

Japan's ruling party wins local elections

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coasted to victory in last Sunday's local elections. Rather than being an endorsement of the LDP's right-wing policies, these elections were another demonstration of the widespread public hostility toward, and alienation from, the entire political establishment in Japan.

The election was a contest for ten gubernatorial and five mayoral posts in prefectures and cities across Japan. Assembly seats in 41 prefectures and 17 cities were also in contention. LDP-backed candidates took all governor posts and 1,153 of the 2,284 prefectural seats, winning a majority for the first time in 24 years. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won only 264 seats.

In the city assembly races, the LDP took 301 seats, with its coalition partner Komeito winning 174 seats. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) came in third with 136 city assembly seats, leaving the DPJ trailing in fourth place with 126 seats.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other LDP leaders gloated over the victory. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declared: "Overall, the results show approval of the results of our Abenomics economic policies and high hopes for our regional revitalization [programs]."

That is far from the case. A record 22 percent of assembly seats went uncontested, while only two gubernatorial seats featured an actual race. In many other seats, the "choice" was between two candidates from big business parties with virtually identical policies and program.

Voters stayed away in droves. Turnout fell to 45 percent of eligible voters in the prefectural election and a record low of 47 percent in the gubernatorial polls.

The elections were a debacle for the DPJ, which fielded just 345 candidates. In office from 2009 to 2012, the DPJ has been reduced to a minor party,

broadly reviled for its broken promises and anti-working class policies. The DPJ's austerity measures and inflaming of tensions with China over disputed islets opened the door for the LDP to come to power.

The election confirmed that the DPJ has no fundamental differences with the LDP. In six of the gubernatorial races, the DPJ simply backed the LDP candidate, and did not bother to field candidates in two other races. The two posts that the DPJ did contest in Hokkaido and Oita went to the LDP.

In Osaka, the One Osaka party led by right-wing populist mayor Toru Hashimoto maintained its position as the largest party in the city and prefectural governments. Toru is an unabashed supporter of Japanese militarism. In 2013, he declared that the Japanese military's abuse of "comfort women" as sex slaves during World War II was "necessary." Toru is also a senior advisor to the right-wing Japan Innovation Party, which won 28 prefectural seats nationally.

The Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP) capitalized on the popular disaffection with the DPJ. It increased its number of prefectural seats from 80 to 111, the highest tally in eight years, as well as gaining seats in all 47 prefectures for the first time in its history.

The JCP long ago abandoned any connection to socialism or communism. It postures as a pacifist party while claiming to oppose Abe's pro-market economic agenda. It has fully integrated itself into the Japanese political establishment, with the party's leader, Kazuo Shii, even suggesting a merger of the JCP with other bourgeois parties in December 2013.

Prime Minister Abe will undoubtedly exploit the local election wins to press ahead with his agenda. The LDP's victory in elections in rural areas, such as the Hokkaido gubernatorial race, has been seized on to justify continuing negotiations over the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Any deal is likely to hit

Japan's heavily protected agricultural sector hard.

Abe has also been waiting until the local elections to introduce unpopular military legislation. These new bills, which have been in the works since last October, will formalize the Abe government's "reinterpretation" of the country's constitution last year to allow for "collective self-defence"—a euphemism for Japanese involvement in US-led wars and military interventions.

The LDP has been in talks with its coalition partner Komeito, nominally a pacifist party, over the bills for weeks. Last month, the two parties reached a general agreement to allow the Japanese armed forces to back the military campaigns of other countries, namely the United States, regardless of whether Japan was directly threatened.

One of the bills would permit the government to dispatch military forces with limited oversight by the Diet, Japan's parliament. Currently, any overseas deployment must receive regular approval from the Diet. Komeito has requested a fig leaf of parliamentary scrutiny, stating that the initial military dispatch should have Diet approval. The LDP had hoped to do away with that provision altogether.

The bills would also allow the military, officially titled the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), to resupply American troops in war zones like the Middle East. Previously, the SDF was legally blocked from providing items such as ammunition.

During the local election campaign, neither the DPJ nor any of the other parties opposed the LDP's plans for remilitarization, essentially giving their approval. Another round of elections is set to take place on April 26.



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