

On the outcome of Japan general election

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General election: LDP, New Komeito grab solid majority, setting stage for Abe's comeback as PM

The largest opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its ally, New Komeito, captured a solid two-thirds majority in the Dec. 16 House of Representatives election, setting the stage for LDP leader and former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to return to power after a five-year hiatus.

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) suffered a devastating defeat, dropping from a pre-election strength of 230 seats to just 57 in the 480-seat chamber and putting an end to its three years and three months in power. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda said he will step down as DPJ president to take the blame for the humiliating electoral outcome.

The LDP garnered 237 single-seat constituencies and 57 proportional representation seats for a total of 294, while New Komeito picked up nine single-constituency seats and 22 proportional representation seats for a total of 31.

Their combined strength of 325 seats tops the 320 necessary for the LDP-New Komeito alliance to pass bills rejected by the House of Councillors into law in a second vote in the lower house.

The Japan Restoration Party, formed by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto and now led by former Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, garnered a total of 54 seats, making it the largest party among the so-called third forces to challenge the DPJ and the LDP.

Your Party, headed by reformist Yoshimi Watanabe, gained 18 seats and the Tomorrow Party of Japan, hastily created by Shiga Gov. and vocal anti-nuclear advocate Yukiko Kada and former DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa, picked up only nine seats.

LDP chief Shinzo Abe, 58, is expected to be elected prime minister during a special Diet session to be convened on Dec. 26, and the LDP will form a coalition government with New Komeito. Abe previously served as prime minister for one year from 2006 to 2007.

Still, as the LDP-Komeito alliance falls short of a majority in the House of Councillors, the LDP is

expected to seek cooperation from other parties on individual policy issues.

Attention will be focused on how the LDP will cooperate with other parties, including those in the so-called "third political force."

The LDP's 294 seats in the powerful lower house surpass the absolute majority of 269 seats and will enable the party to hold the chairmanship of all standing committees in the Diet and still secure a majority in the panels.

The DPJ tried to stay in power by citing such measures during the election campaign as eliminating tuition fees at public high schools but saw its strength reduced to one-fourth.

Eight incumbent ministers lost their seats. They were Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura; Finance Minister Koriki Jojima; Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister Makiko Tanaka; International Affairs and Communications Minister Shinji Tarutoko; Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Wakio Mitsui; National Public Safety Commission Chairman Tadamasu Kodaira; State Minister for Financial Services Ikko Nakatsuka and State Minister for Postal Service Privatization and Disaster Management Mikio Shimoji. All but Shimoji were DPJ lawmakers.

Fujimura became the first incumbent chief Cabinet secretary to lose his Diet seat.

Naoto Kan, who served as prime minister from June 2010 to September 2011, also lost his constituency seat but barely kept a lower house seat in the Tokyo proportional representation block.

Two former chief Cabinet secretaries — Yoshito Sengoku and Hirofumi Hirano — were defeated in the election.

The DPJ will hold a general meeting of its lawmakers in both houses of the Diet before the special Diet session to choose a successor to Noda.

Mainichi Shimbun, December 17, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121217p2a00m0na007000c.html>

LDP aware voters just punished DPJ

The Liberal Democratic Party's overwhelming victory Sunday means hawkish Shinzo Abe is going to be prime minister again.

But the election did not turn out this way because the LDP or Abe are particularly popular, but rather because the Democratic Party of Japan is so unpopular, and the real test for the LDP-New Komeito coalition will come in the Upper House election next summer, political analysts said.

"Voters did not seek a new choice, but wanted to punish the DPJ," said Takeshi Sasaki, a professor of politics and noted analyst at Gakushuin University in Tokyo. The LDP's win "doesn't mean voters hold the policies advocated by the party in high regard. If you interpret the results that way, it would be a mistake."

In fact, media polls have suggested Abe isn't particularly popular, signaling the possibility that the

LDP-New Komeito alliance could see a defeat in the Upper House election as voters have often swung back to the other side after giving one party a landslide win in a Lower House election.

Abe seems to be well aware of this.

Appearing live on TV, a grim-faced Abe said Sunday's victory doesn't mean voters gave "100 percent" approval to the LDP. Instead, they moved to "end three years of chaos" under DPJ rule, he said.

"Unless we meet voters' expectations of voters, their support for us will vanish. With that in mind, we should maintain a sense of tension" in running the government, he said.

