

Japan: Abe's true colors ready to shine following LDP victory

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is expected to promote his nationalistic agenda in full force after the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s massive victory in the House of Councillors election gave it a majority in both houses of the Diet, while those in the government and ruling parties urge him to focus on revitalizing the economy.

Ever since he returned to the prime minister's seat in December last year, Abe has kept his true colors — which have both defenders and detractors — relatively under wraps. Abe's priority was to get through the upper house election safely by drawing the public's attention to economic policy.

However, toward the final days of the election campaign, when public opinion polls showed the LDP with an overwhelming lead, Abe began to revisit his favorite arguments.

On a Nagasaki International Television Broadcasting program that aired July 15, Abe addressed the amendment of the Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9 for the first time since the July 4 announcement of the upper house election, saying, "The clause should clearly state the existence and role of the Self-Defense Forces."

As supporters waving small Japanese flags listened to his last stump speech on July 20 in Tokyo's Akihabara district, Abe went so far as to state, "We will change the Constitution."

A mid-level LDP lawmaker offered the following analysis: "The prime minister is getting into the groove."

Abe's central agenda has been an "escape from the postwar regime," to be achieved primarily through constitutional revision and a review of historical interpretation. Depending on how he goes about carrying out this mission, however, Abe will only aggravate tensions between Japan and its neighbors, possibly even straining ties with the United States.

Because of such concerns, the prime minister's close aides and diplomatic advisers are urging Abe to focus first on developing a national security policy that will reinforce the Japan-U.S. alliance, including securing the right to collective self-defense, instead of delving into the topic of Yasukuni Shrine and other issues related to historical interpretation. The objective here is to regain the sort of political stability that was afforded the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi through Koizumi's trusting relationship with U.S. President George W. Bush.

Appearing on a Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) television program on July 21, LDP Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba expressed enthusiasm for overcoming the current ban on exercising the right of collective self-defense.

"We should not deal with the issue merely from the angle of the government's revision of its interpretation of the Constitution, but rather lay down a foundation for it legally. As this is a topic that impinges on the shape of the Japan-U.S. alliance, we hope to deliberate the matter thoroughly," he said.

A private advisory panel to the prime minister that was set up in February is expected to submit a report on the issue as early as this fall, based on which the government plans to draw up a basic law on state security and make a shift in its interpretation of the Constitution.

Also on July 21, Natsuo Yamaguchi, leader of the LDP's coalition partner New Komeito — which characterizes itself as the “brakes” on some of the LDP's policies — appeared on a TV Asahi program to object to LDP proposals on collective self-defense.

“Past administrations did not approve the right to collective self-defense,” Yamaguchi said. “There's been no explanation as to why it's necessary.”

With New Komeito taking such a stand, an attempt to force the agenda could destabilize the ruling coalition. Those in the prime minister's office recognize the need for caution, with one senior LDP official saying, “We might take things more slowly than we initially planned.”

According to a source close to the prime minister, the government and LDP view constitutional amendment as a mid- to long-term goal. However, if they struggle to find common ground with New Komeito on collective self-defense, there's a possibility the constitutional amendment will emerge as a relatively more immediate issue.

The prime minister has emphasized his willingness to be flexible on the contents of constitutional revision, and on pushing forth with deliberations based on the progress of discussions within the government and the ruling coalition.

“If making changes to our proposal for constitutional amendment will convince people to agree to amendment, we will obviously consider it,” he said on July 7.

A major focus now is on whether Abe will visit Yasukuni Shrine, where class-A war criminals are enshrined along with the war dead. He has expressed deep regret for not having visited the shrine during his first stint as prime minister, but he refrained from visiting the shrine for its spring festival this year, instead sending a gift of a masakaki tree branch. Conservatives are expected to put pressure on Abe to visit the shrine on Aug. 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, and the fall festival in October.

Regarding the issue, Abe stated on a Nippon Television (NTV) program on July 21, “It's only natural to express feelings of respect to those who fought for the country. There's no reason others should interfere with that.” Meanwhile, those close to the prime minister worry about the possibility that a visit by Abe to the shrine will force the administration to channel too much energy to diplomatic issues.

Eyeing a long run in government, many in the administration are urging the prime minister to focus on economic policy for the time being. Ishiba said on an NTV television program that “Issues themselves vary in levels of priority,” adding that economic recovery is what the public most wants.

One senior LDP official said the party still does not have a comprehensive vision for striking a balance between the administration's stability and Abe's most prized agendas. Meanwhile, another senior official said, “If economic recovery goes well, the prime minister will probably take an aggressive attitude with his pet agendas. But there's also the chance that he'll flaunt his true colors even if his economic policies fall short.”

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* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130722p2a00m0na028000c.html>