

Japanese prime minister calls snap election

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In the middle of a parliamentary debate on Wednesday, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda announced his intention to dissolve the lower house of parliament and hold national elections on December 16. He set two conditions—a new bond release to cover the budget deficit and electoral reform to reduce the number of seats—to which the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has apparently agreed.

Noda's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) seems headed for defeat after coming to power for the first time in September 2009, ending half a century of virtually unbroken LDP rule. The broad hostility to both major parties is illustrated by opinion poll figures, which put support for the DPJ at less than 20 percent, behind the LDP on about 30 percent.

The Democrats came to power on a wave of discontent with the conservative LDP, offering a vague slogan of “change” and promises of a foreign policy more independent of the US and modest increases in social spending. Instead, Noda, who is the party's third prime minister in three years, has lined up completely with President Obama's aggressive efforts to undermine China's influence in Asia and also sought to slash the budget deficit.

In August, Noda struck a deal with the LDP to push through legislation to double the unpopular sales tax in return for calling an election “soon”. The Democrats' support for the tax increase, which it pledged at the 2009 election not to implement, along with the government's restarting of nuclear plants following last year's Fukushima nuclear disaster, sent the cabinet's poll rating to record lows.

The DPJ, a loose association of former LDP members, Social Democrats and “independents”, has

been wracked by divisions since taking office. Key powerbroker Ichiro Ozawa, who pushed for closer ties with China and advocated further stimulus measures rather than austerity, split from the Democrats in July and formed his own Peoples Life First party. The Tokyo High Court cleared Ozawa this week of violating long-running political funding charges, allowing him to contest the election.

The DPJ's fragmentation continued this week with another six lawmakers, including two ex-cabinet ministers, quitting the party. According to *Asahi Shimbun*, one reason that Noda called a snap election was the danger of a move to oust him as leader while he attended the East Asia Summit in Cambodia next week.

Noda has flagged support for the US-backed trade agreement—the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—as a key election policy. The TPP, which would ultimately eliminate all tariffs and trade barriers, is strongly supported by sections of big business that view it as essential to pulling the Japanese economy out of two decades of stagnation. The LDP opposes the agreement, which would have a devastating impact on the country's heavily protected agricultural sector and thus on the party's rural base.

LDP leader Shinzo Abe, who was only installed in September, advocates a policy of unlimited monetary easing by setting interest rates to zero or below zero to expand credit, lowering the value of the yen and boosting exports. Such a move risks contributing to an international currency war as the US pursues a similar policy. The depth of the economic crisis in Japan was underlined by this week's statistics showing an annualised 3.5 percent rate of contraction in the September quarter (see: “Deepening economic crisis in Japan”).

Abe's campaign will be based on stirring up right-wing nationalism. After taking over the leadership, he provocatively visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead last month. This week he not only met with the Dalai Lama but publicly supported "freedom and democracy" for Tibet. Both moves were designed to antagonise China and demonstrate a tough stance on foreign policy.

As the country's economic crisis has worsened, the Japanese political establishment as a whole has made a marked turn to nationalism and militarism. Earlier this year, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara deliberately inflamed tensions with China by proposing to buy the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private Japanese owner. Not to be outdone, Prime Minister Noda "nationalised" the rocky islets in September, provoking widespread anti-Japanese protests in China. Following his election as LDP leader, Abe joined in, promising to "protect Japan's land and sea ... no matter what."

The whipping up of nationalist sentiment serves both to justify a military build-up by Japan and to divert public attention from the country's deepening social and economic crisis. The widening social divide is indicated by the rising numbers of people forced to rely on the country's limited welfare system—now more than 2 million, up from 1.07 million in 2000.

A number of parties have formed to exploit the widespread alienation from the two major parties. Last month Ishihara resigned as Tokyo governor, and from the LDP, and established his own party. It merged this week with another small right-wing grouping to form the Sunrise Party. Ishihara is looking to forge a wider front with the Japan Restoration Party headed by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, a right-wing populist who postures as an alternative to the LDP and DPJ. The Japan Restoration Party is in the process of merging with the small Your Party in preparation for the election.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which received 7 percent of the vote and 9 seats in the 2009 election, will also seek to exploit the popular hostility

toward the major parties. The JCP no longer even pretends to fight for socialism. It is a parliamentary formation that is thoroughly integrated into the Japanese political establishment. The JCP and its trade union base oppose the TPP and promote protectionism—thus aligning themselves with less-competitive sections of Japanese business.

The political breakup represented by the proliferation of parties will continue after the election. Whatever its exact composition, the next Japanese government will be compelled to impose the austerity agenda being demanded by international finance capital, further deepening popular opposition and political instability.



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