

Japanese cabinet reshuffle points to deepening political crisis

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reshuffled his cabinet on August 27 in a desperate attempt to prop up a deeply unpopular government. Only five ministers retained their posts. Most of the remaining eleven positions were filled with factional bosses and longstanding ministers drawn from previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments, especially that of Abe's predecessor Junichiro Koizumi.

Abe told reporters the new lineup was aimed at regaining public trust. "I have placed priority on people's ability to implement policies. I have chosen veterans with long years of experience," he declared. In fact, his reshuffle was largely cosmetic: the faces have changed, but the government's policies remain essentially unaltered. The return of the LDP old guard to powerful ministerial and party posts effectively puts Abe on notice—any further blow to the party's fortunes will see him removed.

The immediate reason for the cabinet reshuffle was the LDP's disastrous losses in the July 29 upper house election—one of the worst debacles in its 52-year history. The LDP won just 37 of the 121 seats contested and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) gained a clear upper house majority for the first time. Abe, who took over from Koizumi last September, used the reshuffle to stave off demands inside the party and more widely for his resignation.

After 11 months in office, Abe's popularity plunged from 70 percent to just 22 percent in the wake of the July election. The government has been plagued with scandals leading to the resignation of three ministers and the suicide of a fourth. Following the cabinet reshuffle, Abe's rating in a recent Nikkei poll bounced back to 41 percent, but signs of instability continue. Less than a week after the new cabinet was sworn in, agriculture minister Takehiko Endo resigned on Monday amid another financial scandal.

The weakness of Abe's position is highlighted by the appointment of previous foreign minister Taro Aso as the LDP secretary general, the party's No.2 position, which is frequently reserved for the heir apparent to the prime minister. Although Aso is a close political ally, he competed against Abe last year to replace Koizumi as LDP president and prime minister. Aso, the grandson of former prime minister, Shigeru Yoshida, comes from a wealthy mining family and is widely regarded as a future prime minister.

Prominent factional leaders have been appointed to key cabinet posts. The new foreign minister, Nobutaka Machimura, who held

the same post under Koizumi from 2004 to 2005, heads the largest LDP faction. The new defence minister, Masahiko Komura, is leader of the fifth largest LDP faction and has previously held the posts of foreign minister and justice minister. Both Machimura and Komura are well known for their aggressive assertion of Japanese interests in the region, particularly against China. Machimura has demanded Beijing remove its "anti-Japanese" displays, showing Japan's wartime atrocities, from Chinese museums. As a minister in Koizumi's cabinet, he ended Japan's development aid to China, saying the country was no longer poor and was an emerging rival to Tokyo.

Kaoru Yosano is the new chief cabinet secretary, the government's principal policy spokesman. He served in the ministerial posts of trade and education in the 1990s and is known for his strong support for fiscal reform, cutbacks to public spending and an increased consumption tax. The new finance minister, Fukushiro Nukaga, served in defence posts in the late 1990s and under Koizumi in 2005. Although he served as an economics minister in 2000, Nukaga is best known for his strong support for the joint US-Japan anti-ballistic missile defence project that is aimed against North Korea and also China.

The new cabinet line-up indicates a continuation of the LDP's major policy planks established under Koizumi: firstly, full support for the Bush administration's "war on terror" and the US alliance as the means for justifying Japanese remilitarisation and a more assertive role in North East Asia, and secondly, far-reaching market reforms aimed at reviving Japan's economic position. Whereas Abe appeared to ease tensions with China in line with the demands of Japanese business, the new foreign and defence ministers are likely to renew Koizumi's aggressive posture toward neighbouring countries, including China.

As a number of commentators have noted, the new cabinet marks a return to pre-Koizumi LDP governments in which the prime minister was often little more than a front-man selected by the party's powerful factional bosses. Throughout the 1990s, unstable, short-lived administrations rose and fell with monotonous regularity, unable to press ahead with the economic restructuring agenda demanded by the corporate elite, and widely despised by broad layers of the population.

Koizumi assumed the LDP leadership in 2001 amid a deep inner-party crisis and challenged the party's entrenched factional system. He exploited his maverick image to make an appeal to disaffected young people by ditching the politician's traditional

dark suit and displaying an interest in rock music. Koizumi put an anti-establishment spin on his extremely right-wing agenda of economic reform and the revival of Japanese militarism, including its potent symbols such as the Yasukuni Shrine to the war dead. At the same time, however, his support for the dispatch of Japanese troops to support the US occupation of Iraq generated widespread opposition and protests.

