

Abe sets date for Japan's upper house election

Ben McGrath**18 June 2016**

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe officially announced this month that this summer's upper house election in Japan would take place on July 10, while pledging to again delay a scheduled consumption tax increase.

Half of the 242 seats in the upper house are elected every three years. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its junior partner Komeito hope to secure a two-thirds majority in the body, the number necessary in both houses to make constitutional changes toward remilitarization. While they hold the numbers in the lower house, they will likely need the assistance of parties like the right-wing Osaka Ishin no Kai to secure the necessary 86 seats next month.

One of the main revisions would be to Article 9, which bars Japan from fielding an army or waging war. Successive governments have violated this so-called pacifist clause, including by supporting the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. But the Japanese bourgeoisie finds the remaining constitutional and legal barriers on the military too restrictive on its imperialist interests.

The Self-Defense Forces (SDF) would be turned into a "National Defense Force," which could be deployed abroad as part of "peacekeeping operations" or at home to suppress political opposition. Additionally, the freedom to criticize the government would be curtailed while the emperor would be declared "head of state" and not bound by the constitution.

Last September, Abe and the LDP rammed a bill through the Diet that allows the government to dispatch the SDF anywhere in the world without special legislation. A second law enabled the SDF to provide logistical support to an ally under the guise of "collective self-defense," a euphemism for waging war in concert with another nation, such as the United States.

Abe and the conservatives have portrayed this remilitarization as a necessary defensive measure against China and North Korea. In reality, the goal is to line Japan up even closer behind the US and the "pivot to Asia," Washington's war drive against Beijing. Tokyo has inflamed tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. At the same time, the constitutional amendment would make it easier for Tokyo to pursue its own agenda, independent of the US.

There is no genuine opposition to this remilitarization within any of the establishment parties. The Democratic Party (DP), which was founded in March as a merger between the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), has posed as an opponent of constitutional revision in order to win support from the public. But the DPJ was discredited after being in power from 2009 to 2012, during which time it backed Washington's "pivot" and ramped up tensions with China over the Senkakus.

While officially calling for a repeal of Abe's security legislation, which codified the changes, the DPJ and JIP put forward a nearly identical military bill in February. The proposals would allow the SDF, rather than the Coast Guard, to be dispatched to remote Japanese islands and enforce public order, all without cabinet approval and fully in line with current government policies. This could include confronting Chinese fishing boats or naval vessels sailing near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

The Democrats' bill also included a supposed limit on the actions of the SDF to "areas surrounding Japan." However, it would allow the military to provide rear-area military support in international waters, something once limited to Japanese territory, as well as to carry

out “civilian protection measures” within the confines of a United Nations “peace keeping operation.”

Current DP leader Katsuya Okada said in 2009, while serving as foreign minister in the first DPJ government: “Based on UN Security Council resolutions, Japanese armed forces should be able to use force abroad.” With the simple veneer of UN legitimacy, the DP supports the remilitarization of Japan no less than the LDP. This duplicity also exposes the role of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and Social Democratic Party (SDP), which have backed the DP.

A 2012 report from a prime ministerial committee under the DPJ’s Yoshihiko Noda stated: “Related interpretations [of laws] should be changed to allow collective defense in order to uphold proactive pacifism in the long-term.” Abe himself has used the slogans of “proactive pacifism” and “collective self-defense” to push for remilitarization.

The prime minister hopes to win public support for his agenda by postponing, for a second time, the tax plan originally imposed by the DPJ government in 2012. The consumption tax is now slated to rise from 8 to 10 percent in October 2019, rather than in April 2017. Abe claimed this was necessary to ward off further economic decline, referring to the weak economic conditions in China and other markets.

“Abenomics has been steadily producing results, but the global economic environment has changed unexpectedly quickly in the past year,” Abe said. He has also promised a large stimulus package for this fall. Although the exact figures have not been announced, it could be as much as 10 trillion yen (\$90.7 billion).

Despite “Abenomics”—a mixture of pump-priming, quantitative easing and the cutting of workers’ conditions—Japan went into a recession following the first tax hike from 5 to 8 percent in April 2014. In the last three months of 2015, the economy contracted before growing at a quarterly rate of 0.4 percent in the first three months of this year. The Finance Ministry, however, has continued to back the tax rise as a means of addressing the high public debt, nearly 240 percent of gross domestic product.

The prime minister pulled a similar tactic of delaying a consumption tax rise at the end of 2014, when an increase was initially scheduled for October 2015. Abe then called a snap lower house election. Using the LDP’s victory, he claimed he had public support for his

policies, including the cabinet’s reinterpretation of “collective self-defense” in July 2014 and a mandate to ram through the security legislation.



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