Thus, the analysts predict, the LDP-New Komeito bloc will focus first on the economy, concentrating on massive spending and monetary easing rather than moving on any controversial security policies or the constitutional revision that Abe has advocated.

"The Lower House and Upper House have been divided. So issues about the Constitution will be 'sealed' until the Upper House election in summer," said Kazuhisa Kawakami, a political science professor at Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo.

"For now, (Abe) will focus on achieving economic growth with monetary-easing measures, jump-starting the economy and thereby fixing the divided Diet" by winning the Upper House, Kawakami said.

The LDP has called for massive public works spending despite snowballing government debt and the looming fiscal crisis. For starters, Abe's government will likely compile a supplementary budget for fiscal 2012 that could total several trillion yen, probably financed through the issuance of government bonds.

Many economists doubt Abe's economic policies will have long-lasting effects, though they might provide a temporary boost.

Data suggest the LDP has good reason to focus on the economy before the Upper House election.

An NHK poll conducted from Dec. 7 to 10 asked voters who would be more qualified to lead the nation, Abe or incumbent Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of the DPJ.

As much as 47 percent of the 2,679 respondents said "neither" are qualified, while 28 percent preferred Abe versus 19 percent for Noda.

During the campaign, Abe repeatedly painted himself as a decisive leader who can be tough against China or North Korea and discussed with pride his wish to revise the pacifist Constitution.

But when the Asahi Shimbun asked voters what issue was most important to them, "policy measures to boost the economy" came out on top with 61 percent, followed by nuclear power-related issues in second place. Only 15 percent named "diplomacy and national security issues."

"I voted for the LDP because I think you can expect more from the party as far as economic measures are concerned," said a 52-year-old man who only gave his family name, Minobe, at a polling station in Kawasaki.

Even if the LDP survives the Upper House election, Abe will face a second challenge as early as next fall, according to Gakushuin's Sasaki.

That is when the government, as required by law, will have to assess economic conditions and decide whether to raise the unpopular consumption tax to 8 percent in April 2014. The tax is set to be raised again to 10 percent in October 2015.

Abe will also remember his bitter experience with swing voters in the past.

When he became prime minister in fall 2006, he had a support rate of 65 percent, according to a NHK poll. But the LDP suffered a crushing defeat in the Upper House election the following July, winning a paltry 37 seats of the 121 contested. The LDP lost its place as the No. 1 party in the chamber for the first time since its inception in 1955.

Abe stepped down in September 2007, citing health reasons that have largely been attributed to the mental stress he suffered through that election and the aftermath.

To secure a majority in the Upper House, analysts say the LDP may try to form an alliance with other conservative parties, most notably Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) and Your Party.

And with the DPJ suffering a devastating defeat Sunday, some of its right-leaning members may jump ship and spur a major realignment of the existing parties.

Many Japanese are concerned that Abe, who has called for stationing a Self-Defense Forces unit on the disputed Senkaku Islands, will antagonize China and South Korea.

Sasaki said that whether Abe will trigger a foreign policy crisis will depend largely on external factors, such as the diplomatic postures of the new governments in China and South Korea, and public sentiment, rather than his own hawkish beliefs.

The new administration will be preoccupied with domestic issues, he said.

"I think (Abe's government) will first use its energy to keep external factors in check," Sasaki predicted.

Abe has denied he will harm ties with China should he become prime minister, citing the "inseparable" economic interdependency between the two countries.

"Japan has invested in China and raised profits from it, while China has generated more than 10 million jobs with investments from Japan," he wrote in an article for the latest issue of the monthly magazine *Bungei Shunju*.

"It's an inseparable relationship" and branding him as a politician capable of causing a war with China is "unrealistic," Abe wrote.

REIJI YOSHIDA, *Japan Times* staff writer, December 17, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121217a2.html>

Three-way races gave advantage to LDP

The emergence of the so-called "third political force" may have played a major role in whittling away

votes from the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in House of Representatives election constituencies where three-way battles were staged among the DPJ, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the third-force parties, giving a relative advantage to the LDP.

Among the 204 single-seat constituencies that saw such three-way races out of a total of 300 constituencies across the country, the LDP won 168 seats, followed by the DPJ with 20 seats, and the third forces — the Japan Restoration Party (JRP), Your Party and the Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ) — with a combined 15 seats. One independent candidate took the remaining seat.

