

Japan's new prime minister: a recipe for another short-lived government

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26 September 2007

Yasuo Fukuda, 71, was installed as Japan's new prime minister on Tuesday following the resignation of Shinzo Abe after less than 12 months in office. Fukuda, one of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factional heavyweights, is widely regarded as "a safe pair of hands" following the party's disastrous loss in the upper house elections on July 29.

Fukuda's ability to resurrect the LDP's fortunes is limited, however. There is widespread hostility to the LDP government over the social impact of its market reform program and also its support for the Bush administration's occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. While indicating he will moderate the government's foreign and domestic policies, Fukuda has no fundamental disagreements with Abe or his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi.

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) immediately put Fukuda on notice by nominating its own leader, Ichiro Ozawa, as prime minister. Fukuda was confirmed as prime minister in the lower house of the Diet or parliament, but not in the upper house where the DPJ holds a majority. Ozawa's nomination was largely symbolic, but it makes clear that the DPJ intends to use its control of the upper house to challenge the Fukuda government and force an early lower house election.

The key contest in deciding the next prime minister took place on Sunday at the LDP's headquarters in Tokyo. Fukuda easily won the ballot for party president, traditionally the post held by the prime minister, against his only rival, Taro Aso. With the backing of eight of the nine LDP factions, Fukuda scored 330 votes against Aso's 197.

In the lead up to the vote, Fukuda and Aso expressed few differences on economic policy—both stated the need to continue the economic restructuring set in motion under Koizumi. Fukuda, however, is seeking to tone down the attempts of Koizumi and Abe to revive Japanese militarism and aggressively assert Japanese interests in North East Asia, which have antagonised China in particular. Aso, on the other hand, as foreign minister under Koizumi and Abe, is closely associated with their hard-line stance against North Korea, the flexing of military muscle, and Koizumi's insistence on publicly visiting Japan's controversial Yasukuni war shrine.

Fukuda's installation also marks the reassertion of power by

the LDP factional bosses. In 2001, amid a deep political crisis, Koizumi, who was widely regarded as a maverick, won the leadership by opposing the factional system. He cultivated a flamboyant, anti-establishment style in a bid to establish a base among disaffected voters for his right-wing policies. Fukuda, who belongs to the LDP's largest faction, closely fits the conventional, conservative mold for a Japanese politician.

On Monday, Fukuda appointed his loyalists, mainly factional leaders, to key LDP executive positions. He removed Aso as party general secretary and installed former education minister Ibuki Bunmei. He named former finance minister Sadakazu Tanigaki as chairman of the LDP general council, which is in charge of policy making. Both men share Fukuda's views of economic restructuring and the need for a more moderate diplomatic stance in Asia.

The new cabinet reflects the same orientation. Fukuda retained 13 of the 17 cabinet ministers installed in Abe's reshuffle following LDP's losses in the upper house elections. Many are factional bosses and figures with long lists of previous ministerial posts.

Like Abe and Aso, Fukuda is one of the party's dynastic heirs. His father, Takeo Fukuda, was prime minister from 1976 to 1978. After working as a typical Japanese "salaryman" in the middle management at Maruzen Petroleum for 17 years, he became his father's secretary in 1976. He served as the chief cabinet secretary under prime ministers Yoshiro Mori and Koizumi from 2000 to 2004.

Dubbed the shadow foreign minister and defence minister, Fukuda was known for his criticisms of Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. He was forced to resign in May 2004, following a scandal over the failure of a number of ministers to make pension payments, at a time when the government was demanding that working people increase their pension premiums. Although sidelined, he remained a powerful figure in the faction headed by Nobutaka Machimura.

Abe's installation as prime minister in September 2006 was widely regarded as due to Fukuda's withdrawal from the contest. Abe, however, quickly ran into political difficulties, with a series of scandals and plummeting support in the opinion polls. While there has been much media commentary on Abe's personal failings, it was the growing unpopularity of

the policies begun under Koizumi that led to his political downfall. Fukuda has been installed to find a way to revive the LDP's standing, while maintaining essentially the same political course.

