

Japanese prime minister resigns after just nine months

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Under mounting pressure from within the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama announced yesterday that he and DPJ secretary general Ichiro Ozawa would resign their positions. The resignations follow a disastrous slump in the government's poll ratings ahead of upper house elections expected on July 11.

Hatoyama came to office just nine months ago after the Democrats won national elections, defeating the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had ruled virtually continuously for more than 50 years. The DPJ capitalised on widespread disaffection with the LDP over its support for US militarism, including the war in Afghanistan, as well as growing economic uncertainty and rising social tensions in Japan itself.

The immediate trigger for Hatoyama's resignation was public outrage over his government's reversal of an election promise to move the Futenma Marine Corps airbase out of Okinawa. Hatoyama had promised to renegotiate a 2006 deal with the US to relocate the base within Okinawa. But he backed down two weeks ago in the face of Washington's intransigence and agreed to move the base to the north side of the island.

The presence of the US military is deeply unpopular on Okinawa, which houses half of the 44,000 American military personnel in Japan. In late April, a mass rally of 90,000 demanded that the Hatoyama government abide by its election promise. A series of protests has followed against the US bases.

Hatoyama's backdown on the Okinawa base also undermined his broader election promise to refashion Japanese foreign policy, by establishing an "equal partnership" with Washington and improving relations

with China and South Korea. By giving in on Okinawa, the government demonstrated that, like the LDP, it is unwilling to do anything to jeopardise the longstanding US-Japan alliance.

Public hostility to the US bases in Okinawa is part of broader opposition to Japan's involvement in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and more generally to militarism. LDP Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who committed Japanese troops to Iraq, was forced to pull them out amid widespread anger over the war. Hatoyama kept his election promise to end the unpopular Japanese naval refuelling mission in support of the Afghan occupation, but only with a nod of approval by the US and promises to boost other forms of aid to Afghanistan.

Hatoyama attempted to justify his decision to keep the US base on Okinawa by pointing to rising tensions on the Korean peninsula over the sinking of a South Korean warship. But support for the government plunged to just 17 percent, according to a poll for the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper last weekend. Only 27 percent approved the government's decision on the Okinawa base while 57 percent disapproved. After winning the election last August, the government's ratings in September were around 70 percent.

The government was dealt a further blow when the Social Democratic Party pulled out of the ruling coalition last weekend after Hatoyama dismissed its leader Mizuho Fukushima as a minister for refusing to accept the agreement on Okinawa. While the DPJ has an outright majority in the lower house of the Japanese Diet, it could lose control of the upper house after elections next month, making the passage of the budget and legislation difficult.

Hatoyama's resignation came after a series of meetings

early this week with DPJ secretary general Ozawa and upper house leader Azuma Koshiishi. A *Yomuri Shimbun* survey of the party's 54 upper house legislators facing reelection found that nine wanted Hatoyama to step down and only seven explicitly supported his continuation as prime minister.

The precipitous collapse in support for the DPJ over the past nine months underscores the tentative character of its election win in the first place. Taking a cue from Barack Obama's campaign, Hatoyama exploited the overwhelming hostility to the LDP with vague promises of "change". Amid growing public concerns over the social divide between rich and poor, he made limited pledges to provide child allowances, axe road tolls, change the labour laws to protect workers, assist farmers and provide free school education. At the same time, Hatoyama promised big business that his government would rein in the budget deficit and Japan's huge levels of public debt.

Voters, who supported the Democrats as a means of getting rid of the LDP, rapidly became disillusioned by the government's failure to address the country's worsening social crisis. Despite rising exports and a return to positive growth in the first quarter of 2010, the official unemployment figure was 5.1 percent in April, up from 5.0 percent in March. Disaffection is particularly strong among young people, many of whom are either unemployed or condemned to part-time or temporary low-paid work.

The sovereign debt crisis in Greece and Europe has put a spotlight on Japan's high levels of public debt, which currently stands at 180 percent of GDP and, according to the OECD, could hit 205 percent next year. The OECD warned last week that Japan must develop a "credible and detailed medium term fiscal consolidation program, including tax reform" to reduce the mountain of public debt. Government stimulus packages over the past three years have widened the budget deficit from 3 percent of GDP in 2007 to 9 percent.

All eyes are on Finance Minister Naoto Kan, who is expected to take over as party leader and prime minister when the DPJ meets tomorrow. While he backed stimulus measures when the government first took office, Kan has increasingly advocated financial discipline and called for measures to cut the debt. Early last month, he told the

media: "We have no excuse to increase debt. That's why we need to consider tax reforms to secure funds."

The oblique reference to "tax reform" is a hint that Kan may increase the country's deeply unpopular 5 percent sales tax to shore up public finances. During the election campaign, Hatoyama declared that he would not raise the tax, insisting that the Democrats would cut public spending by eliminating government waste and corruption. Not only would any increase in the sales tax provoke opposition among working people, it might also be counterproductive. A decline in domestic spending would only compound the problems of deflation affecting the economy.

A change of DPJ leadership might provide an immediate boost to the party's fortunes in next month's elections, but will do nothing to change its prospects in the longer term. The Japanese government, like its counterparts in Europe and internationally, is being driven by the worsening global economic crisis to impose new burdens on working people and will inevitably confront intense opposition, particularly from the working class.

Already the majority of the population is deeply alienated not just from the government, but the entire political establishment. While last weekend's *Asahi Shimbun* poll showed the Hatoyama government at 17 percent, support for the LDP opposition was even lower at just 15 percent. On voting in the upper house election, the two parties were tied at 20 percent, with 41 percent of respondents undecided. With no avenue to express itself through official channels, political opposition is likely to take new and potentially explosive forms.



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