

Japan's LDP suffers electoral defeat for only the third time since 1955

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Sunday's parliamentary election in Japan for the lower house of the Diet has resulted in a stunning setback for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). With its ally Komeito, it failed to win a majority of seats for only the third time since the LDP was formed in 1955.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who just assumed office on October 1, called the snap election in a bid to obtain a mandate for his right-wing, militarist agenda. That has now backfired. He has pledged to remain in office, however, ignoring commentary that he was likely to take responsibility for the defeat and resign.

Ishiba told reporters on Monday that, in the light of Japan's economic and security conditions, he would not allow a "political vacuum" to occur. Noting the "severe criticism" of the government by voters, he declared: "We will fulfil our duties to protect the lives of the people and the country by responding to tough issues in a solemn and appropriate way."

In his brief period in office, Ishiba, a former defence minister, has lined up fully behind the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and Washington's accelerating preparations for war against China. He has called for the formation of an "Asian NATO" to confront China and North Korea, suggesting that Japan should play a more prominent role in the region's security structures.

Prior to the election, the LDP held a majority in its own right in the 465-seat lower house. Its 259 seats have now been reduced to just 191. Two cabinet ministers lost their seats. Komeito also lost seats, dropping from 32 to 24, leaving the ruling coalition with just 215, well short of the 233 seats necessary for a majority.

Ishiba has blamed the defeat on the corruption scandal surrounding the misuse of proceeds from the

LDP's political fundraisers. However, the alienation and hostility to the government, and indeed the entire political establishment, is rooted in far deeper issues—the worsening social crisis, widening social inequality and the turn to militarism and war.

Commentators have pointed to inflation and the "cost-of-living crunch" as a significant factor turning voters away from the LDP. While core consumer prices rose by just 2.4 percent year-on-year in September, according to government data, the index excluded volatile fresh food items and obscured far higher rises in the price of some basics. Real wages fell by 0.6 percent in August compared to a year earlier.

According to data released last Friday, Tokyo rice prices in October soared by a record 62.3 percent from a year ago, driven up by high costs for fertilizer and other inputs. Imported food stuffs have also risen sharply due to a weak yen—coffee beans and beef up 16.6 percent and 14.1 percent, respectively.

While Ishiba promised to end corruption in the LDP and take measures to ease cost-of-living burdens, voters in large numbers clearly did not believe him. The far broader alienation of voters from the political establishment is evidenced by the fact that nearly half of registered voters did not bother to cast a ballot.

Voter turnout in single seat constituencies on Sunday was just 53.9 percent, a drop of 2 percentage points on the previous election, and the third lowest level since World War II. While figures have not so far been released, the turnout among younger voters will have been far lower. In the 2021 lower house election, just 43.2 percent of teenagers and 36.5 percent of voters in their 20s cast a ballot. Japan only lowered the voting age from 20 to 18 in 2016.

The low turnout among youth reflects the fact that many have been condemned to a life of poorly-paid

part-time or casual work with no future prospects. Successive governments have dismantled much of the post-war lifelong employment system that guaranteed jobs and other benefits. No doubt many young people, like their counterparts around the world, are also concerned about the rise of militarism and the dangers of war.

While the main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), made significant gains, boosting its seats from 98 to 148, it is hardly a vote of confidence in the party. The CDP emerged out of a split in the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) that had defeated the LDP in 2009 for the second time since 1955 but was unceremoniously thrown out of office in 2012 after breaking its promises to address pressing social issues facing working people.

Yoshihiko Noda, who was the last of the three prime ministers of the 2009-2012 Democratic Party government, was installed as CDP leader this September and turned the party to the right.

Mass protests erupted in 2015 against the LDP government of Shinzo Abe and its legislation to formalise so-called collective self-defence—that is, Japan’s military involvement in US wars of aggression—which was ultimately rammed through the Diet. The DPJ and subsequently the CDP had sought to capitalise on this anti-war opposition by promising to overturn the legislation, a pledge that Noda signalled he will jettison.

That the issues of government support for US-led wars, remilitarisation and the doubling of the defence budget were not raised in the official election campaign reflects the fact that the entire political establishment, in one way or another, supports a more aggressive assertion by Japanese imperialism of its economic and strategic interests.

Two parties could decide the next prime minister—the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin). The DPP, a right-wing fragment that emerged from the break-up of the DPJ, now holds 28 seats, up from 7. Ishin, a far-right party that openly supports Japanese remilitarisation, holds 38 seats, down from 44. Either party could give Ishiba the numbers he needs to retain the prime ministership when parliament reconvenes on November 11.

Ishiba, however, told reporters yesterday that he was not considering forming a broader coalition “at this

point.” This raises the possibility that he will attempt to operate as a minority government, relying on deals with other parties to push through legislation.

Buoyed by the election result for the CDP, Noda is signalling that he will make a bid to become prime minister. “Voters chose which party would be the best fit to push for political reforms,” he declared on Sunday, adding that the “LDP-Komeito administration cannot continue.” The CDP, however, is in a far weaker position to form government, given the political diversity of parties that it would have to woo to form a government.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which long ago dropped any opposition to the capitalist system and is thoroughly integrated into the political establishment, has previously backed and concluded electoral deals with the CDP. In Sunday’s election, in protest over Noda’s refusal to commit to rescinding the collective self-defence legislation, the JCP stood against the CDP in numbers of electorates. The JCP’s seat count fell from 10 to 8.

The decline of the LDP and fragmentation of the Japanese political establishment has been a protracted process over the past three decades, fuelled by the break-up of the post-war order dominated by US imperialism, and the crisis of world capitalism. The LDP lost office briefly for the first time in 1993, after breakaway LDP factions formed an unstable coalition with the Socialist party. It is no accident that the LDP again lost power in 2009 during the global financial crisis and failed to gain a parliamentary majority on Sunday amid growing financial instability, geo-political tensions and war.

None of the establishment parties can address the needs and aspirations of workers and youth in Japan. Whatever the form it takes, the next government will be one of instability and crisis as it seeks to impose new burdens on the working class in order to boost the profits of big business and aggressively pursue the interests of Japanese imperialism.



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