

Japan elections: JRP suffers sense of defeat

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JRP suffers sense of defeat, party split feared

A sense of defeat prevailed in the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) following the July 21 House of Councillors election, as the party failed to reach its goal of winning 10 seats despite its strong showing in last December's House of Representatives election.

Although the number of seats the JRP won exceeded its pre-election strength of two among seats up for grabs in the July 21 election, the party's momentum shown in the Dec. 16 lower house election — in which it won 54 seats to follow closely behind the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) — has apparently faded away.

The JRP is poised to hold a party leadership meeting as early as the end of this week to confirm the continuation of the collective leadership represented by co-leaders Toru Hashimoto and Shintaro Ishihara. However, party members who hail from the former Sunrise Party, including Ishihara, harbor dissatisfaction against Hashimoto over his remarks on the wartime "comfort women" issue, which triggered the party's slowdown. Furthermore, Hashimoto has underscored the need to realign opposition forces, making it likely that the party will be beset by unstable management with a possible split in sight.

During a press conference in Osaka on the evening of July 21, Hashimoto acknowledged his responsibility for the election results, saying, "It wasn't a victory. The results are not something I can be proud of as a party leader. Voters didn't have confidence in me as party leader."

Ishihara, on the other hand, told reporters in Tokyo, "It was a satisfactory result. I want to further continue to engage in activities in the Diet."

Hashimoto also brushed aside the question of whether he needed to resign, saying, "Of course not."

Ishihara has denied Hashimoto's responsibility for the election results apparently because the former is wary of the possibility of Hashimoto's resignation leading to a party split.

On July 18 toward the end of his election campaigning, Hashimoto said during a stump speech, "As a new political group, reformist forces in the DPJ, Your Party and JRP will be united for sure." As the LDP's dominance has become more conspicuous, Hashimoto presented his idea of assembling counterbalancing forces by realigning opposition parties, but his remarks were interpreted as saying that some JRP members are breaking away from those hailing from the former Sunrise Party, deepening the rift between the two factions.

"It will serve the benefit of this country to form a force that can counterbalance the LDP. Our responsibility to the public is to form another opposition party that can bring about a regime change," Hashimoto said, indicating that he would discuss his fate as party leader and the realignment of opposition forces during the upcoming party leadership meeting.

"It would be meaningless if the JRP expanded its influence on its own," Hashimoto said, suggesting that he was not stuck on the idea of keeping the JRP going. "It would be unreasonable to continue to

manage the party with members from the former Sunrise Party. We should return to our starting point as the 'Osaka Restoration Association' regional party and seek to become a national party once again from there."

Senior party officials close to Hashimoto are even eyeing splitting the party following the upper house election. In Osaka, an urgent task is to put into shape a plan to dissolve the cities of Osaka and Sakai to reorganize them into "Osaka metropolis," with the Sakai mayoral election that will contest the pros and cons of the plan slated for September. Hashimoto envisages a scenario in which the JRP returns to Osaka, makes achievements as a regional party and then takes the initiative in realigning opposition parties in national politics.

In order to give speeches for JRP candidates running in the upper house election, Hashimoto mainly covered cities in the Kansai region, resulting in the party winning constituency seats only in that region. In contrast, winners of the proportional representation seats were largely to be former Sunrise Party members.

"Hashimoto should withdraw from national politics once and start over," said a senior member of Your Party, showing the willingness to team up with the JRP's Osaka-based faction in the event of the party's split-up.

The move to reorganize opposition parties, including the DPJ that has suffered a devastating defeat, will become the focal point in the wake of the upper house poll.

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* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130722p2a00m0na024000c.html>