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Hoping against Hope

When Japan's prime minister called snap elections, he meant to shore up support for his Liberal Democratic Party. But a new rival in Tokyo threatens to disrupt his plan

The Japanese public is going to the polls for snap elections, again. It's the second time that Shinzo Abe has called for unscheduled plebiscite since he was elected in 2012, and the tactic has proved powerful in the past. Then, as now, the unpopular increase in the consumption tax from eight to 10 per cent provided the impetus for him to consolidate his hold on power in the face of a fractured opposition.

In December 2014 – the so-called 'bait-and-switch' election – Abe called a national vote to delay the scheduled tax hike, under a menacing campaign slogan: 'There is no other path'. He then used his victory speech to reaffirm his long-time goal of revising Japan's pacifist constitution. For Abe, there was little to lose and much to gain, as the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ, later Democratic Party), ignominiously turned out of power in 2012, was polling around 10 per cent. With no real alternatives on the ballot, voter turnout plummeted to its lowest point since World War II, a mere 53 per cent. Youth voting rates barely reached 30 per cent. Abe claimed victory.

What worked in 2014, Abe hoped would work again to drive through two controversial policies: a sales tax hike and a revision to the constitution. Plus it might divert attention from the Moritomo scandal – over sweetheart deals for an ultra-nationalist kindergarten – which has dogged the prime minister since the beginning of the year. In calling a snap election on 22 September, Abe assumed he could only bolster his support.

He guessed wrong. By the next working day, Yuriko Koike, the upstart governor of Tokyo, had launched a new party to challenge Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The Party of Hope, as she called it, would take a conservative, security-oriented approach while implementing 'bold'

economic reforms of the type promoted by Trump and Macron. By the first week of October, Abe lost four points from his cabinet approval rating, which now stands at 41 per cent, with 46 per cent disapproving of the performance, according to Kyodo Press.

With just 14 breakaway MPs at the outset, the Party of Hope might have amounted to nothing more than another faddish movement in Japan's multi-party system. But within 72 hours, the main opposition, the Democratic Party (DP), had dissolved. Its leader, Seiji Maehara, saw the opportunity that the popular – some say populist – Koike supplied to mount a substantial opposition to the LDP. But, fumbling the ball, he failed to secure an agreement on key party planks before encouraging all members of the DP to join Hope. A savvy tactician, Koike responded that she would accept only those who agree with her conservative agenda on security and the constitution. The vetted former DP politicians numbered over 100, supplying Koike with momentum. The rump DP liberals have since cobbled together the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan under Yukio Edano.

Tokyo's unlikely rabble-rouser

But who is this galvanising upstart? Koike seized the national limelight last year when she unexpectedly quit the LDP to run for governor of Tokyo. The regional party she founded, Tokyoites First, trounced Abe's party, taking 49 out of the 50 seats up for grabs. As a former television announcer, Koike knows how to handle the media and has remained in the public's gaze by targeting high-profile problems such as the controversial relocation of the world's largest fish market to a putatively contaminated site. However, her critics question her closed management style and efficacy. A survey by the Tosei Shimpo, a publication popular among government officials, found her to be the consummate strategist, more concerned with the political game than implementing policy.

Koike advocates a 'reform conservativism' that aims to 'challenge taboos' and cut the 'shackles' of vested interests. The party's manifesto, announced last week, sets out its programme. In place of the sales tax hike, the government would sell state-owned assets to raise revenue. Nuclear power dependency would be reduced to zero by 2030. The number of parliamentarians would be cut, along with their pay. Married couples would be allowed to retain separate surnames and LGBTQ discrimination would be outlawed. But beyond the nod to identity politics, there is much that is arch-conservative in her platform. Indeed the right-wing nationalist Japan Restoration Party has accused Koike's party of simply adopting its own reform plans, sometimes word for word. Both call for a reduced central government, greater local autonomy, more

'realistic' security policies, constitutional revision, and the elimination of nuclear power.

As of October 6, the Party of Hope had signed up over 200 candidates and was well on its way to securing 233 names – the number needed to claim the majority of seats in the Lower House – by the October 10 deadline. Yet the question on everyone's mind remains whether the party's dynamo leader will be listed alongside them. At of the time of writing, Koike affirms that she will continue her tenure as governor of Tokyo. Even so, few expect that she will carry out her full term at the local level.

Taxing times for Abe

The past two weeks have seen not only the election ballots rewritten, but the issues driving the plebiscite as well. Initially, Abe stressed the controversial sales tax increase as the motive to renew his mandate. After years of delaying, he promised to see it implemented in October 2019, as currently scheduled, but with more money diverted to social welfare measures, including education, child-rearing, and nursing care. But facing an unexpectedly strong opposition in a new party landscape, Abe has changed tack to promote an image of stability and military security within a sea of change. In recent days, he has stressed the plebiscite as a chance to vote on his diplomatic skills and tough stance on North Korea. He has also pledged to advance plans to amend the constitution to mention the self-defence forces by name and to allow parts of the founding document to be suspended during states of emergency.

But rather than a show of strength, the shift in strategy belies weakness, and by the end of last week, the LDP had rolled back its electoral goals. Chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga stated that the planned sales tax hike would not go forward if the economy returned to the condition it was in before Abenomics was implemented. And Abe claimed that victory would be his if he retained a simple majority with his coalition partner.

Will this be a Theresa May moment for Abe? At present, the LDP, with its coalition partner the Komeito, holds a two-thirds majority in the Lower House. Losing a mere 13 seats would downshift this to a simple majority, and much more is at stake. Koike is aiming big, hoping that her party, only a few weeks old, will seize the helm of state, Macron-style.

But critically different to the recent electoral shifts in Europe are the absence of significant ideological divides. Jeremy Corbyn's left-Labour politics have garnered surprising – and substantial – public support with

the latest opinion polls placing him ahead of the conservative Theresa May.

In Japan, however, there is little ideological division between Koike and Abe: both are on the political right and advocate similar mixes of neoliberal and nationalist policies. For the economy, Koike has little new to offer beyond inserting her first name into the Abenomics program to create 'Yurinomics'. Both are members of the neonationalist Nippon Kaigi, an association dedicated to historical revisionism and the promotion of an unapologetic state-oriented, emperor-oriented nationalism. Both support revising Article 9 of the constitution, in which Japan renounces the right of war, in addition to many of the other articles in it.

Blessed are the peacemakers

The last point, constitutional revision, has been a driving goal for Abe, but an unpopular one with the electorate, and one difficult to pass with his coalition partner, the Komeito. With origins in a religious sect, the Komeito has been reluctant to support any revision of the 'pacifist' Article 9. Could the rise of the Party of Hope – plus horse-trading – pave the way for Abe, or Koike, to follow through?

The answer may come down to who comes out to the ballot box. Voter participation rates are at their lowest since 1947, with nearly half of those registered not bothering to make their voice count in the 2014 snap elections. But the present media hype might draw more out to the polls. According to a Kyodo survey, as of October 1, 46 per cent supported Abe, 33 per cent preferred Koike, and 21 per cent were undecided. Asked about parties, 24 per cent said they would back the LDP, and 15 per cent the Party of Hope. But, crucially, a whopping 43 per cent of the electorate remains uncommitted. With so much in play, the next two weeks will be decisive.



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