

The July Election: A Fatal Blow to Abe and the Abe Doctrine

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The shattering defeat suffered by the far-right government headed by Abe Shinzo in the Upper House elections on July 29 2007 has jolted and sent into disarray the grand strategy of the Japanese right to recraft the postwar Japanese state through a revision of the 1946 Constitution.

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It was a veritable landslide. In the triennial election replacing half of the 242 Upper House seats, the Liberal Democratic Party obtained only 37 seats compared to pre-election 64 while the major opposition Democratic Party of Japan gained 60 compared to pre-election 33. As the result, the number of Upper House seats occupied by the ruling LDP-Komei coalition fell to 105, well below the majority line, while the DPJ together with other opposition parties came to command a secure majority of 137. A key feature of this election was that the LDP lost most of its seats in the rural single seat constituencies, once considered impregnable LDP strongholds. "This is a farmers' uprising," Ono Kazuoki, agricultural journalist, characterized this phenomenon. Voters in large cities too revolted. The urban middle class, which had enthusiastically supported Koizumi last time, massively swung to the DPJ, rejecting Abe's LDP. A large bulk of youth, who were once attracted to Koizumi, now disenchanted, voted against Abe.

The political situation that has emerged as the result of the election is a new one. The ruling coalition, despite having control of the Lower House, can no longer expect to make laws by simply railroading bills through the Lower House. The Upper House can, and will, meticulously and critically scrutinize bills sent from the Lower House and will vote them down. Moreover, the Upper House can, and will, adopt bills of its own making and send them to the Lower House for approval. True, the Lower House has the power to reverse Upper House decisions with a two thirds majority and can vote down bills sent from the Upper House. But under the new situation the Upper House majority can easily paralyze the vote-casting machine on whose smooth operation the LDP has habitually depended.

At the beginning of the election campaign, Abe declared more than once that voters were being asked to choose between him and Ozawa Ichiro, president of the Democratic Party, as the leader of the country. Now that people have made their option clear, everyone expected Abe to step down. But he declared he would not. "I have just begun my work and cannot give it up halfway." A poker-faced Abe told the press, "I do not think my basic policy has been rejected." This attitude has further

alienated popular support.

The LDP is in an extreme crisis and Abe is a veritable lame duck. But the LDP has no alternative candidate to replace him and cannot dissolve the Lower House for a general election to seek a fresh mandate, as this will only bring another crushing defeat.

It is true that the July election results served to strengthen the bipartisan system of alternate rule by two conservative parties. This time, many people felt they had to vote for the DPJ to defeat Abe's LDP and this led to a setback of the Communists and Social Democrats (their seats decreased from nine to five and three to two, respectively). Being basically a conservative party consisting of heterogeneous elements, the DPJ cannot be expected to take a principled position on important issues such as Okinawa, U.S. bases, neoliberal reform, and the constitution.

But the July election also demonstrated exemplary cases of autonomous grassroots campaigns that escaped absorption by bipartisanship. In Okinawa anti-base activist/politician Itokazu Keiko, the joint candidate of all the opposition parties, defeated her LDP rival by an unprecedented margin of 120,000 votes, while another Okinawa candidate Yamauchi Tokushin, a veteran anti-base activist, ran in the proportional representation constituency as a Socialist candidate, and won thanks to massive support from not only Okinawa but also all over the country. In the hotly contested Tokyo, Kawada Ryuhei, a young popular leader of the movement of people infected by HIV in contaminated blood products, won a staggering 680,000 votes, defeating an LDP candidate whose victory no media doubted. Kawada had no organization to back him but was supported by a large number of volunteers and directly by individual citizens.

Downfall of Far-Right Doctrine: What does this signify for the future of Japan?

The most crucial part of the election is that Abe's defeat has made definite the failure of the far-right doctrine and movement that began to gain momentum in the middle of the 1990s and stepped into the mainstream of Japanese conservative politics at the beginning of this century. We pointed out, in the editorial overview of the previous Japanesia Review issue [1], that the Abe cabinet was not simply another hawkish conservative government but a far-right government consisting almost exclusively of historical revisionists who hoped to reinstate the glory of the Japanese empire. They are the ones who have built up their political identity by justifying the Japanese aggression against Asia as an act of liberation, claiming that there were no such things as the Nanjing massacre or military sexual slavery. Abe filled most of his cabinet's posts with his comrades who incidentally had but poor political careers and experience. They are dubbed "Abe and buddies" by the media.