The DPJ and the LDP staged head-to-head competitions on Dec. 16 in 256 constituencies, out of which 204 saw three-way races among the DPJ, the LDP and the third forces, calling much attention to whether the conventional structure of the single-seat constituencies contested by the two main parties would undergo drastic change.

Among the constituencies contested by the DPJ, LDP and the third forces, the LDP won eight constituencies in Fukuoka, six in Hokkaido, four each in Gunma, Gifu, Shiga and Hiroshima, and three each in Aomori, Fukushima, Tochigi, Niigata, Fukui, Ehime and Kumamoto. The LDP also made a strong showing in 23 constituencies in Tokyo where the three-way battles were staged.

The DPJ, on the other hand, settled for winning only a small number of such constituencies — including the Chiba No. 4 constituency won by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, the Miyagi No. 5 constituency claimed by Acting DPJ Secretary-General Jun Azumi, the Iwate No. 3 constituency by Senior Vice Minister for Reconstruction Toru Kikawada, the Aichi No. 2 constituency by former Minister for National Policy Motohisa Furukawa, and the Mie No. 2 constituency by former Minister for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Masaharu Nakagawa.

As for the third-force parties, the JRP garnered a seat each in the Osaka No. 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17 and 19 constituencies, while Your Party won seats in the Kanagawa No. 4 and No. 8 constituencies, with policy chief Keiichiro Asao and Secretary-General Kenji Eda taking control of the districts, respectively.

However, Your Party did not make such a strong showing as expected in single-seat constituencies due to a lack of coordination among third-force parties. The TPJ failed to underscore its presence, with many of the former lower house members who defected from the DPJ losing in the three-way battle constituencies.

Even in the 52 constituencies where the DPJ and the LDP clashed head-on in the absence of third-force candidates, the LDP dominated the race, winning 44 seats and losing only seven seats. The remaining seat was won by an independent.

The DPJ only managed to retain the party's seats in constituencies where high-profile candidates enjoy strong support bases, including the Mie No. 3, the Shizuoka No. 5, the Fukushima No. 3 and the Ibaraki No. 5 constituencies, where Deputy Prime Minister Katsuya Okada, policy chief Goshi Hosono, Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba and former Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Akihiro Ohata were re-elected, respectively.

Mainichi Shimbun, December 17, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121217p2a00m0na033000c.html>

Voter turnout plummeted to a record postwar low

Voter turnout Sunday set a new postwar low for Lower House elections, the government said Monday.

Turnout sank to 59.32 percent for single-seat constituencies and 59.31 percent for the proportional representation segment, according to the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry. Both figures represent a drop of 9.96 points from the previous election in 2009.

The previous record low for a House of Representatives election was set in 1996, when turnout fell to 59.65 percent for single seats and 59.62 percent in proportional representation, forcing Socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama to be replaced by the Liberal Democratic Party's Ryutaro Hashimoto.

The number of early voters came to 12,039,570, down 13.91 percent from 2009, the ministry said.

The most notable surges in voting saw turnout reach the upper 60 percent range. This occurred in 2005, when postal privatization was the main issue, and in 2009, when the Democratic Party of Japan ousted the LDP, ending over half a century of nearly unbroken rule.

Kyodo Press, December 18, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121218b7.html>

Lower House seat distribution, votes out of sync

Sunday's Lower House poll left a huge gap between the percentages of seats won in single-seat districts and the percentages of votes won, sparking calls for a review to the current electoral system.

The Liberal Democratic Party won 237 seats, or 79.0 percent, of the 300 seats that were contested in the single-seat districts, while garnering just 43.0 percent of votes in all constituencies.

The Democratic Party of Japan gained 22.8 percent of the votes in the districts but won only 27 seats, or 9.0 percent.

For the remaining 180 seats allocated in the proportional representation segment, the percentages of seats won were roughly in line with those of votes garnered.

The LDP secured 31.7 percent of the seats for the 27.6 percent of proportional representation votes it received, while the DPJ obtained 16.7 percent of the seats for its 16.0 percent share of votes.

In addition, the percentage of wasted votes in the single-seat districts soared.

Some 37.3 million votes cast in the single-seat constituencies were not for candidates who were elected, accounting for 56.0 percent of the votes cast for all candidates.

The percentage jumped by 9.7 percentage points from the previous election in 2009, reflecting the participation of many new parties, including Nippon Ishin No Kai (Japan Restoration Party), causing a wider spread of votes.

