

Japan's election dominated by right-wing nationalism

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Japan's elections to take place on December 16 mark a sharp turning point. As the country slides into recession and social tensions rise, parties across the political establishment have shifted to the right, whipping up nationalist sentiment especially over the dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has set the benchmark with an election program released on Wednesday that calls for the strengthening of the military and the stationing of government officials on the uninhabited disputed islands. It also emphatically rejects criticism of Japan's war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s.

The LDP platform calls for the transformation of Japan's self-defence forces into a regular military, as well as the revision of the defence guidelines and an increase in both the number of troops and the defence budget. It also proposes to allow Japan to engage in "collective self-defence"—that is, to join military pacts and engage in joint military operations with other powers.

These measures would require changes to the Japanese constitution, which prohibits war or the use of force as a "means of settling international disputes." Over the past two decades, successive Japanese governments have stretched this so-called pacifist clause to the point of meaninglessness, including through the widely unpopular dispatch of Japanese military engineers to support the US occupation of Iraq.

The LDP is now proposing a new constitution based on "Japanese pride and Japanese-ness." This would allow Japanese imperialism free rein to engage in

aggressive military operations, either on its own or as part of a broader alliance, to defend its interests.

The danger of conflict is underlined by the present tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, provoked by the decision of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to "nationalise" the islets by buying them from their private Japanese owner in September. Since then, Japanese coast guard ships and Chinese civilian maritime vessels have been playing a dangerous cat-and-mouse game in the disputed waters.

Noda claimed that he made the decision to sideline steps by right-wing Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara to raise funds to buy the islands and build facilities on them. In reality, Noda was seeking to ensure the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) remained in step with the nationalist campaign whipped up by Ishihara.

Ishihara has since split from the LDP and formed his own party, which merged last weekend with the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) led by the right-wing populist Toru Hashimoto, currently the Osaka mayor. Ishihara, who became the JRP's president, has pledged to change the country's "ugly" constitution, to take a tougher stand against China. He has previously said Japan should consider building a nuclear weapon.

The election campaign is rapidly becoming a contest in which each of the parties seek to outbid each other as proponents of Japanese nationalism and militarism. The LDP's plan to station government officials on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is in part aimed at ensuring that it is not outdone by Ishihara and the JRP.

Shintaro Abe, who became LDP leader in September,

was previously prime minister for a year in 2006-07 when he transformed the self-defence agency into a full ministry. Known for his nationalist views, he has visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead—a move calculated to inflame tensions with China.

The LDP program, reflecting Abe's views, calls for a wholesale revision of the "unjust" perception of Japan's wartime history through the establishment of a research institute to counter criticism. Abe, for instance, has denied that so-called comfort women were coerced into sex slavery by the Japanese military—an issue that has provoked an angry reaction by South Korea and China.

The promotion of Japanese nationalism goes hand in hand with a turn to socially regressive policies designed to place new burdens on the working class. The latest economic data revealed a 3.5 percent annualised contraction. As big business presses for austerity measures to control Japan's mountain of public debt, the LDP joined with the Noda government to pass legislation to double the country's sales tax.

The LDP program proposes a 10 percent reduction of welfare benefits under the livelihood protection program. At the same time, it calls for a series of pro-business measures, including the lowering of corporate taxes. For its part, the DPJ advocates signing up to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership—a trade deal that requires the wholesale removal of tariffs that would mean a savage restructuring of Japanese industries. The LDP has not unequivocally supported the move, as it would devastate Japanese agriculture and the party's rural base.

The latest opinion polls indicate that the LDP is likely to win the election. This is a damning indictment of the DPJ, which came to power in 2009 after half a century of virtually unbroken LDP rule. Support for the DPJ quickly slumped after it broke its limited promises to increase social spending and instead began to implement an austerity program. Noda, who was only installed as leader in August last year, is deeply unpopular, not least for giving the green light to restarting the country's nuclear plants following the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

There is, however, a deep-seated alienation and hostility to all of the major parties. While polling fluctuates, this week's figures from the Kyodo News survey put support for the LDP at just 23 percent, ahead of the DPJ at 10.8 percent and a total of 7.8 percent of the Hashimoto and Ishihara parties, prior to their amalgamation. Trailing behind are the LDP's ally, New Komeito on 4 percent, the minor Your Party at 2 percent, and the Japanese Communist Party on 1.9 percent.

In other words, over half of all voters do not feel their interests are served by any of these parties. Asked what they considered the most important issues, 29.2 percent cited social security, including pensions and health care, with the next highest being employment and economic issues at 28.4 percent. The concerns of ordinary voters stand in stark contrast to the nationalist campaign being whipped up by all parties.

The lack of support for the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP) amid a deepening social crisis is particularly telling. The JCP is an integral part of the Japanese political establishment, as is demonstrated by its stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The party insists that Japan's claims to the islands are legitimate and criticises LDP and DJP governments alike for not forcefully enough arguing the case for Japanese possession. The JCP calls for "a calm and persuasive diplomatic effort" to convince the Chinese people of Japan's rights—a recipe for further inflaming tensions between the two countries.

It is likely that the election will leave no party with a clear parliamentary majority. This situation underscores the ongoing breakup of post-war Japanese politics, which were dominated by a ruling LDP and a loyal opposition comprising the now virtually defunct Japanese Socialist Party and the JCP.



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