

Ruling LDP wins Japanese upper house election

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The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secured a clear majority in Japan's upper house of Diet, or parliament, in elections held yesterday. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will now exploit his control of both parliamentary houses to ram through his right-wing agenda of militarism and austerity.

The results are yet to be finalised, but preliminary figures give the LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito at least 74 of the 121 seats—half the upper house—that were contested yesterday. Combined with the 59 seats already held, the ruling coalition will have more than 130 of the total of 242 seats—well short of the two-thirds majority required to approve constitutional changes.

While the win is being described as a “landslide” for the LDP, nearly half of all eligible voters did not cast a ballot. The Japanese media estimated yesterday's turnout at about 51 percent—one of the lowest in post-war election history—reflecting widespread alienation from the entire political establishment.

Since coming to power in lower house elections last December, Abe has pressed ahead with plans to expand the Japanese military and free it from the constraints of the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution. His government has increased military spending for the first time in more than a decade and, with US backing, adopted an aggressive stance toward China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.

Last week, Abe pointedly visited the regional headquarters of the Japan Coast Guard on Ishigakijima island that is responsible for patrolling waters around the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. He declared that he had no intention of making any concession to China. Describing the tense standoff between Chinese and Japanese vessels as “increasingly severe,” he

warned: “I am determined to take the lead in protecting our territories.”

In his final campaign speech in Tokyo on Saturday, Abe declared his intention of pressing ahead with far-reaching constitutional changes that include revising the so-called pacifist clause. “To build a proud nation, let's revise our constitution!” he told cheering, flag-waving supporters.

The LDP-led coalition still lacks the two-thirds majority needed in both parliamentary houses to put a referendum on constitutional change. While continuing the drive to rewrite the constitution, Abe will press ahead with legislation designed to circumvent the pacifist clause and allow “collective self-defence”—code words for allowing the Japanese military to take part in a US-led wars of aggression. US military bases in Japan are already central to the Obama administration's “pivot” to Asia and preparations for conflict with China.

Abe's militarism goes hand-in-hand with economic policies that are aimed at undercutting Japan's rivals and imposing new burdens on the working class. His “Abenomics” involves three “arrows”—stimulus spending, pumping money into the financial system via the Bank of Japan (BoJ) and pro-market restructuring.

Before the election, the government implemented only the first two “arrows” of Abe's economic policies. The BoJ's version of the US Federal Reserve's “quantitative easing”, effectively printing money, has driven down the value of the yen, boosting Japanese exports at the expense of its rivals and raising tensions with both South Korea and China.

Big business has backed Abe's policies, which contributed to an annualised growth of 4 percent in the first quarter and a steep 40 percent rise in share prices. But the corporate elites are now demanding that the

government press ahead with the “third arrow”—a drastic pro-market restructuring that will inevitably erode living standards and provoke resistance from the working class.

The British-based *Financial Times* commented last week: “Backstage, the thinking goes, the true Mr Abe—more conservative than the average citizen, but possibly more committed to painful economic change—is preparing to make his appearance.”

The painful “reforms” being demanded by big business include: lowering the corporate tax rate and doubling the regressive sales tax by 2015; making new inroads into the country’s “lifelong employment” system to boost the pool of cheap casual labour; and deep cutbacks to social spending to cut the budget deficit and public debt that stands at more than 200 percent of gross domestic spending. None of these policies was openly discussed or debated during the election campaign.

The LDP was able to win the election in large measure due to the lack of any opposition. Support for its main rival, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), has plummeted since it won government in 2009 with vague promises of “change.” The DPJ rapidly broke its pledges to make modest increases in social spending and pursue a foreign policy more independent of Washington. The DPJ government legislated the increased sales tax, maintained a controversial US base in Okinawa and ratcheted up tensions with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

In the 2007 upper house election, the DPJ defeated the LDP government led by Abe, capitalising on opposition to its support for the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its pro-market agenda. Abe resigned as prime minister shortly afterward. Now the DPJ’s policies are virtually indistinguishable from those of the LDP.

With yesterday’s election results yet to be finalised, the DPJ had secured just 15 upper house seats, the worst outcome since its formation in 1998. The DPJ, which had a significant base of support among the urban middle classes, lost seats in the major cities of Tokyo and Osaka.

Abe’s nationalist platform enabled the LDP to undermine support for the right-wing militarist Japan Restoration Party, which won eight seats overall, but declined as a percentage in the overall vote compared

to the lower house elections in December. The pro-business Your Party, which advocates deep inroads to public spending and lower taxes, also secured eight seats.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) won prefectural seats in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto for the first time in 12 years—in many cases as a protest vote against the LDP and DPJ. The Stalinist JCP, however, which is thoroughly integrated into the parliamentary framework and the political establishment, is no alternative for workers and youth. Significantly, it has lined up behind the LDP and the DPJ in supporting Japan’s claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands against China.



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