In 2005, Koizumi expelled LDP upper house members who voted against his key postal privatisation legislation and called a snap election on the issue. By limiting the campaign to a single issue of postal “reform” and casting himself as a rebel against the LDP establishment, he was able to brush aside widespread opposition to Japan’s military involvement in the US occupation of Iraq and win a convincing victory. For all his political gimmicks, Koizumi’s much-vaunted popularity quickly began to wane. By February last year, his support in the opinion polls had slumped to 45 percent as a public debate erupted over social inequality—the “winners” and “losers” of the government’s economic policies—for the first time since World War II.

Abe, who had been a staunch support of Koizumi’s policies, took over last October. Despite being Japan’s youngest prime minister, he was in no position to adopt Koizumi’s unconventional persona. Coming from a long line of LDP bluebloods, he is a conventional right-wing politician to the core. He sought to dress up his right-wing program of remilitarisation and market reforms, under the banner of building a “beautiful country”.

Abe’s popularity quickly began to slide. Under pressure from sections of big business not to antagonise China and South Korea, he refrained from publicly visiting the Yasukuni Shrine—a move that only alienated the extreme right-wing constituency created by Koizumi. Unable to stamp his authority on the cabinet, disputes and scandals began to erupt. As poll ratings began to fall, Abe reinstated the upper house “postal rebels” expelled by Koizumi, further undermining his public standing as a strong leader. Abe’s crisis, however, is not simply of his own making, but reflects the widespread opposition to the government’s militarist and socially regressive policies that had already emerged under Koizumi.

The LDP was particularly shocked at the loss of seats in its traditional rural base. Abe declared last week: “We need to deliver the [economic] fruits to regional areas where people are feeling the pain of reforms.” Abe appointed one of his critics, Yoichi Masuzoe, known for his commentary on the growing gap between rich and poor, as the new health, labour and welfare minister. Masuzoe’s installation will do nothing to reverse the thrust of the government’s economic policies and little to quell the growing anger and concern over social inequality.

The corporate elite is demanding continued economic restructuring. An editorial in the business daily *Nikkei* warned: “Worries have grown that as a result of the upper house election defeat, reforms will stall.” The *Yomuri Shimbun* on August 28 declared that, although it was necessary to “correct some excesses” in previous economic reforms, the government should not do so to “please the public”. “Delays and backsliding in the reform drive—or lavish spending on government programs related to the regional economies, for that matter—must never be permitted,” it commented.

The opposition DPJ’s control of the upper house will compound the government’s problems. While the DPJ has no fundamental differences with the government, its calls for a more independent foreign policy reflect concerns in the ruling elite about the dangers of Japan’s uncritical support for the US “war on terror”. By criticising Japan’s commitment to the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa was able to tap into the broad antiwar sentiment.

The DPJ is threatening to block the renewal of the “anti-terrorism law” that allows the Japanese navy to refuel US and allied warships in Indian Ocean in support of the war in Afghanistan. The law, which is necessary to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution, is due to expire in November. The DPJ has also declared that it will submit a bill aimed at ending the presence of the Japanese air force in Kuwait in support of the US occupation of Iraq.

In a bid to reach a working arrangement with the DJP, Abe appointed Toshihiro Nikai and Nobuteru Ishihara to key party posts. Nikai and Ishihara are known for their close connections to Ozawa and the DPJ, which was formed in the 1990s from LDP breakaway factions. Nikai has been appointed chairman of LDP General Council and Ishihara as chairman of the party’s Policy Research Council. Their installation, however, is unlikely to head off clashes between the government and the opposition or to stem the LDP’s political crisis as it prepares for lower house elections due next year.

Aso appears to be positioning himself as Abe’s successor in more ways than one, by trying to take a leaf out of Koizumi’s book. In a rather absurd attempt to attract a following among young people, he has publicised his love of *manga* or Japanese comic books and his nickname—“Rozen Aso” after his favourite *manga* “Rozen Maiden”. He proudly claims to read 10-20 comics a week. During last year’s contest for the LDP president, the 66-year-old Aso spoke at Akihabara, Tokyo’s “hang out” district for young people to shop for electronics, computer games, comics and fashion goods.

Whether or not Aso replaces Abe, he is hardly likely to be able to reproduce Koizumi’s political confidence trickery. It is far more likely that the LDP will plunge back into a period of political instability and bitter infighting in the face of deeply-felt public opposition to its right-wing policies and their social and economic impact.



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