

Right-wing LDP wins Japanese election amid low turnout

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The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan has retained office after yesterday's national election. The LDP won 290 seats in the 475-seat lower house of the Diet, which together with the 35 seats for its junior partner, New Komeito, gives the government a two-thirds majority and the ability to override the upper house.

The vote, however, is far from an endorsement of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his policies of remilitarisation and austerity. Nearly half of those eligible—48 percent—did not vote at all. The turnout of 52 percent was the lowest in post-war history—down from 59 percent in the 2012 election.

The record low turnout reflects widespread alienation and hostility to the entire political establishment. This has developed over the past two decades as the economy has stagnated and successive governments have imposed new burdens on working people.

The political agenda of the opposition parties—the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the right-wing nationalists of the Japan Innovation Party and Party for Future Generations—is not fundamentally different from that of the LDP.

Abe called the snap election ostensibly to win a new mandate for his economic policies, so-called Abenomics, after data showed Japan was in recession. In reality, the decision was a pre-emptive strike to catch the opposition parties in disarray and gain a new four-year term for his whole range of policies, which has provoked broad opposition.

In interviews late yesterday, Abe claimed support for two years of Abenomics. He will no doubt exploit the election win to press ahead with his so-called third arrow, structural reform, which will mean a deepening assault on living standards. His other two

“arrows”—stimulus measures and quantitative easing—have generated profits for the corporate and financial elite at the expense of working people, whose real wages have declined.

Even though this issue was largely buried in the campaign, Abe made clear that he will accelerate his militarist agenda. “I will prepare national security laws to protect the lives and happiness of the Japanese people,” he told the public broadcaster NHK. Over the past two years, the government expanded the defence budget, established a national security council, revised military guidelines and ratcheted up tensions with China over disputed islands in the East China Sea.

Earlier this year, the government “reinterpreted” the constitution to allow for “collection self-defence”—in other words, to allow Japan to join US-led wars of aggression, whether in East Asia, the Middle East or beyond. The national security laws to be introduced in parliament next year will entrench this “reinterpretation” in law. Abe declared that he will press ahead with his “long-held wish” to revise the constitution, in particular to neutralise or remove its so-called pacifist clause.

Speaking to Bloomberg, Hiroko Nakai, who voted for the opposition DPJ, said: “I feel the Abe administration is moving dangerously towards war. Defending one's own territory is something totally separate from Japan engaging in war and the policies should be clearly separate, but they are not.”

However, this sentiment finds no reflection in the DPJ's policies. The DPJ won the 2009 election, ending half a century of virtually unbroken LDP rule, on the vague slogan of “change” and promises to boost social spending and establish closer relations with China. The party was formed in 1998 from an amalgam of breakaway LDP factions, fragments of the former

Japanese Socialist Party and other groupings.

Less than a year after assuming office, DPJ Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, under strong pressure from Washington, resigned. His efforts to accommodate Beijing cut across the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" aimed at diplomatically and militarily undermining China.

The two subsequent DPJ prime ministers—Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda—abruptly changed course and ditched the party's promises, implementing the demands of the financial elite for austerity and adopting a more aggressive stance toward China. Noda precipitated a dangerous and continuing standoff with Beijing by "nationalising" the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and opened the door for Abe's militarist policies.

The DPJ lost the 2012 election in a landslide. It is wracked by political infighting and was unable to stand candidates in many seats in yesterday's election. Despite broad opposition to the Abe government, support for the DPJ increased only marginally. It won just 73 seats, up from 62 in the previous parliament. DPJ leader Banri Kaieda lost his own seat in Tokyo.

Wide layers of voters no longer believe that the DPJ is essentially any different from the ruling LDP. The DPJ attacked the Abe government for widening the social gulf between rich and poor, but its economic policies when in office had the same effect. It junked its promises in the 2009 election, including handouts to families, farmers and small business. It also broke its pledge not to increase the country's sales tax.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) capitalised on the DPJ's inability to stand candidates in all electorates as well as the popular opposition to Abe's policies of "collective self-defence," remilitarisation, regressive economic measures and restarting the country's nuclear reactors. As a result, the JCP increased its tally of seats from 8 to 21.

The JCP, however, has long been thoroughly integrated into the political establishment and has abandoned any, even nominal, socialist rhetoric. In its advocacy of pacifism and modest social reforms, it functions as a loyal opposition party for the ruling classes to confine popular frustration and anger to the safe channels of the parliamentary arena. While posturing as an opponent of Abe's military policies, the JCP has lined up with the government and opposition

parties in supporting Japan's claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The rapidity with which Abe has pushed ahead with remilitarisation is underscored by the fact that he has undermined support for extremist parties to the right of the LDP. The Japan Innovation Party led by Osaka mayor Toru Hasimoto managed to hang on to 41 of its 42 seats, but the Party for Future Generations of former Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara lost all but two of its 20 seats. Ishihara himself was defeated.

Having won a two-thirds majority, Abe will undoubtedly use it to accelerate his right-wing agenda, which will undoubtedly bring his government sooner or later into confrontation with the Japanese working class.



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