Paradoxically, Abe and his buddies' successful march to the helm of power proved the untenability of their doctrine. As soon as Abe got to power, it became clear that for him to openly state what he believed would destroy Japan's relations with the rest of Asia and the United States. After making petty deprecatory remarks, such as there was no proof that soldiers had used "physical coercion" in turning Asian girls into comfort women, and drawing accusations from all over the world, Abe had to grudgingly accept his predecessor prime minister Murayama Tomiichi's self-critical position on Japan's war responsibility and Lower House Chair Kono Ichiro's admission of the imperial army's criminal role in organizing military sexual slavery. At this stage, the doctrine proved to be a sword that could not be unsheathed.

Arrogant Stolidity

But Abe did not abandon the doctrine. If impossible to proclaim it universally, why not impose it internally so that the Japanese nationals would embrace his self-congratulating slogan of a “beautiful country”? In the first half year of his reign, Abe proceeded to enact one major law after another, listening to no criticisms, to satisfy his strategic requirements. Changing the Basic Education Law, which directly linked education to the spirit of the constitution, was the Abe group’s long cherished strategic goal. Under the revised law of the Abe cabinet, reference to the spirit of the constitution was dropped, patriotism was introduced as the value to be inculcated into children, and the independence of education was replaced by state control. Ignoring vigorous opposition from both inside and outside the Diet, Abe railroaded the bill through the Diet in December 2006. This was followed by three more laws aiming to enforce tight state control on education and teachers, which were forced through the Diet in June 2007 amid protest. With this done, Abe proceeded to go into the direct preliminary process of changing the constitution — the enactment of a new referendum law required to change the constitution. The passage of this law in May 2007 was another breakthrough.

Abe also dashed ahead with militarization in strategic cooperation with the United States. While committing to the deployment of U.S. missile defense, Abe organized a private consultative council to invent and recommend a new interpretation of the constitution that would allow Japan to engage in “collective self-defense.” This aimed to destroy the long established official interpretation of the constitution that while Japan had the right to collective self-defense, the constitution prohibited its exercise. The ultimate conclusion of the council is foregone since Abe picked only people who were known protagonists of collective self-defense.

The Abe cabinet rushed these and other calamitous bills into laws refusing to engage in serious debate. The LDP-Komei coalition had more than the two-thirds majority in the Lower House and so could pass any laws it wanted. No need to listen to criticism or engage in serious discussion. This mentality prevailed until the very eve of the July election.

The triumphant mentality rested on a flimsy ground, however. The Lower House majority Abe could command was not his own making but had been inherited from his predecessor Koizumi Junichiro, who in August 2005 resorted to a snap election to obtain public consent on the national postal service privatization project (See *Japonesia Review* No.2 editorial overview [*ibid.*]). Under the spell of the charismatic Koizumi, people overwhelmingly voted for him and his plan and gave the ruling coalition a formidable house majority. Abe abused it conveniently to advance his particular cause and was punished for this.

Neoliberal Reform Exposed

During this period, another change in climate was occurring as common people began to see through the true face of neoliberalism presented as plausible “reform” as horrible realities undermining their livelihood and dignity. After the magician Koizumi stepped off the stage, the illusion of “reform” vanished, sobering the people to see what has actually happened to them. They now realize that their lives did not improve while corporate profits rocketed.

Acute social issues long covered up by the discourse on plausible reform at last surfaced and the mass media began to talk about the burgeoning ranks of “working poor,” growing disparities between the urban centers and countryside, and the crisis of social security programs while Abe complacently repeated that economic growth would solve the disparities. They saw that Abe was

talking nonsense. Big business was dictating pro-business and anti-labor policies and programs to Abe who was busy making big business proposals into laws. But working people, small shop-owners, rural residents, women, and youth saw their living further deteriorate with jobs becoming more precarious and exploitative. As social security premiums were being raised and services being cut down across the board, people were shocked to hear that the Social Insurance Agency had lost track of 50 million pension premium payment records.

