

Japanese prime minister calls snap election

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Amid the escalating danger of war on the Korean Peninsula, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced a sudden election Monday evening, stating he would dissolve the lower house of parliament on Thursday. Campaigning will begin October 10 and the election will take place on October 22. It is the first general election since December 2014.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) already has sizable majorities in both houses of the Japanese Diet or parliament. Abe has called the snap poll, above all, to whip up a climate of fear and panic over North Korea so as to intensify his push for Japan's remilitarization. Speaking Monday evening at a news conference, Abe stated: "It is my mission as prime minister to exert strong leadership abilities at a time when Japan faces national crises stemming from the shrinking demographic and North Korea's escalating tensions."

While the LDP intends to offer populist pledges to garner support, Abe's real goal is to justify amending Japan's constitution, principally Article 9, known as the pacifist clause, which bans the "the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," the maintenance of any form of "war potential," and the "belligerency of the state." To skirt the constitution, Japan's military is still formally known as the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

Abe has lined up with US President Donald Trump's reckless warmongering against North Korea. Abe wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece last week, "I firmly support the United States position that all options are on the table,"—a euphemism for military action. Abe also ruled out any negotiations with North Korea, making war more likely. "What is needed to do that is not dialogue, but pressure," he declared.

Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso went further in a speech on September 23. Whipping up chauvinistic fears of "droves" of Korean refugees, he suggested the

SDF should shoot Koreans fleeing a conflict, rather than provide them with safety. "They could be armed refugees," he stated. "Would the response come from the police or defense operations by the Self-Defense Forces? Would they be shot? We must give this some serious thought."

In May, Abe announced his intention to change Article 9 by 2020 to formally recognize the SDF, while watering down the constraints on waging war overseas. However, Abe has met resistance from LDP party members who are demanding further changes to the constitution in line with a 2012 draft that would strip away democratic rights and give more powers to the emperor.

While the LDP, its coalition partner Komeito, and other right-wing politicians favoring constitutional revision control the necessary two-thirds in both houses of parliament, any amendments must pass a national referendum. Abe would exploit an electoral victory to try to stampede public support behind remilitarization.

In reality, longstanding alienation from the entire political establishment will ensure the election is characterised by mass abstention and hostility, as in the past. A Kyodo News poll from Sunday showed that 64.3 percent of the public oppose holding a new election. That poll and another by the Nikkei business publication found varying levels of support for the LDP—27.7 percent versus 44 percent respectively—but both found the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) trailing far behind at 8 percent. Some 42 percent of voters remain undecided.

The DP is in complete disarray and has been since it was voted out of power in 2012. It has no fundamental differences with the LDP's agenda of remilitarization, war and austerity. The slump in the party's fortunes has angered right-wing DP members, leading to the resignation of party leader Renho Murata over the summer. With the backing of those conservatives, Seiji

Maehara was elected party leader on September 1. He supports constitutional revision in line with Abe's position.

Maehara's current strategy is to convince other opposition parties, including the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) to stand down their own candidates to back the DP. The JCP, which has regularly supported the Democrats in various campaigns, has not agreed. It is cautious about seeming too close to the DP and losing its own seats in the Diet.

Tokyo's Governor Yuriko Koike, a right-wing populist, formally announced the launch on Monday of her own Party of Hope (Kibou no To), shortly before Abe's news conference. Her regional party, Tomin First no Kai, inflicted a stunning defeat on the LDP and DP in July's Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election. Koike, a longstanding LDP politician, and former defense minister, left the party this year and now postures as an outsider. She declared in an interview: "Even if voters are dissatisfied, they cannot cast their ballots unless they are given an option."

While Koike intends to remain governor of Tokyo, she will also lead the new party. She claims to be an opponent of male-dominated politics, promising that she and her party will increase women's roles in society. She has also made mild criticisms of Abe's economic agenda. In reality, she is no less right-wing than the prime minister and his government.

Koike is a senior member of Nippon Kaigi, an ultra-nationalist organization that promotes historical revisionism to whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s by claiming that Japan liberated Asia from the West. The organization promotes emperor worship and opposes gender equality. Abe and the majority of his cabinet are also members of Nippon Kaigi.

Koike advocates revising Article 9 and taking a militarist stance toward North Korea. She visits the Yasukuni war shrine, where those who died in Japan's imperialist wars, including 14 class-A war criminals, are symbolically interred.

Significantly, the Party for Hope has been supported by several defections from the DP as well as one lawmaker from the LDP. The small, right-wing Party for Japanese Kokoru, led by former LDP members, is also expected to join the Party for Hope.



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