Japanese prime minister reshuffles cabinet

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reshuffled his cabinet last week. At one level, the personnel changes sought to rally Abe's sagging support and cement his position inside the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). More than anything else, however, the reshuffle prepares for an intensification of the attacks on the working class at home and an expansion of Japan's remilitarization directed at its rivals abroad.

Abe kept most key posts unchanged, with Taro Aso remaining as deputy prime minister and finance minister and Yoshihide Suga as the chief cabinet secretary. Economy Minister Akira Amari and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida also kept their positions.

After coming to power in December 2012, the Abe administration's support in opinion polls was around 70 percent, largely reflecting public disillusionment with the previous Democratic government. More recently, however, Abe's standing has slumped to about 50 percent amid a worsening social crisis and the government's raising of the unpopular sales tax.

There is also widespread hostility to Abe's revised constitutional interpretation in July, to allow for "collective self-defense," that is, the formation of military alliances for waging wars abroad. Since taking office, Abe has boosted the defence budget, established a US-style National Security Committee and revised strategic guidelines to target China.

The government is facing growing criticism in business circles after the economy shrank in the second quarter by 6.8 percent in annualized terms. Announcing the new line-up, Abe told a press conference: "We will continue to put the economy first, aim to snuff out deflation and do whatever we can to implement growth strategies."

The revamped cabinet was hailed in business circles. "This is a cabinet that we can expect to implement policies toward the second chapter of Japan's economic revitalization," said Sadayuki Sakakibara, chairman of Keidanren, the main business association. Yasuchika Hasegawa, chairman of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives, declared: "It's a heavyweight lineup deserving to be called a 'reform-achieving Cabinet'."

The government is under corporate pressure to deliver on the "third arrow" of Abenomics after the first two arrows—budget stimulus and monetary easing—failed to lift the economy. The "third arrow" involves pro-market structural reform, especially of the labour market. In this regard, the most significant appointment is that of former central banker Yasuhisa Shiozaki as minister of health, labor and welfare.

Shiozaki, a vocal advocate of market restructuring, is expected to "reform" the country's labor laws to make firing employees easier. He is also under pressure to change the way the government pension investment fund is run, by allowing it to buy riskier assets and thereby open up the world's largest retirement fund to financial speculators.

Speaking about Shiozaki, Masamichi Adachi, a senior economist at JP Morgan Chase and another former central bank official, declared: "Abe is ready to deliver on reforms. The appointment of Shiozaki shows that he wants to reform the ministry most resistant to change."

Several commentators interpreted the appointment of Sadakazu Tanigaki as LDP secretary general and Toshihiro Nikai as his deputy as a sign that the government is seeking to ease tensions with China. Both men are regarded within the right-wing LDP as moderates with close ties to China.

Relations with China worsened after Abe flatly ruled out any compromise over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea and pursued an agenda of whitewashing the crimes of Japanese imperialism in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. Last December, he visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead, including convicted class A war criminals.

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The appointment of Tanigaki and Nikai does not alter the extreme right-wing, militarist character of Abe's cabinet. As defence minister, Abe has appointed close ally Akinori Eto, who belongs to a group of MPs advocating visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Eto will also take on the role of minister in charge of security legislation. This post is closely related to the constitutional reinterpretation in July, which now needs to be reflected in myriad security-related laws.

Various media, from the business *Nikkei* to the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* and the *New York Times*, highlighted Abe's appointment of five female cabinet members, compared to only two before, as something progressive in its own right. Since most of the women have a conservative and ultra-nationalist outlook, it seems that the twisted logic of gender identity politics has come a full circle and is now ready to support even staunch opponents of gender equality, as long as they are female.

Three of the five—Interior Minister Sanae Takaichi, Women's Affairs Minister Haruko Arimura and Eriko Yamatani, the minister in charge of the North Korean abductions issue—all belong to a lawmakers' group that supports Japan Conference, a far-right ultra-nationalist organization founded by former imperial military cadre, Shintoist fundamentalists and other conservatives.

Not only are members of Japan Conference opposed on principle to gender equality, they are apologists for Japan's wartime atrocities and abuses such as the 1937 Nanking massacre and the coercion of Asian women into sex slavery for the imperial army—so-called comfort women. The group also aims to subordinate public education to "patriotic values" and calls for a bigger political role for the imperial family.

Interior Minister Takaichi has already expressed her readiness to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, saying she had done so before and intended to continue. Takaichi has also publicly called for the replacement of the 1993 government apology on "comfort women," saying the new version must "dispel false information" that "undermines Japan's honor."

Far from being exceptions, these right-wing women fit in perfectly. According to the South Korean daily *Joong Ang*, 15 of Abe's 19 cabinet members belong to Japan Conference. A Washington-based think tank *Asia Policy Point* reports that "63 percent of the extended 97-member Abe administration and nearly 90 percent of its 19 cabinet ministers" are members of the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership Diet Members' Caucus. Some "53 percent of the extended administration and nearly 80 percent of its top ministers" belong to the Association of Diet Members for Worshipping at Yasukuni Shrine Together. Abe and Defense Minister Eto are members of all three groups and Deputy Prime Minister Aso belongs to the first two.

Within these circles, historical revisionism is rampant and unabashedly discussed. Every now and then, a leading politician says in public what they are accustomed to voicing in private. Such "gaffes" as Aso suggesting that Japan could learn from Nazi Germany how to change the constitution stealthily have provoked outrage in Japan and internationally, and created political problems for the government.

The government's agenda of promoting militarism has not changed, but Abe is determined to retain control of the script. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga has expressly forbidden public statements by cabinet members on historical issues. During the news conference revealing the new cabinet lineup, Suga said views on historical issues "will be all unified under the prime minister and the chief cabinet secretary." To emphasize the point, he added: "There will be no personal opinions as individuals. There will only be a view of the cabinet."

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