

Right-wing ruling coalition wins Japan's upper house election

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The ruling coalition of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe won a majority of the seats in Sunday's upper house election in Japan. Together with other allies, Abe now has the two-thirds majority required to change the country's constitution to accelerate the process of remilitarisation and make further inroads into basic democratic rights.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) took 56 of the available 121 seats. Its junior coalition partner Komeito won 14, while the right-wing Osaka Ishin no Kai garnered seven. The latter has expressed support for constitutional revision and would give Abe the required numbers in the upper house. The main opposition Democratic Party (DP) took only 32 seats. Half of the upper house seats are up for election every three years.

Sunday's vote was marked by mass abstention rather than any widespread support for Abe's policies. Turnout stood at just 54.7 percent, the fourth lowest level since World War II. It was also the first time young people aged 18 and 19 could vote in an election. "I think people are unhappy, but they don't really see that voting is going to make things different," Jeff Kingston, director at Tokyo's Asian Studies at Temple University, stated. "There is not an alternative. This is as lukewarm a sense of support as you get."

The official opposition to the LDP, centered around the Democratic Party (DP), offered no genuine alternative. The DP, formerly called the Democratic Party of Japan before it united with the Japan Innovation Party, is still highly unpopular from its time in office between 2009 and 2012 when it broke its promises to improve living standards and to adopt a foreign policy more independent of the US. While posturing as an opponent of the LDP's policies during the election, the DP previously supported constitutional revision and the use of military force overseas.

A number of voters expressed their concerns over remilitarization to the media. "I think the main issue in the election is the revision of the constitution. But, during the election campaign, [Abe] chose to divert his focus toward the economic issues, which makes me worry that if the LDP stays in power, Japan may soon become a country that will be able to go to war," Nagisa Kato said.

Constitutional revisions require approval by a two-thirds majority in both the lower and upper houses of the Japanese parliament, or Diet, and then by a majority in a national referendum. Before Sunday's election, Abe already had a two-thirds majority in the lower house. Following Sunday's election, the number of upper house members who have expressed support for constitutional revision stands at 165, or three more than the two-thirds necessary. This includes three members of the Party for Japanese Kokoro and four independents whose seats were uncontested Sunday.

Changes to Japan's constitution would mark an historic shift. Successive Japanese governments have bent and altered the interpretation of the document since it was imposed in 1947 by the United States after World War II, but it has never been formally revised. The most contentious aspect of revision would be to Article 9, the so-called pacifist clause banning Japan from maintaining armed forces or taking part in wars. Washington has encouraged Tokyo to make changes so that Japanese troops can participate in US wars in the Middle East and in preparation for conflict with China and Russia.

At a post-election news conference, Abe attempted to focus on the economy. "The nation has given me a powerful mandate to further accelerate Abenomics. I am grateful for this," the prime minister said, referring to his economic agenda.

When pushed on the issue of Article 9, Abe, who has been at the forefront of remilitarization, attempted to gloss it. “The (Diet) Commission on the Constitution should first discuss in detail which article should be revised and how,” he said. “It is expected that discussion will be initiated, developed and narrowed down there.”

Not all the parties who have supported constitutional revision agree completely on how it should be carried out. The LDP’s junior partner Komeito, which bills itself as a Buddhist pacifist party, will undoubtedly require some window dressing for its pro-war policies.

Other LDP officials emphasized their intentions more directly. “Our party is one that calls for reforming the constitution,” Tomomi Inada, the LDP’s policy chief, said. “Our party has already submitted a draft for reforming the constitution.” That draft includes more than just changes to Article 9. It includes numerous changes that would limit democratic rights and elevate the status of the emperor.

Under LDP’s revisions, put forward in April 2012, Japan’s military, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), would be designated as the “National Defense Force.” It could be deployed overseas under the guise of a peacekeeping mission or “collective self-defense,” as already codified under the military bills passed last September. The prime minister would also serve as commander-in-chief. The proposed NDF could also be used to suppress opposition at home. The prime minister and the cabinet could rule by dictatorial decree in the event of an “emergency situation.”

Freedom to criticize the government would be curtailed, while “duties” to respect the flag, national anthem and the constitution would be imposed on the population. The LDP’s revision states “engaging in activities with the purpose of damaging public interest or public order, or associating with others for such purposes, shall not be recognized.”

The LDP’s draft would turn the emperor into the “head of state” while removing his obligation to follow the constitution, thus concentrating more power into his hands. It has long been an ambition of the extreme right wing in Japan to restore the emperor to his role before World War II, when he served as a rallying point for Japanese militarism.

Abe is well aware that forcing through constitutional change will face widespread resistance, even if he

manages to gain the necessary parliamentary support. Opposition to remilitarization is widespread in Japan. Last summer saw massive protests in Tokyo and around the country to denounce the Abe government and the military bills to allow the SDF to take part in wars overseas, alongside an ally, namely the United States.



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