The current Lower House election system causes volatile swings in election results and leaves many votes wasted, political analyst Atsuo Ito said.

“It is time to review the system, as some 20 years have passed since its introduction,” he said.

Even LDP Secretary General Shigeru Ishiba said the system should be reviewed.

“We need to hold discussions on whether the current election system is all right as it is,” he said, pointing to wild swings in the results of the three most recent Lower House elections.

Jiji Press, December 19, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121219a3.html>

Nippon Ishin falls short, readies for next race: Disappointing results don't dampen hope for summer Upper House poll

OSAKA – Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) picked up only 54 seats in the Lower House election, a far cry from the hundreds of seats party leaders had hoped for.

But party leaders were already looking ahead to the next Upper House election, and indicated a willingness to work with the Liberal Democratic Party-New Komeito coalition on areas of common interest.

The Osaka-based party, founded by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto and Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, dismissed criticism that last month's tieup with former Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara and former members of Tachiagare Nippon (Sunrise Party of Japan) was to blame for the disappointing result.

“We needed Ishihara's strength,” Hashimoto said Sunday night in Osaka, where he and Matsui followed election results, while Ishihara waited in Tokyo.

“In Osaka and the Kinki region, we explained things, but in the rest of the country our efforts were insufficient. But when we tied up with Ishihara, we all agreed that we were a team,” Matsui told reporters Sunday evening.

Even so, Nippon Ishin is certain to become the third-biggest force in the Lower House after Sunday's poll.

Attention is now turning to whether the party will cooperate with the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito – the presumptive new ruling bloc – on certain issues.

In addition, it's unclear how the party will operate next year when Hashimoto and Matsui, currently the No. 2 and No. 3 men in the party, return to concentrating on their day jobs full time.

Matsui said the party would review its organizational structure and make changes.

“This was our first election, and perhaps we could have used our time more efficiently,” he said.

For his part, Hashimoto rejected postelection commentary that concluded Nippon Ishin was still primarily a local party with limited appeal.

“We’ve won seats in Hokkaido, Tokyo and the Kanto region,” he said.

Other “third-force” parties that sprang up ahead of the election to challenge the two established giants – most notably Nippon Mirai no To (Tomorrow Party of Japan), led by Shiga Gov. Yukiko Kada, and Your Party, led by Yoshimi Watanabe – were expected to win even fewer seats.

Pre-election polls by Kyodo News indicated the fledgling parties were diluting each other’s support rather than tapping into a powerful upwelling of voter dissatisfaction with the establishment.

Support for Nippon Ishin appeared to decline after Hashimoto abandoned the goal of reducing Japan’s nuclear energy reliance to zero when he joined forces with Ishihara, a nuclear energy advocate.

The party’s election pledges included reducing Japan’s reliance on nuclear power, setting an inflation target of 2 percent, achieving nominal growth of at least 3 percent and allowing Japan to exercise its right to collective self-defense.

Nippon Mirai, set up a week before official campaigning kicked off on Dec. 4, also failed to gain wide support despite its commitment to phasing out nuclear power within 10 years over the meltdowns in Fukushima.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* staff writer, December 17, 2012
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121217a6.html>

Communists, socialists fight losing battle, likely to affect Constitutional debate

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), both staunch backers of a zero-nuclear policy and the current Constitution, fought a losing battle in the Dec. 16 House of Representatives election, the result of which is likely to affect highly sensitive debate on whether to revise the country’s postwar Pacifist Constitution.

The two parties had tried to differentiate themselves from the so-called up-and-coming “third pole” political forces in Japanese politics, but they failed to stop their influence from declining further. The weakening influence of the two long-established, pro-Constitution political parties is likely to affect debate on revisions to the Constitution vehemently pursued by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and other conservative political parties.

JCP leader Kazuo Shii said on an NHK program late on the evening of Dec. 16, “Our policy itself serves the interests of the general public. We have to boost our party’s capabilities. The House of Representatives election was held at a time when we were only half way to bolstering the party’s strength.”

The JCP had fielded 152 candidates in single-seat constituencies in the 2009 general election, but it reversed its policy and fielded 292 candidates this time. The party tried to secure more voter support by combining its campaigns for single-seat constituencies and proportional representations. However, the party suffered defeat in all single-seat constituencies. Even in the proportional representations, it secured only eight seats — down from nine it had held before the latest election.

