

# Japan: Abe becoming increasingly hawkish as upper house election approaches

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is becoming increasingly aggressive in pushing toward his cherished goals as his Cabinet approaches its fifth month in power and the House of Councillors election draws near.

Abe had intentionally toned down his conservative views since his rise to power late last year, focusing instead on reviving the economy. His recent statements, however, indicate a clear shift in gears, perhaps buoyed by the popularity of his Cabinet.

Among the statements Abe has been making, those on Constitutional revision stand out most. In his policy speech delivered to the Diet in late February, he called for “national discussion toward revising the Constitution,” but did not indicate a specific time frame for the process. However, he made his envisioned timeline clear at an upper house budget committee session on April 23, referring to the revision of Article 96, which stipulates the conditions for Constitutional amendment.

“We should fight the upper house election with amendment as a goal,” he said.

Debate over Constitutional revision suddenly intensified after Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, who until then had been cautious toward the issue, suggested at an April 7 lecture that it would be a focal point of the upper house election. Ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba rushed to support the administration, saying, “Some people say, ‘The government will keep its intentions hidden until the upper house election, and change drastically soon afterward,’ but we don’t mean to defraud anyone.”

Meanwhile, Japan Restoration Party co-leader Toru Hashimoto has also agreed with Abe on Article 96 revision, apparently leading Abe to feel confident that he is well on his way to laying the foundations toward realizing his goal.

Abe has also been more aggressive in the realm of foreign diplomacy. In reaction to objections from China and South Korea against visits made by Japanese Cabinet ministers to Yasukuni Shrine — where World War II war dead and war criminals are enshrined — Abe said, “Our ministers will not give in to any threats.”

The fiscal 2013 budget bill and a Public Offices Election Law amendment bill to reduce vote-value disparities are expected to be enacted during the current Diet session after they passed the lower house on April 16 and April 23, respectively. Amid the lackluster performance of lawmakers from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the prime minister’s strong speech has been making an impression in recent Diet debates. There’s a possibility Abe is stepping up efforts to appeal to the public as the upper house election approaches.

Abe’s recent shift has alarmed some of his colleagues, however. At a television program taping on April 25, LDP Diet affairs chief Ichiro Kamoshita acknowledged that it was “honest” of Abe to indicate the direction in which he wants to take the country after the upper house election, but that

it was also important to consider the big picture.

“It is my hope that when the prime minister speaks, he comprehensively takes into consideration his wording, the LDP’s relationship with the New Komeito and Japan’s relationships with China and South Korea, among other issues,” he said.

Meanwhile, one ministerial official said, “The prime minister probably has no aides who will disagree with him.”

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\* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130426p2a00m0na012000c.html>