a gap exists in any era? I said that again and again in budget committee meetings. Do you think that the gap in Japan is bigger than in its neighbouring countries?" He also urged the LDP leadership to suppress criticism from the old party factions, which, he said, would only hamper the pace of the free-market reform.

Poll after poll has shown Abe's support in free fall. The latest survey conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* in February reported a further drop from 40 percent to 37 percent, compared to nearly 70 percent when Abe replaced Koizumi as prime minister last September.

These polls underscore the basic dilemma confronting Japanese governments throughout the 1990s: how to

establish a social base for policies that are deeply unpopular. Koizumi was preceded by a string of short-lived and highly unstable LDP governments that attempted to press ahead with market reforms and revive Japan as a military power to compete with its great power rivals.

Koizumi was able to press ahead with this agenda in part because he broke the traditional mould. He openly challenged the dominance of the LDP factions and promoted an unconventional "rebellious" persona to attract a layer of alienated, particularly younger voters. Koizumi put an anti-establishment spin on his support for Japanese militarism and socially regressive economic policies.

More fundamentally, Koizumi consolidated the backing of sections of the Japanese ruling elite for his strategy of full support for the Bush administration's "war on terror" as the means for freeing Japan from the constrictions of its post-war "pacifist" constitution. Koizumi defied a wave of public opposition in order to commit Japanese troops to the US occupation of Iraq and adopted an increasingly belligerent stance in North East Asia, particularly toward China.

Koizumi's rather superficial popularity was never going to last. But Abe, with his clean-cut image and pedigree as an LDP blueblood, was completely incapable of making the same type of appeal as his predecessor. Moreover, while Abe is committed to Japanese militarism, he has come under pressure from sections of the corporate elite to placate China, where Japanese business has huge investments. He is also under fire for failing to press ahead with economic restructuring.

The political establishment's internal tensions were evident during US Vice President Dick Cheney's recent visit to Japan. Cheney refused to meet Defence

Minister Fumio Kyuma who in January mildly criticised the US invasion of Iraq as a “mistake”. The criticism reflects growing concerns within ruling circles about the consequences of aligning too closely with the Bush administration’s military adventures.

Abe received something of a slap in the face from Washington when the US pushed ahead with a deal last month over North Korea’s nuclear programs and all but ignored Tokyo’s concerns. Abe came to political prominence in 2002 when he pressured Koizumi to pursue the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in 1970s and 1980s.

American negotiators, however, relegated the issue to a working party—that is, to the distant future. As one of the parties to multilateral talks, Japan was forced to fall into line and agree to the deal worked out between Washington and China. Abe’s displeasure was evident in Japan’s refusal to help finance aid for North Korea in return for the shutting of its research reactor.

Bush phoned Abe a day after the deal was signed to reassure Japan of US support on the abduction issue. During his visit, Cheney also made a point of meeting with the parents of an adducted Japanese woman, declaring that he understood the issue “means a great deal”. But, as the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper noted, these gestures “did little to dissipate concerns that Washington may embark on a new strategy that leaves Japan without strong US backing” in the future.

In a comment on February 21, the US-based think tank Stratfor explained that Washington’s deal over North Korea had undermined Abe’s tactic of using the threat of Pyongyang to overcome opposition to his program of reviving Japanese militarism. To push through his planned constitutional reform, Abe needs a “very clear and present danger”. Stratfor commented: “The danger must be North Korea, as Tokyo needs to show its desire for peaceful coexistence with Beijing. The nuclear deal [between US and North Korea] complicated matters for Tokyo, but has not derailed its overall plans”.

The government has also exploited the North Korean “threat” to divert attention from growing social inequality and falling living standards at home. An article in *Time* magazine on February 15 observed that Japan’s economic recovery from a decade of stagnation has been at the expense of working people. The previous system of life-long employment has been

significantly undermined, leading to a growth in the proportion of low-paid, casual workers from 20 percent of the workforce in 1992 to 33 percent today.

Nearly 68 percent of respondents to a Cabinet Office survey said they felt anxious about the daily lives. Although the country’s official unemployment rate fell from 5.4 percent in 2002 to 4.1 percent last year, real wage levels have been stagnant. According to official figures, the average Japanese wage was \$2,881 a month in 2002, compared to \$2,749 in 2006. Even Koizumi’s architect of economic reform, Heizo Takenaka, admitted: “The statistics say that the economy is in good shape, but people can’t feel that.”

Under growing pressure over falling opinion polls, Abe declared at a LDP convention in January that economic growth should be for public interests, not just for business. He called on the powerful business association Keidanren to lift wages. Keidanren leader Fujio Mitarai quickly rebuffed the appeal and demanded that Abe cut corporate taxes and raise the sales tax—in other words, put further burdens on working people.

It is in this context that Koizumi suggested to Abe to ignore public opinion and press ahead with his unpopular policies. In the final analysis, such advice has only one meaning. Whatever the short-term expediency of various political tricks and camouflages, it is only possible to ram through measures that are antithetical to the interests of the majority by resorting to increasingly anti-democratic means.



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