When the single seat and proportional representation system was introduced in 1996, the JCP won 26 seats in the lower house election that year. But in 2003, 2005 and 2009, the JCP secured only nine seats, respectively. While aiming to double the number of its seats to 18 in the recent general election, the JCP took a more clearly adversarial stand against the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and bitterly criticized the “third pole” political forces as “fission-fusion” groups formed merely for the sake of the election.

Nevertheless, the JCP failed to win the hearts and minds of voters who were critical of the ruling parties. Shii is likely to remain as head of the JCP, but the party will certainly come under pressure to review its policy.

The SDP also won only two seats — down from the five it had held before the election. It tried to win voter support for its pet project of a zero-nuclear policy and a policy of rectifying the gap between the rich and the poor. But its presence was dwarfed by the emergence of the up-and-coming antinuclear Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ).

Although the SDP can barely meet the legal requirements to remain as a political party by combining its lower house seats and upper house seats, it is indeed in a precarious position for its survival. SDP leader Mizuho Fukushima said at a news conference late on the evening of Dec. 16, “We appealed through our opposition to undesirable amendments and revisions to the Constitution, but we may not have been able to reach out to voters.”

Mainichi Shimbun, December 17, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121217p2a00m0na028000c.html>

LDP policies: How far will LDP benefit cuts go ahead of upper house poll?

Effects from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) marching back into power after its sweeping victory in the Dec. 16 House of Representatives election will be felt everywhere from economic and social security policies to nuclear energy and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) issues.

The LDP is expected to embark on curbing welfare benefit payments, but it is unclear whether welfare services for the elderly will also be streamlined. The party will attempt to overturn the zero-nuclear policy laid out by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)-led government and will reactivate nuclear reactors once their safety is confirmed. While having expressed reservations about the TPP, the party will be pressed to make a decision at an early date on whether Japan will participate in the free trade negotiations.

Abiding by its election pledge, which advocated the promotion of self-help and financial independence, the LDP is expected to curb social security benefits. In particular, welfare benefits will be the primary target of such cutbacks as the party has advocated a 10 percent cut in benefit

levels and the termination of benefit payments after a certain period.

At a press conference on Dec. 17, LDP President Shinzo Abe said, "The public has clearly said 'No' to the DPJ's pork-barreling." Ahead of the Dec. 16 poll, the LDP campaigned against welfare benefits in an apparent bid to distinguish itself from the DPJ-led administration, which suffered a setback after promoting child allowances and other benefits without securing enough financial resources to cover them.

Since the nation's social security payments top 100 trillion yen, it is inevitable to slash the costs in order to maintain the system. As the LDP has gained a single-party majority in the powerful lower house, possibly diluting the influence of its ally and pro-welfare New Komeito, officials of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare are nervous about possible cuts in welfare.

Abe has also shown his willingness to resume the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, where social security costs were slashed during the former LDP administration led by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. The council has been suspended since the DPJ took over the government in 2009. Once resumed, the council will discuss social security issues, including concrete measures for streamlining coverage of medical and nursing care benefits. As part of comprehensive reforms of the tax and social security systems, such a policy was included in the law to promote social security reform at the initiative of the LDP, but concrete measures, including not covering homemaking services with nursing care insurance for those in less need of care, have been shelved. The council will also discuss whether to limit insurance coverage on the treatment of mild cases.

Because detailed measures will be put to debate at the national assembly on social security reform, which will draw a conclusion by Aug. 21 — after the upcoming House of Councillors election, it is unclear whether the LDP would actually go ahead with benefit cuts as the party has heretofore advocated pork-barrel policies in the last minutes of elections despite its earlier decisions for pension cuts and raising the elderly's burden of medical costs. The party also faces a challenge of whether to implement the consumption tax hike in April 2014.

As for the TPP, Japan needs to decide by the end of fiscal 2012 whether it will take part in TPP negotiations because participants in the talks are seeking to conclude the pact by the end of next year. During recent election campaigns, the LDP cited six conditions for Japan to join TPP negotiations, including ensuring standards for safety and security of food, and opposition to the abolition of tariffs without sanctuary, apparently in consideration for domestic agricultural organizations and to distinguish itself from the DPJ, which is pro-TPP.