Deep-rooted Public Criticism

The landslide that drowned Abe and his LDP occurred as the majority of voters refused to give mandate on every one of these major issues. TV commentators generally cite several corruption cases involving Abe cabinet members, Abe's weak leadership, lost pension records, gaffes made by Abe's buddies, and other coincidental factors as the chief causes for the LDP defeat. These were of course relevant. Calling women "baby bearing machines" (Welfare and Labor Minister Yanagisawa Hakuo), justifying U.S. atomic bombings (Minister of Defense Kyuma Fumio, elected from Nagasaki) and incredibly discriminatory statements by other government leaders naturally disgusted and alienated a number of voters. But there are reasons to believe that people reacted to the issues at deeper levels. While opinion polls by most media use superficial and misleading questions, a survey conducted on August 8 by FNN, in fact a right-leaning TV network, had sharp questions other media dared not and provides us with an interesting picture. Let us mention some of the items the survey covered.

Do you support the Abe cabinet?	Yes 22.0%	No 64.8%
Do you support Abe's foreign policy?	Yes 27.9%	No 50.4%
educational policy?	Yes 24.7%	No 55.29%
economic policy?	Yes 17.1%	No 61.6%
policy on changing the constitution?	Yes 24.7%	No 53.5%
policy priority?	Yes 17.3%	No 53.8%

Yet, Abe insists that his basic policy was accepted by the people.

Prospects of the Battle over the Constitution

In shock over this defeat, the LDP is in disarray, not knowing what to do. All analysts argue that Abe's cabinet reshuffle would not call back public support. The LDP hopes to talk the DPJ into a grand coalition, but Ozawa intends to shake the diffident LDP by confrontation on major issues, bring the Abe cabinet down, force a dissolution of the Lower House, and get to power through general elections.

The first showdown is likely to occur over the extension of the Japanese navy fueling services for U.S. and NATO warships in the Indian Ocean as part of the war in Afghanistan. The law on this fleet mission will expire on October 31, 2007. Ozawa has already made it clear that the DPJ will oppose the extension of the term of the law for this operation. Unless the influential intra-DPJ group of American strategy promoters such as former party president Maehara Seiji take a decisive move against this decision, the cabinet proposal for the extension will certainly be voted down by the Upper House.

The most important long-term outcome of the July election is the collapse of the LDP's project to craft a new constitution. Initiating the process for the amendment of the constitution requires action by two thirds of the members of each of the two houses. Given the new political picture in the Upper House, no one knows whether and how the two thirds majorities in both houses could be organized. The LDP has already prepared its own draft constitution but cannot initiate the amendment process without the support of other groups to form a two thirds majority in both houses. By nature this measure has been seen as a difficult task but it has become even more difficult now that the opposition has an Upper House majority. True, the DPJ is divided over the constitution, with many pro-amendment enthusiasts within it. But on the other hand, the New Komei Party leadership is under pressure from many members of its religious backer, Sokagakkai, who are not for the deletion of Article 9. The line between pro- and anti-revision is constantly shifting. The Asahi Shimbun (August 7 2007), analyzing the new political map, observed that the "enthusiasm" for change of the constitution had "quickly cooled off" so that now only 53% of the Upper House members supported revision of the constitution. Most surprisingly, the Asahi survey found the percentage of pro-revision DPJ members decline from a pre-election 61% to 38%.

Time for a Counter-Offensive

The ruling political groups are now wandering, having lost sight of where to go. No doubt this is time for a counter-offensive, one based on our principles, demilitarization under Article 9, among others. The counter-offensive can, and should, begin by undoing what has been done during the past ten years by the ruling elites by repealing laws, policies, commitments, and agreements that go against the pacifist principles and best traditions achieved by postwar movements. In other words, we must make it clear that we do not accept *faits-accomplis* but demand that they be removed. Cancel the support for the Bush war, call back the air self-defense forces from Iraq, put the original basic education law back, outlaw the labor dispatch business, and retract the government guidelines that force the Hinomaru flag and Kimigayo anthem on children! Bury the bankrupt Abe doctrine once and for all! We are not just going back to the status quo ante but want to develop a new, alternative perspective and retrieve and place our best heritage in that perspective. The ice seems to have begun cracking in Japan as it is elsewhere.

P.S.

* From *Japonesia Review*, People's Plan Japonesia website

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Footnotes

[1] pp2-5, *Japonesia Review* No.2, December 2006, People's Plan Study Group, Tokyo. See on ESSF: [Upper House Elections Mark the Beginning of the End of the Koizumi Era —A Major Confrontation is Impending over the Peace Constitution](#)