

Japanese voters sweep Liberal Democrats from office

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The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) routed the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in lower house elections yesterday. The Liberal Democrats have held power in Japan since the party's formation in 1955, with the exception of an 11-month period in 1993-94.

The result was a landslide for the Democrats. According to the *Mainichi Shimbun*, the DPJ has increased its presence in the lower house from 113 to 308 seats. Its two small allies—the Social Democratic Party and the Peoples New Party—won 7 and 3 respectively. As a result, the DPJ-led coalition will have 318 seats, just short of the two-thirds majority needed in the 480-seat lower house to override an upper house veto.

For the Liberal Democrats, the outcome is devastating. The party's seat tally slumped from 300 to 119. Its coalition partner, New Komeito, dropped from 31 to 21 seats. Five cabinet ministers, including Finance Minister Kaoru Yosano, and party heavyweights such as General Council Chairman Takashi Sasagawa and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura lost their single-seat constituencies. Most will return to parliament via the 180 seats elected by proportional representation.

The remaining seats will be held by smaller parties and independents. The Japanese Communist Party retained its nine lower house seats. The Your Party won 5 and the New Party Nippon and New Party Daichi one each. Six independents were elected.

The *Mainichi Shimbun* estimated voter turnout at 69.3 percent—the highest since single-seat constituencies were established in 1996. An exit poll conducted by the newspaper found that about a third of people who described themselves as LDP supporters voted for the Democrats yesterday. Of those who said they supported no particular party, some 59 percent voted for the DPJ as against 23 percent of LDP.

The scale of the LDP's defeat was underscored by the results in Tokyo. Of the single-seat constituencies in the capital, the Democrats won just one at the previous election in 2005.

Yesterday, DPJ candidates took 21 of the 25.

Far from being a positive endorsement of the Democrats, the outcome reflected broad opposition to the LDP over deepening social inequality and the government's support for the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Japan has been particularly hard hit by the global recession, which has led to sharp falls in exports and a wave of layoffs. Official statistics released on Friday put unemployment at a post-war high of 5.7 percent. Levels of poverty and homelessness are on the rise.

The Democrats appealed to voter disenchantment with a vague slogan of "change". The party promised a number of limited handouts, including a child allowance, an end to highway tolls and income support for farmers. In foreign policy, the DPJ called for a more equal relationship with the US and closer economic and diplomatic ties with countries in Asia, including China and South Korea. It proposed ending Japan's naval refuelling mission for US warships providing support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

Speaking to the media last night, Democrat leader Yukio Hatoyama declared that it had been "a revolutionary election", adding: "The people have shown the courage to take politics into their own hands." While the results do reflect deep going popular alienation and anger, the installation of the DPJ in power is no "revolution".

The Democrats were formed in 1998 from dissident factions of the Liberal Democrats and former Social Democratic Party members. Hatoyama himself has a long political pedigree going back to his grandfather Ichiro Hatoyama who helped found the LDP in 1955 and was prime minister at the time. In his victory speech, Hatoyama paid tribute to Ichiro Ozawa and indicated that he would play a prominent role in the next government. Ozawa, a former LDP powerbroker, was leader of the Democrats until May when he was forced to stand down over an election funding scandal.

Regardless of its election promises, the new government will confront broad opposition from big business to any increase in

spending as the country's public debt already stands at 170 percent of GDP. Fujio Mitarai, chairman of the big business council Keidanren, told the *Financial Times*: "We would like the DPJ to carry out discussions that transcend party lines and produce concrete results. It's vital that a way out of the economic turmoil is found."

The DPJ has pledged not to raise the consumption tax or increase overall spending, and claims that it will pay for its election promises by cutting waste and the LDP's pork barrel projects. Hatoyama said he will establish joint ministerial committees and dispatch 100 parliamentarians to ensure that the government asserts control over the country's powerful state bureaucracy. In reality, the party's populist rhetoric against top bureaucrats is the means for justifying deep inroads into public spending and social services.

As the economic crisis worsens, the DPJ will quickly lose support. Political analyst Minoru Morita told the *Washington Post*: "The Democrat Party actually has no economic policy. They have no systematic proposals, no New Deal. Without a plan, they cannot overcome the crisis left to them by the LDP. If they drive the economy recklessly, then they could lose big time in the upper house election next year." The DPJ and its allies currently control the upper house.

On foreign policy, DPJ spokesmen are already reassuring Washington that there will be no sharp change. "It's a complete nonsense that a non-Liberal Democratic government will hurt US-Japan relations," senior Democrat Tetsuro Futuyama told the *New York Times* today. "But there are many things left unchanged from the last 50 years that need to be reexamined."

For the Liberal Democrats, the defeat will certainly precipitate a deep internal crisis. Prime Minister Taro Aso has already announced that he will step down as party president. "The LDP has had four prime ministers in the last four years. People's dissatisfaction and distrust about that came to the surface all of a sudden," he told the media.

The result, however, is not a huge surprise. As the *Financial Times* commented: "The shifting of the political tectonic plates—a small earthquake, no tsunami", as one astute commentator put it—is not quite a tumultuous as meets the eye. The result did not come out of the blue. Rather, it echoed two previous election results that, in retrospect at least, marked the slow-motion crumbling of the LDP edifice."

While the economic crisis over the past year was a major factor in the election campaign, the decline of the Liberal Democrats has far deeper roots. As a party of the post-war period, the LDP rested on its Cold War alliance with the US

and a program of national economic regulation. The globalisation of production processes that undermined the Soviet Union in the 1980s also impacted on the Japanese economy. It was no accident that the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s coincided with the collapse of Japan's stock market and property bubbles, which ushered in a protracted economic stagnation.

Over the past two decades, the LDP has lurched from one crisis to the next. Even its so-called political successes under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi from 2001 to 2006 were a product of his careful cultivation of an unorthodox, anti-establishment image. In 2005, Koizumi only won a landslide victory by focussing the campaign against his own party's factional heavyweights and promising to smash the party if it did not carry out his free-market agenda. After he stepped down in 2006, amid falling popularity, Koizumi was followed by three short-lived leaders.

It is not obvious who will replace Taro Aso as party president. Whoever does become leader will confront a party in turmoil. It is quite possible that the defeat will produce another string of defections as LDP parliamentarians look to their political future elsewhere. Over the past year, the Japanese media has reported discussions between LDP and DPJ groupings, each disgruntled with their own parties.

Parliament is due to meet to select the next prime minister in mid-September. In the meantime, Hatoyama will be engaged in inner party wrangling to select ministers and try to balance the various disparate factions that make up the DPJ. Given the country's deep economic malaise and the widespread hostility to the political establishment generally, the new government is certain to face political crises—in all likelihood, sooner rather than later.



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