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A Trump-like anti-intellectual

Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, steps down. During his tenure, he failed to achieve most of his goals

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On 28 August 2020, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that he would be stepping down after a record term in office of almost eight years. Abe had already been Prime Minister between 2006 and 2007. In his first term of office, he had been barely able to move anything forward and was described in the media as 'a complete failure'. His second term of office was admittedly long and delivered political stability but even in the many years since 2012, the Prime Minister has barely achieved any of the goals he had set out to. Most recently, the government had been severely criticised for its inadequate coronavirus crisis management. Abe had studiously ignored the second coronavirus wave in July/August and steered clear of publicity. The approval ratings for the government in polls fell at times to 32 per cent.

But above all, Abe could not reach his own long-term goals. In 2012, shortly before he came into office, he published a book entitled 'Shaping a beautiful country' (*Utsukushii kuni e*). Similar to Donald Trump's description of the US after the presidency of Barack Obama, Abe saw Japan as down and out and run down, which he largely attributed to the previously ruling Democratic Party of Japan, but partly also to the reforms from the time of occupation after World War II. In his view, the reforms of the victorious powers were too harsh and led to the destruction of Japan's traditions.

As per the 'Overcoming the Postwar Regime' slogan, Abe therefore demanded again and again the cancellations of the reforms that were carried out between 1945 and 1952. During his first term of office he had successfully initiated and carried out a revision of the education law from 1947, which attempts to convey more national pride at Japan's schools. Again and again, Abe stressed the revision of the – since 1946 unchanged – constitution and explained this revision as his 'life's work'.

A failed constitutional revision

However, although the government coalition consistently held a two-thirds majority in the parliament since 2012 – the precondition to initiate the process of revising a constitution – there has been no progress in this regard until now. Discussions in the parliament committee show that there is not even unity in the government coalition over the 'what' and 'how' of a revision. Polls show a clear majority of the population is against the amendments proposed by Abe and his party.

By contrast, the number of scandals in which Abe himself, his wife, members of his cabinet or politicians from his Liberal Democratic Party were involved is possibly record-breaking.

In 2013 and 2014, Abe therefore initiated law amendments, which are equally important as a change in the constitution and were brutally pushed through without any consideration of the lack of consensus in society. The law on the protection of state secrets approved in 2013 annulled the law on the disclosure of information (1999/2001). The security laws approved in 2014 allowed Japan more freedom in military missions outside Japan's sovereign territory. This way, Article 9 of the constitution was annulled – the paragraph in which 'the Japanese people abandon for all time war as a sovereign right of the nation and abandon threatening or exercising violence as a means of settling international disputes.

As the revision of the constitution is barely seen as a political priority by the people, Abe focused on economic policy from the outset of his second term of office. With an economic and fiscal policy, which he rather immodestly entitled *Abenomics*, he wanted to fight inflation and stagnation.

A failed economic policy

As, however, both phenomena had, in Japan's case, barely anything to do with each other, *Abenomics* was seen as having failed even before the coronavirus. Both the targeted 2 per cent inflation target, as well as the announced 3 per cent economic growth, are a long way off. Even in the fourth quarter of 2019 – and in earlier phases too – Japan showed negative growth rates or zero growth. But above all income is still stagnating.

While there had been a certain growth under the Democratic Party of Japan government from 2009 until 2012, the average income between

2012 and 2020 has barely changed; the announced trickle down effects failed to materialise. Social inequality is therefore today much starker than at the beginning of the Abe era. Abe's *Womenomics* policy to promote women at work led to a growth in working women. However, the majority was part-time employment. There are still rarely any women in key positions; Japan continues to be ranked in the bottom places of the Gender Gap Index.

By contrast, the number of scandals in which Abe himself, his wife, members of his cabinet or politicians from his Liberal Democratic Party were involved is possibly record-breaking. These scandals range from nepotism over irregularities in accounting relating to donations to the party to massive corruption. Some of these scandals nearly meant the end for Abe.

In 2017, for example, there were suspicions that Abe and his wife Akie were involved in giving preferential treatment to a kindergarten operator, to whom a property owned by the state had been sold for a 'preferential price'. Abe's wife was honorary president of the kindergarten and Prime Minister Abe waved away the accusations.

As of now, it is still unclear who will take over from Abe. The most promising candidate is his long-time government spokesperson Suga.

When North Korea had a test rocket fly over Japanese territory in July 2017, Abe invoked national unity and called new elections, in which the Liberal Democrat Party was able to win a clear majority again – because of a divided opposition. But new scandals emerged in subsequent years. The announcement that he was stepping down is probably connected with the fact that currently three members of parliament, of which Abe supported at least two actively in their election campaign, are in pre-trial custody and accused of bribery.

A failed Olympic Games

In a press conference, Abe announced that he was stepping down for health reasons. For a few weeks, the media reported that the prime minister was again and again out of office, while more frequently going to the hospital. However, he made sure that he did not miss the opportunity to postpone stepping down long enough so that he went down in history as the country's prime minister with the longest term of office.

However, he had to miss out on being able to welcome the world to the Olympic Games in Tokyo. Bringing them to Tokyo was largely seen as of

Abe's making, who was present for Tokyo's presentation at the IOC as the organiser and gave a self-assured speech. The cancellation of the Olympics must have accelerated his decision, especially because it is unclear whether they can take place in the summer of 2021 (his term of office would then still have allowed him to show up as the host).

As of now, it is still unclear who will take over from Abe. The most promising candidate is his long-time government spokesperson Suga. Nothing much would naturally change under him – after all it was Suga who had to sell the cabinet's policy for many years to the press and to the people. Former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, a moderate politician, is also said to have a chance. He could clearly do different things to Abe, as he does not have his anti-intellectual and Trump-like features. The candidate most unlike Abe would be Shigeru Ishiba, who already in 2012 was only just beaten by Abe in the election for party chairman. Ishiba is loved by the Liberal Democrat Party base but gained only a few votes from members of parliament in 2012. This scenario could be repeated in the party chairman election scheduled for the first half of September.



Sven Saaler
Tokyo

Sven Saaler is FES Representative in Japan and Professor of Modern Japanese History at Sophia University in Tôkyô. He has written and edited books on history debates in Japan, East Asian regionalism and Japanese-German relations. Among his most recent publications are *Mutual Perceptions and Images in Japanese-German Relations, 1860-2010* (Brill, 2017) and the *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History* (Routledge, 2017).