

Tokyo election reveals widespread political alienation

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Former Health Minister Yoichi Masuzoe, who was backed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), won the election for Tokyo governor last Sunday. He received more than the combined votes of his next two rivals—Kenji Utsunomiya, a lawyer backed by the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and former Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa, who was supported by another ex-PM, Junichiro Koizumi.

Hosokawa and Koizumi ran a single-issue campaign advocating the immediate scrapping of the Japanese nuclear power industry, in a bid to capitalise on the widespread opposition following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. With Utsunomiya also an anti-nuclear candidate, the media in Japan and internationally billed the election as a referendum on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's plans to restart the country's power plants, all of which remain offline pending safety checks.

What the outcome revealed above all, however, was the widespread alienation of Japanese voters from the entire political establishment. The turnout was just 46.1 percent, down from 62.6 percent in the previous gubernatorial election in 2012, and the third lowest figure ever. While the media blamed a heavy snowstorm on Saturday, the small turnout reflects the development of broad dissatisfaction and hostility toward all the major parties over the past two decades.

Hosokawa's campaign was a bid to effect a new political realignment aimed at trapping this popular disaffection. Hosokawa, a longstanding LDP member, quit the party in 1992 amid a series of factional splits following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Japan's share and property bubbles in 1989–90. He became prime minister of a short-lived coalition government in 1993–94 that included various LDP breakaway parties—the first non-LDP administration in four decades.

The LDP then returned to power in a grand coalition with the Japanese Socialist Party—the major opposition party of the postwar period. The Socialist Party's entry into a coalition with its nemesis, accompanied by its repudiation of longstanding policies, led to a collapse of support at the 1996 election.

Next, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was formed in 1998 as an alliance of various breakaway LDP and Social Democratic factions. A decade later, the DPJ, campaigning on the vague slogan of “change,” defeated the LDP in the 2009 election, but quickly lost support as it implemented austerity measures and lined up with the Obama administration's military build-up against China. This opened the door for the LDP to return to power in the December 2012 election.

Hosokawa's candidacy in the Tokyo election was an attempt to create a new political safety valve for the ruling class as opposition grows to the present, right-wing Abe government. As well as Koizumi, who is still a prominent LDP member, Hosokawa was backed by the opposition DPJ, the People's Life Party of Ichiro Ozawa, who broke from the DPJ, as well as several members of the right-wing, nationalist Japan Restoration Party.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) indicated that it could align itself with Koizumi on the nuclear issue, when he suddenly announced last October that he opposed nuclear plants. In the end, however, the JCP and Social Democratic Party lined up behind lawyer Utsunomiya, who came in second on Sunday, narrowly ahead of Hosokawa.

Various media commentators declared the defeat of Utsunomiya and Hosokawa as a victory for Abe and his plans to restart the country's nuclear plants. In fact, among voters, there were broader concerns, reflecting Japan's deepening economic and social crisis. In a poll

by the *Asahi Shimbun*, 30 percent of respondents nominated the economy and jobs as the most important issue, followed by 25 percent who named health care and welfare.

The same poll found that 74 percent of respondents wanted nuclear reactors completely eliminated, immediately or in the near future. Even Masuzoe, the LDP-supported candidate, was compelled to adapt to this overwhelming concern by indicating that he would like to see nuclear plants eventually phased out. The sheer scale of the Fukushima disaster, which will take decades to clean up, is a constant reminder of the danger of nuclear power under capitalism.

Hosokawa's low vote also reflected distrust in him and his backers. Koizumi was one of Japan's longest serving post-war prime ministers, holding office from 2001 to 2006 before handing over to his protégé, Abe. While he is commonly touted in the media as a popular politician, support for Koizumi slumped as his government committed Japanese troops to the US occupation of Iraq and carried out pro-market restructuring that hit the working class. His sudden embrace of the anti-nuclear issue only compounded the doubts.

In the wake of the election, there are already moves to consolidate a new bourgeois opposition grouping. An article in yesterday's *Asahi Shimbun* entitled "Anti-nuclear side laments lost 'golden opportunity' in Tokyo election" noted that the combined votes of Hosokawa and Utsunomiya nearly matched those of the winning candidate Masuzoe. With other local elections looming, the article cites several anti-nuclear campaigners calling for an end to the political divisions.

The fourth-placed candidate in Sunday's election was the ultra right-wing nationalist, Toshio Tamogami. He was the Air Self-Defence Force chief of staff until 2008, when an essay that he wrote defending the Japanese militarist regime in the 1930s and 1940s came to light. Tamogami was backed by Shintaro Ishihara, who was Tokyo governor until November 2012, when he quit to co-lead the Japan Restoration Party.

Tamogami was also supported by Naoki Hyakuta, an Abe appointee to the board of governors of Japan's public broadcaster, NHK. In publically campaigning for Tamogami last week, Hyakuta declared that the 1937 Nanking massacre, in which Japanese troops

slaughtered many thousands of Chinese civilians and soldiers, "never happened." This whitewashing of the war crimes of Japanese imperialism is part of a broader campaign in ruling circles, spearheaded by the Abe government, to remilitarise Japan.

The great danger facing the working class is that it has no party that fights for its class interests as the ruling class prepares for war and a far-reaching assault on living standards.



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