However, the LDP is not absolutely against the TPP and will apparently look into participating in the talks if the system would not adversely affect Japanese industry. At a press conference on Dec. 17, LDP President Abe said, "We will thoroughly examine the United States' demands and requirements." As the U.S. has demanded Japan eliminate non-tariff barriers for the automotive field as a precondition for joining TPP talks, Abe will likely look into whether it is possible for Japan to make a compromise.

Also at issue is whether rice could become an exception in abolishing tariffs, which Abe may likely sound out in the U.S. behind the scenes. Abe, who is set to visit the U.S. at an early date, will draw attention over whether he can show a clear stance toward the TPP during his meeting with President Barack Obama.

The LDP will also bolster the domestic farming industry, which is closely linked to a decision on TPP talks, and will expand the subjects of the DPJ-led individual income support system for farmers to those growing rice, barley, soy beans as well as vegetables and fruit. As the LDP seeks to legislate a

system to provide further income support to owners of farming land out of consideration for land conservation and maintenance of village functions, the party may likely be the subject of further criticism for pork-barreling.

The change of government will also affect the zero-nuclear policy hammered out by the DPJ-led administration, which seeks shutting down all nuclear reactors in Japan by the 2030s. Under the new administration, suspended reactors will be reactivated after their safety is confirmed by the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA).

“The zero-nuclear policy is irresponsible,” Abe said, underscoring the LDP’s intention to maintain a certain number of reactors out of consideration for industry. In response to the LDP’s landslide victory in the election, electricity-related shares soared at the Tokyo stock market on Dec. 17.

However, the New Komeito party, which will form the ruling coalition with the LDP, advocates a departure from nuclear energy at an early date. It is also hard for the LDP to advocate the promotion of nuclear power ahead of the upper house election next summer. Therefore, the party has postponed debate on the future ratio of nuclear power generation by claiming in election campaigns that it will decide the best energy mix over the next 10 years. The party is apparently taking time to determine the course of public opinion over the issue.

While the LDP is planning to leave a decision to reactivate suspended reactors to “expert judgment at the NRA,” the NRA will formulate tentative safety standards for reactivation around next spring and make a formal decision in July next year. If the LDP waits until the NRA’s decision, reactors will unlikely be restarted before peak demand in summer. As the industry is concerned over possible increases in electricity bills due to mounting fuel costs from thermal power generation, it will be hard for the LDP to brush aside these intentions. The party may discuss an option to request nuclear plant operators to prepare for reactivation based on the NRA’s tentative safety standards and to finish screening at an early date after the formal standards are drawn up.

Another focal point will be the government’s response to the management of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), the operator of the disaster-stricken Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima Prefecture. TEPCO has earlier pointed out that the cost for damage compensation for disaster victims and decontamination of radioactive materials could top 10 trillion yen — twice the government estimate. Use of public money for decontamination is also likely to be discussed.

Mainichi Shimbun, December 18, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121218p2a00m0na013000c.html>

Inose cruises to victory in Tokyo governor’s race

Naoki Inose, the prizewinning writer who became a Tokyo vice governor in 2007, was elected the capital’s next governor Sunday.

The 66-year-old Inose, named by Shintaro Ishihara as his favored candidate when he stepped down as governor in October to run for the Diet, has promised to carry on work left unfinished by his predecessor, including the bid to host the 2020 Summer Olympics and integration of Tokyo’s two subway systems.

Inose has also been enthusiastic about reforming the power industry, partly because the metropolitan government is a top shareholder in Tokyo Electric Power Co., operator of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

Many viewed the campaign as a referendum on the 131/2-year administration of Ishihara, who provoked the recent bitter diplomatic row with China by announcing he wanted the metropolitan government to purchase several of the disputed Senkaku Islands. The central government outbid him.

Many of the eight other candidates pledged to break from Ishihara's policies.

"I'd like to further proceed with the unfinished tasks, including the reform of Tokyo Electric to secure a stable electric power supply," Inose said after being assured of the victory.

Inose's main opponents were Kenji Utsunomiya, 66, former head of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, former Kanagawa Gov. Shigefumi Matsuzawa, 54, and Takashi Sasagawa, 77, a retired lawmaker with the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan.

Utsunomiya pledged to decommission all of Tepco's reactors, abandon the metropolitan government's attempt to host the Olympics and improve the capital's welfare systems. Matsuzawa promised to liquidate the money-losing bank Tokyo Shinginko.

Kyodo Press, December 17, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121217a3.html>