To defuse tensions with China and the Koreans over the Yasukuni Shrine, Fukuda has previously advocated the building of a secular war memorial that Japanese politicians could more openly visit. The Yasukuni Shrine is a private, Shinto shrine run by right-wing groups and symbolically pays homage to all the Japanese war dead, including those convicted as Class A war criminals. Koizumi's insistence that his public visits to this symbol of Japanese militarism were "an internal matter" led to a marked cooling of relations with China.

In an interview with Kyodo news agency last week, Fukuda said he would put aside Abe's plans to revise the constitution, because the LDP could not implement the changes without the support of the opposition DPJ. Abe's plans to amend the constitution, particularly its so-called pacifist clause, were part of a broader agenda to strengthen the military as a means for asserting Japanese interests. Over the past six years, Tokyo has aggressively asserted its disputed territorial claims with China, South Korea and Russia.

A more cautious foreign policy does not mean, however, that Fukuda will alter Koizumi's strategy of using support for the Bush administration and its bogus "war on terrorism" to secure US backing for a more assertive Japanese role in the region and internationally. One of the triggers for Abe's resignation was the DPJ's threat to block the renewal of an "anti-terrorism" bill used to justify the deployment of Japanese naval refuelling vessels in the Indian Ocean to support the US occupation of Afghanistan. Fukuda has announced that he intends to proceed with the renewal of the legislation, which is due to expire on November 1.

There is widespread opposition to Japan's involvement in the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, which the DPJ was able to exploit in the upper house elections. The DPJ's stance reflects concerns in ruling circles that Japan's involvement will end in disaster. The DPJ is not opposed to these wars as such but insists that they have the fig leaf of UN approval before any Japanese involvement. To short-circuit the opposition, the Japanese government last Wednesday persuaded the UN Security Council to add a clause into a resolution extending NATO's "anti-terror" operations in Afghanistan to express "appreciation" for Japan's refuelling role in the Indian Ocean.

Fukuda's more moderate diplomatic approach, particularly toward China, is also bound up with concerns in Japanese business circles that the deterioration of relations with Beijing under Koizumi could impact on the economy. Japan's revived rates of economic growth in the past few years have been heavily dependent on increased exports to, and investment in, China. Likewise, Fukuda's insistence that economic restructuring must proceed is motivated by fears about the tentative character of the Japanese economic recovery.

Well aware of the groundswell of opposition to the growing gulf between rich and poor in Japan, Fukuda has tentatively promised to address the results of Koizumi's "excessive economic rationalism". At the same time, however, Fukuda made clear in a speech to a LDP meeting on September 16 that this "does not mean slowing down reforms... I think Koizumi's reforms were not sufficient." In particular, Fukuda has advocated increasing the highly unpopular consumption tax.

Cutbacks to public works projects and government spending have already produced sharp opposition in the LDP's rural strongholds. In the upper house election, the LDP lost all but six of its mainly rural single-seat constituencies. According to *Asahi Shimbun*, 31 of the 47 LDP prefectural chapters want the new prime minister to increase government subsidies to the construction industry, which bolsters the local economies.

Fukuda has promised little more than cosmetic changes to the government's economic policies. His fundamental orientation was summed up in comments last week: "We have to promote reforms. The world is changing and if we don't change we will be left behind." There is no doubt that his government intends to press ahead with further cutbacks to public spending and measures to boost productivity through longer hours, lower wages and greater casualisation—all of which will fuel greater opposition.

An *Asahi Shimbun* poll last week showed that 53 percent preferred Fukuda as prime minister, compared to just 21 percent for Aso. Those who supported Fukuda generally expressed hope for a change from the governments of Koizumi and Abe. Some 32 percent of respondents regarded "pension problems" as the primary issue that should be addressed first, followed by the "income gap", "fiscal reconstruction" or spending cutbacks, and finally "diplomacy and national security".

Far from meeting the hopes and expectations of ordinary working people, Fukuda's policies will inevitably deepen the current social crisis, even as he continues to support the Bush administration's widely unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is the recipe for another short-lived government plagued by falling support in the polls, internal crises and scandals.



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