

# New Japanese party formed to capitalise on anti-nuclear sentiment

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The breakup of Japanese politics continues apace with the formation of yet another party—the Japan Future Party—to contest national elections set for December 16. Launched on Tuesday by the governor of Shiga prefecture, Yokiko Kada, the party is seeking to exploit widespread public hostility to the nuclear industry in the wake of last year’s Fukushima nuclear plant disaster.

Kada, an environmental sociologist, is known for her role in leading protests against the restarting of two nuclear plants near the Shiga prefecture in June. She previously belonged to the small Social Democratic Party. An *Asahi Shimbun* poll on Monday found that 50 percent of respondents opposed nuclear power, with just 34 percent in favour.

Hostility to the major parties is particularly strong in areas of northern Japan hit by the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster. More than 300,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation, without adequate services, and unemployment is high. An audit of reconstruction spending released late last month found that half the budget allocation had not been distributed, and 25 percent of the money actually spent had funded projects unrelated to the disaster.

Kada’s Japan Future Party (JFP) is also seeking to capitalise on hostility to the government’s decision to double the country’s unpopular sales tax to 10 percent by 2005. The JFP calls for the reduction of central government bureaucracy and the slashing of supposed wasteful spending before any tax increases. The party is yet to make its foreign policy clear.

Kada has attracted support from several breakaways from the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The People’s Life Party, which is headed by former DPJ factional strongman Ichiro Ozawa, and has 49 members of the Diet (parliament), announced on Tuesday that it would merge with the JFP. Ozawa broke from the DPJ after opposing the sales tax increase.

Ozawa played a key role in the September 2009 election campaign that brought the DPJ to office, ending a half century of virtually unbroken Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rule. Sharp divisions rapidly emerged within the DPJ—an amalgam of former LDP and Social Democratic groupings, as well as independents—over foreign and economic policies.

The first DPJ prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, resigned in June 2010 after being pressured by Washington to abandon a promise to shift a controversial US Marine base off the island of Okinawa. Naoto Kan, who took over, reaffirmed his unequivocal support for the US alliance, dumped the DPJ’s social spending promises and called for measures to rein in the country’s huge public debt—policies that continued under the current prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda.

Ozawa, who advocates closer economic ties with China and increased social spending, has been at odds with both Kan and Noda. He challenged for the DPJ leadership in September 2010 and lost. Earlier this month, the High Court cleared him of long-running electoral fraud charges, giving him a free hand to contest the election.

The Green Wind Party, which was only formed this

month by DPJ defectors, indicated that it too could support or merge with the Japan Future Party. It opposes nuclear power plants, as well as Japan joining the US-led trade agreement—the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The Tax Cuts Party, which was set up in 2010, and also opposes nuclear power and the TPP, is in talks with the JFP as well.

The formation of the Japan Future Party has been criticised by the right-wing populist Toru Hashimoto, who has been promoting his Japan Restoration Party (JRP) as a “third force” capable of challenging the two-party dominance of the DPJ and LDP. He told a TV program: “An antinuclear group is very dangerous in some ways,” saying it would make promises it could not keep. Hashimoto, who previously advocated the abolition of nuclear power, did an about-face after Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara merged his Sunrise Party with the JRP. Ishihara, who is now the JRP president, not only supports nuclear power but has suggested that Japan should be nuclear-armed.

Hashimoto and Ishihara are both known for their right-wing nationalist stances. Ishihara was instrumental in stirring up tensions with China by establishing a fund to purchase the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from their private Japanese owner. Prime Minister Noda responded by “nationalising” the islands in September, triggering anti-Japanese protests in China and a dangerous standoff between Chinese and Japanese vessels near the islands. The LDP has intervened by also stirring up nationalist and militarist sentiment (see: “Japan’s election dominated by right-wing nationalism”).

The Japan Restoration Party is itself seeking to garner support from other small parties. Talks with the Your Party, formed in August 2009 by a breakaway group from the LDP, appear to have broken down, in part because of Ishihara’s involvement and the JRP’s shift on nuclear policy.

The fragmentation of the LDP and DPJ, and the intense political jockeying by a plethora of small parties, reflects the disaffection and alienation of broad layers of the population from the major parties. Opinion polling is highly volatile. The latest Nikkei survey

released this week showed the LDP on 23 percent, ahead of the JRP on 15 percent and the DPJ on 13 percent. In other polls this week, the DPJ was ahead of the JRP. The one constant is that the largest bloc of voters—40 to 45 percent—is undecided or supports none of the parties.

The break-up of the established political framework began in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War, and amid the economic stagnation that followed the collapse of share and property prices. For decades, the conservative LDP had formed government, while the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) and Japanese Communist Party (JCP) constituted the loyal parliamentary opposition. The LDP briefly lost power in 1993 when several factions quit the party. The JSP imploded after it formed a government of national unity with the LDP in 1994.

The DPJ, which was formed mainly from various fragments of the LDP and JSP, came to office in 2009, under conditions of intense hostility to the LDP, on the vague slogan of promising change. Having implemented the austerity agenda demanded by big business, support for the government has collapsed, opening the door for LDP to return and impose new burdens on working people. Moreover, amid a deepening economic and political crisis, what is dominating the election campaign is the stirring up of Japanese nationalism over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, which all of the parties have, in one way or another, promoted and adapted to.



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