

Right-wing LDP government to take office in Japan

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17 December 2012

Japan's conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been returned to power by a landslide in yesterday's election. According to NHK exit polls, the LDP is projected to win between 275 and 300 seats in the 480-seat lower house of the Diet, or parliament. Together with its coalition partner, New Komeito, it is predicted to hold 320 seats, creating a two-thirds majority that would enable the new government to override the upper house.

The outcome was not a positive vote for the LDP. It was an overwhelming rejection of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which came to power in 2009 promising "change" but reneged on its election promises. LDP leader Shinzo Abe, who is due to be installed as prime minister on December 26, acknowledged: "I think the results do not mean we have regained the public's trust 100 percent. Rather, they reflect 'no votes' to the DPJ's politics." The DPJ is expected to win between 55 and 77 seats.

During the campaign, Abe promoted a right-wing nationalist agenda that will further heighten tensions in North East Asia, especially with China. The immediate issue is the territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, which flared again last week after China sent a maritime surveillance plane into disputed airspace. Japan responded by scrambling eight F-15 fighter jets.

Abe has promised tougher measures. "Just recently a Chinese airplane violated our airspace, and we always see official Chinese ships entering our territorial waters. This kind of thing never happened when the LDP was in power!" he said on Saturday. The LDP has indicated that it intends to build permanent structures on the uninhabited islets; a move that is certain to incense China.

More broadly, Abe has called for constitutional

changes to end the limitations on the Japanese military as a result of the constitution's so-called pacifist clause. In an essay in *Bungei Shunju* last week, he explained that the LDP's slogan "Take back Japan" did not just mean defeating the DPJ. "This is a fight to free the Japanese nation from the postwar history and return it to the Japanese people," he wrote.

"Freeing the Japanese nation" signifies ending any constraints on Japanese imperialism in pursuing its economic and strategic interests. Abe has called for an end to "self-torturing history education"—that is, any acknowledgement of the war crimes carried out by the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s. After becoming LDP leader in September, he visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead.

Abe is an LDP blue blood with a long political pedigree. His maternal grandfather was Nobushuke Kishi, who as prime minister presided over the signing of the US-Japan security treaty in 1960, which provoked mass protests. Kishi had been a minister in the pre-war militarist government. As a result, he was imprisoned for three years, but never charged with war crimes by the US occupation authorities. Abe's great-uncle was also a prime minister and his father was a foreign minister.

The stirring up of Japanese nationalism during the election campaign, not only by the LDP but the entire political establishment, including the DPJ, is an attempt to divert attention from the worsening economic and social crisis at home. Data released last week revealed that the economy had slid into recession in the second and third quarters of 2012—the fifth recession in 15 years. Two decades of economic stagnation have greatly widened the social gulf between rich and poor in Japan.

Abe has promised a new round of stimulus spending

and monetary easing in a bid to boost economic growth. With official interest rates at rock bottom, he is proposing “unlimited” quantitative easing along the lines being carried out by the US Federal Reserve—a policy that will bring the government into conflict with Japan’s central bank and further fuel currency wars internationally. During the campaign, Abe refused to commit himself to increases in the unpopular sales tax, even though the LDP supported the enabling legislation. Now in power, however, Abe will be compelled to shift the burden of the country’s huge public debt onto working people, including by tax hikes.

The election outcome is a devastating indictment of the DPJ, which had ended a half century of virtually unbroken LDP rule. The DPJ, which was formed in 1988 from breakaway groupings from the LDP and the Social Democratic Party, won the 2009 election in a landslide with vague promises of “change” and more progressive policies than the LDP.

The incoming DPJ government soon abandoned its proposals for a foreign policy more independent of the US and aimed at improving ties with China. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama stepped down in mid-2010 after the Obama administration refused to move a US Marine base off Okinawa. Hatoyama’s replacement, Naoto Kan, gave his full support for the alliance with the US and in September 2010 provoked a major diplomatic row with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Kan was forced to resign last year over his government’s mishandling of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and he might lose his seat in this election. Support for Yoshihiko Noda, who replaced Kan, plunged after he authorised the restarting of nuclear plants this year and pushed through legislation to double the sales tax. None of the DPJ’s promised social measures, such as free education and child allowances, has been implemented.

The DPJ, which has always been an unstable amalgam of factions, is now in deep crisis. The party had begun to fragment before the election, with the departure of political strongman Ichiro Ozawa, who opposed the sales tax increase, and his supporters. Its parliamentary numbers slumped from 308 after the 2009 election to 230 prior to yesterday’s poll. Key DPJ figures, including Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu

Fujimura and Education Minister Makiko Tanaka, lost their seats yesterday. Noda conceded defeat and resigned as party leader.

The DPJ is politically responsible for the LDP’s return to power, and for the rise of the right-wing nationalist Japan Restoration Party (JRP), headed by Shintaro Ishihara. As Tokyo governor, he initiated the current tensions with China by establishing a private fund to purchase the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private Japanese owner. The JRP is expected to hold between 40 and 61 seats in the new parliament.

The media in Japan and internationally has described yesterday’s result as a shift to the right in Japanese politics. In reality, the election has exposed the deep divide between the Japanese political establishment and the vast majority of voters. *Kyodo News* estimated the turnout at just 59.7 percent, down about 10 percentage points from the 2009 election, and in line with pre-election polls showing that 40 percent of the electorate was undecided. Many of those who did cast a ballot, voted for what they regarded as the “lesser evil”.

This deep-seated popular alienation has been reflected in a succession of short-lived governments—Abe will be Japan’s seventh prime minister in less than seven years. In fact, he was previously installed as prime minister in 2006 but resigned a year later, nominally for “health reasons”, amid a series of scandals and cabinet resignations. Despite its huge parliamentary majority, the next Abe government is just as likely to become mired in political crisis as it imposes austerity measures on the working class and ratchets up the confrontation with China.



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