

Japanese PM seeks election win to advance his right-wing agenda

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9 July 2013

The campaign for Japan's upper house election on July 21 formally began last week with the ruling right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) expected to win enough seats to gain a majority. Last December, the LDP won control of the lower house and formed government following the landslide defeat of the Democratic Party of Japan.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is seeking control of both parliamentary houses to press ahead with his militarist, pro-market agenda. He plans to free the Japanese military from the constraints of the so-called pacifist constitution and implement economic restructuring measures that will impose new burdens on working people.

None of these policies is being openly discussed in the campaign. Instead Abe has focussed on ending Japan's "twisted parliament"—in which opposition control of the upper house has delayed or blocked government policies or appointments. Speaking last week, he blamed the so-called twisted parliament for the lack of speedy economic recovery and disaster relief after the 2011 tsunami and nuclear crisis. "Please help us get out of this gridlock," he declared.

The LDP has also capitalised on initial signs of economic growth following its introduction of "Abenomics"—a combination of stimulus measures, pumping money into the financial system via the Bank of Japan (BoJ) and pro-market "reforms." Under Abe, the central bank has been purchasing around \$US70 billion in government bonds each month, driving down the value of the yen, boosting exports at the expense of Japan's rivals, and pushing up share prices.

Economic growth for the January-March quarter hit an annualised rate of 4.1 percent and industrial production was up 2 percent in May compared to the previous month. The BoJ has set itself a target of 2

percent annual inflation, ending the persistent deflation that has plagued the economy for much of the past two decades. To date, the policy has not worked. While retailers have noted increased sales of luxury items, overall household spending fell in May and the core consumer price index remained flat.

The main reason for the LDP's lead in the campaign is the collapse of support for the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which came to office for the first time in 2009 promising "change," but reneged on all its major election promises. Amid growing corporate demands for austerity, it dumped its modest pledges on social spending and pressed ahead with increases to the country's unpopular sales tax, despite vowing not to do so.

The DPJ government also abandoned plans for better relations with China and lined up behind the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, aimed against Beijing. After the resignation of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in June 2010, under pressure from Washington, the DPJ took an aggressive stance over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, provoking sharp tensions with China. In doing so, the DPJ opened the door for Abe, who is known for his nationalist and militarist views, to campaign for even tougher military measures.

Recent opinion polls put the LDP well ahead of any rival party, with its support ranging from 31 to 45 percent, as compared to 7 to 9 percent for the DPJ and less for others, including the extreme right-wing Japan Restoration Party, co-led by Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto.

At the same time, voter turn-out is likely to be low, with broad layers of the population, especially young people, alienated from the political establishment as a whole. A Nikkei survey found that only 64 percent of

people intended to vote, down from 69 percent in 2010 and 74 percent in 2007. Actual voting was only 58 percent in 2010 and 59 percent in 2007.

In Tokyo city elections last month, the LDP, with its coalition partner New Komeito, won back control of the city's assembly that it lost four years ago. Voter turnout, however, was at a near record low of just 43.5 percent. According to one estimate, the LDP took nearly half the seats, but won the support of just 15 percent of all those eligible to vote.

In the upper house, the LDP needs to win 63 of the 121 seats up for election in order to hold a majority with New Komeito, or 72 seats to win outright control. In either case, Abe will rapidly press ahead with his agenda of militarism and austerity.

The government has been preparing legislation to circumvent the “pacifist” clause of the constitution to enable Japan’s already substantial military to engage in “collective self-defence” with the US and other allies. Abe is seeking to remove the obstacles that limited the dispatch of Japanese forces in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Just months after assuming office, Abe set up an expert task force in February to advise on the legal basis for the Japanese military. While the LDP is not raising the issue of collective self-defence in the election campaign, Abe has, according to the *Asahi Shimbun*, instructed the task force to discuss the issue, paving the way for a security bill next year.

The LDP is further planning to make significant changes to the constitution, including to the “pacifist” clause and the status of the emperor. As a first step, the government is proposing an amendment to make changes to the constitution far easier. At present, a change requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament before it is taken to a national referendum. The LDP is seeking to reduce the requirement to a simple parliamentary majority.

In the economic sphere, the LDP has held back on the “third arrow” of “Abenomics”—drastic pro-market restructuring, including austerity measures to slash the government deficit and further labour market “flexibility” to increase the pool of low-paid, casual workers. The government is under pressure to reduce the mountain of public debt, which stands at more than 200 percent of gross domestic product. Berenberg Bank economist Rob Wood commented: “Abe needs to make

sure the third arrow—structural reform—flies straight and true.”

Pressing ahead with the “third arrow,” however, will undermine the limited economic growth that is underway and lead to social conflict. Abe is already under pressure from sections of his party to postpone an increase in the sales tax from 5 to 8 percent, due next April, amid a prediction by the Cabinet Office that a 1 percent rise would cut growth by 0.5 percent.

Above all, the government is deeply concerned over popular opposition to tax rises and cutbacks to essential social services. While economic growth is up, there has been no decrease in unemployment and the social gulf between rich and poor has continued to widen.



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