

Japanese PM plans to submit constitutional revisions this year

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5 July 2017

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe plans to accelerate the revision of the country's constitution at a faster than expected pace. During a speech on June 24, he proposed that his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) would submit proposed changes to lawmakers by the end of the year. At the top of the list of amendments is the alteration of Article 9, often referred to as the pacifist clause, in order to accelerate Japan's remilitarization.

In an interview on June 28, LDP vice president Masahiko Komura said his party would finalize a draft by September, allowing Abe to take advantage of an extraordinary session of the Diet, Japan's parliament, to submit the revisions. Originally the amendments were expected next year, but Abe is working to ensure they take effect by 2020 amid falling public support for his government and its right-wing agenda.

The proposed revision to Article 9 would formally establish the legality of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), Japan's large and well-equipped military. Article 9 explicitly bans the maintenance of armed forces. According to the LDP, the SDF would be defined as "an organization using the bare minimum of force necessary to protect the state." The article also states that Japan forever renounces war as a sovereign right. This would be watered down with a revision declaring that the article does not prohibit the existence of the SDF.

Abe first announced his plan on May 3, Constitution Day, in a video recording to the ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi, calling for a "new Japan"—in other words, one capable of militarily asserting its interests overseas. Last November, as part of the UN Mission in South Sudan, Abe's cabinet for the first time gave Japanese troops formal permission to fight alongside allied troops, using controversial 2015 legislation allowing for "collective self-defense."

Abe's plan for constitutional change has been met with opposition from some LDP lawmakers, who feel the

proposed revisions do not go far enough. Shigeru Ishiba, former defense minister, who headed the body in charge of drawing up the party's draft constitution in 2012, stated: "I think it's possible to specify the existence of the SDF in the Constitution, but the essence of the issue here is the question of what constitutes a 'military.' We need to answer that question thoroughly."

The concern of Ishiba and others is that without removing Article 9, paragraph 2, Japan will not be able to field a genuine military force, free from all restraints. The clause states: "[L]and, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

Shigeharu Aoyama, who is close to Abe, has suggested deleting the last sentence from the paragraph to win the support of the LDP critics.

The LDP draft constitution in 2012 largely re-wrote Article 9 and turned the SDF into a "National Defense Force" under the command of the prime minister, who could deploy it abroad supposedly for peacekeeping or domestically in the name of maintaining public order.

The 2012 draft also called for other amendments, in order to slash individual democratic rights while boosting the powers of the state, including those of the emperor. Similarly, the LDP today is considering other changes, which include a mixture of populist measures and attacks on democratic rights.

The proposal to allow term extensions for Diet members during a natural disaster or other emergency is particularly foreboding. The Abe government has been using the increasingly dangerous US-led confrontation with North Korea as the pretext for remilitarization. A "national emergency" citing North Korea could be declared and exploited to cancel Diet elections if such a revision is passed.

The relatively mild amendments to Article 9 are aimed at winning support from the LDP's junior partner

Komeito, which postures as a Buddhist pacifist party, the right-wing Nippon Ishin no Kai, and sections of the opposition Democratic Party (DP).

Any constitutional changes will set a precedent for future alterations; the constitution has not been amended since it went into effect in 1947. In order to pass any amendments, two-thirds of both the Lower and Upper House of the Diet must approve them, followed by a national referendum. While the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition has a two-thirds majority in the Lower House, the government needs the support of other parties in the Upper House.

The LDP has cynically included an amendment mandating free education at all levels, including university, as a means of winning public support. As in other countries around the world, students and their families in Japan face massive debts as they struggle to pay for university education. There is little reason to believe this measure would be implemented if passed. As one public school teacher told the *Mainichi Shimbun*: “High school still isn’t completely free, even though it’s supposed to be, so I don’t know whether I should believe anything the government says.”

The opposition Democratic Party has no fundamental opposition to the planned constitutional changes. The DP is in complete disarray, with a recent poll showing only 6.7 percent public support compared to 38.1 percent for the LDP. Revealingly 45.7 percent of respondents supported no party or were undecided, a clear sign of widespread political alienation.

The DP was formed in 2016 through the merger of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the right-wing Japan Innovation Party. While in power from 2009–2012, DPJ party leaders like Katsuya Okada and former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda supported plans for constitutional revision to strengthen the Japanese military. The opposition offered by the DP and its allies in response to Abe and the LDP today is nothing more than a smokescreen.



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