

Japan's new opposition leader promotes militarist agenda

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The election of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday as the new leader of Japan's opposition Liberal Democratic Party marks a further shift to the right, not only by the LDP but the entire political establishment.

The poll took place amid sharp tensions between Japan and China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda sparked the current conflict by announcing that it had "nationalised" the islands by buying them from their private Japanese owners. Beijing strongly protested the move and dispatched fisheries and surveillance vessels to the area to assert China's claim.

In the lead-up to yesterday's election, all five candidates demanded tougher action to defend Japanese territory. Former Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba called for the Japanese military—the Self-Defence Forces—to be mobilised to bolster the coast guard that is currently patrolling the area. "Losing a piece of our territory eventually means losing the whole country," he told a press conference last week.

While campaigning on Tuesday, Abe, who is known as a right-wing nationalist, declared: "Japan's beautiful seas and its territory are under threat... I promise to protect Japan's land and sea, and the lives of the Japanese people no matter what."

Abe only won yesterday's election in a second round, after coming second to Ishiba in the first. The final vote was close—108 to 89—indicating serious concerns about his previous performance as prime minister. Abe took over from Junichiro Koizumi in September 2006 and

stepped down less than a year later, after losing control of the upper house in July 2007 and presiding over a series of ministerial scandals and resignations.

Upon being elected, Abe apologised for "causing you all trouble with my sudden resignation as prime minister six years ago." He promised to do his utmost to win back power and "build a strong country, a prosperous country."

A general election may be called within months. Prime Minister Noda was recently forced to promise elections "soon" as the price for the LDP's support in passing legislation to double the country's unpopular sales tax.

Abe is a proponent of Japanese militarism, including the removal of the so-called pacifist clause of Japan's post-war constitution and the promotion of Japanese patriotism based on "traditional values"—code words for the glorification of the wartime military regime, its symbols and record.

Abe has already indicated that he would visit the controversial Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead as prime minister, even though such an event could rupture relations with China. During his previous term in office, he made no visit to the shrine, in a bid to patch up relations with Beijing, which had sunk to a low under Koizumi.

In another step that will antagonise China and South Korea, Abe has indicated that he might seek to nullify the limited apologies issued by previous Japanese governments for wartime atrocities carried out in the 1930s and 1940s. He also promised to strengthen

defence cooperation with the United States by taking a more active military role.

During his year as prime minister, Abe changed the country's education law to foster "love for the nation" and to whitewash the country's wartime history. He denied that Asian women had been forced to act as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during the war. Abe also stridently backed the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has responded to opposition criticisms by making its own marked shift to the right. Noda's provocative decision to buy the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands was aimed at undercutting the campaign waged by Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara for public donations to make the purchase. Ishihara, a fervent nationalist, also proposed building facilities on the rocky outcrops to consolidate Japanese control.

The Japanese political establishment as a whole is deliberately whipping up nationalist sentiment in a bid to divert attention from the deteriorating economy and rising unemployment and poverty. The Democrats won power in 2009—ending half a century of virtually unbroken LDP rule—by promising to address social needs and distance itself from the US and its aggressive military interventions. Japan's involvement in the Afghan and Iraq wars has been deeply unpopular.

Support for the Democrats slumped after the government—under three successive prime ministers—broke all its promises. Noda's support hit an all-time low after he pushed through the sales tax increase and gave the green light for restarting the country's nuclear power stations, brushing aside public fears after last year's Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The lack of any progressive alternative in Japan to the LDP and Democrats has opened the door for Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto, a right-wing populist, to exploit widespread alienation with the major parties. Hashimoto, who rails against both parties and the Tokyo bureaucracy, formed his own party—the Japan Restoration Party—this month.

Speaking at a fundraising event earlier this month,

Hashimoto declared: "Our glorious Japan has fallen into a state of decline... Let's fight together... to once again revive glorious Japan." He has called for the revision of the Japanese constitution to eliminate the pacifist clause and strengthen the military.

Hashimoto has previously dismissed Japan's wartime atrocities as fictions. As mayor of Osaka, he mandated the singing of the national anthem at all school events.

Such is the extent of hostility to the political establishment that Hashimoto's party was ahead of both parties in a Fuji News Network poll earlier this month—23.8 percent as against 21.7 percent for the LDP and just 17.4 percent for the Democrats. A Kyodo News survey put the Japan Restoration Party behind the LDP but ahead of the Democrats.

The support for Hashimoto represents hostility to the existing major parties rather than positive support for his right-wing nationalist agenda. It parallels the huge swing in 2009 to the Democrats, who capitalised on the bitter opposition to the entrenched LDP with a vague promise of "change."

What is striking about the polling figures is that 40 percent of respondents do not support any of these parties, which promote nationalism, militarism and a big business agenda that will inevitably place new economic burdens on working people.



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