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How Shinzo Abe still rules Japan

In this weekend's election in Japan, the ruling LDP will most likely hold on to power — with its former leader Shinzo Abe still pulling the strings

On 31 October, a new House of Representatives will be elected in Japan. Most likely, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will hang on to its majority in the principal chamber of the Japanese Parliament, but with considerable losses. The public appears to be fed up with LDP-led governments, while the opposition is consolidating.

Above all, however, there is a growing aversion to the continuing influence of former long-term leader Shinzo Abe. He is still trying to pull strings from behind the scenes, despite the many scandals that led to his resignation in 2020. Last month his successor Yoshihide Suga, who had pledged to continue Abe's policies, also resigned. He had seen the writing on the wall in the relentlessly declining poll numbers, which seemed to threaten the re-election chances of younger LDP candidates in particular.

At first, the subsequent election of Fumio Kishida as the new LDP leader and prime minister seemed to breath new life into Japanese politics. The rather reserved politician and former foreign minister, characterised in the English-speaking media as 'soft-spoken' in stark contrast to the often abrasive Abe, promised during his campaign to pursue a 'new capitalism'.

With his call for 'growth through redistribution' he criticised – relatively explicitly by Japanese standards – the neoliberal economic policy implemented by the LDP for twenty years. It has led to income stagnation and, as in many other countries, the deepening of social inequality. With this change of direction he may also have wrongfooted the opposition. The social democratic Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) in particular has tied its colours to the mast of redistribution.

The LDP's reactionary stranglehold

Kishida had to row back from this position soon enough though. In his

contest for the party leadership with the more progressive – and very popular – Taro Kono he had to ensure the support of the internal party grouping around Shinzo Abe. For Abe and the reactionary wing of the LDP he leads, Kono's liberal demands – such as liberalisation of the nationality law, exit from nuclear power, and the right of spouses to have separate family names – are completely anathema.

Kishida reboarded the Abenomics train.

Instead, the Abe faction advocates the recommissioning of atomic reactors, but also a reprocessing plant. And on top of that, their ideas about family policy and national identity come straight out of the nineteenth century, a period they idealise as one of Japanese 'greatness'. For Abe, Kishida seems more pliant than the self-confident Kono, and so he backed him in the second round of the leadership election.

Kishida showed his gratitude when he allocated party and cabinet posts. Abe's ally Akira Amari, a vocal advocate of nuclear power and former minister of the economy, who had to step down after corruption allegations in 2016, was given the influential post of LDP general secretary. The front-woman of the reactionary wing of the party, Sanae Takaichi, who stands for 'traditional' family values and rejects spouses' free choice of family name (notwithstanding the fact that, despite her marriage to former MP Ichita Yamamoto, she continued to use her maiden name as a politician), is now chair of the Policy Research Council, a kind of central party policy committee. Her sympathies for ultra-right groups and ideas have already cast a shadow over her. Takaichi also bid for the party leadership and will henceforth play a more prominent role in the party.

These appointments have already cost Kishida a lot of popularity. In the first surveys after becoming prime minister on 4 October only around half of those asked stated that they supported the cabinet. This is the worst result for more than two decades – new governments usually enjoy a honeymoon period with very favourable polling. Many took the view that Kishida's cabinet was just a rehash of Abe's cabinet, and that no new policy initiatives were to be expected.

In addition to falling in line with his appointments, Kishida also had to tone down his substantive demands. Because of the support he received from Abe he felt compelled to row back on his criticisms of Abe's policies, known somewhat immodestly as 'Abenomics'. While he explained that growth can be achieved only by way of redistribution in a

speech to the lower house on 8 October, he rowed back shortly afterwards stressing that growth first had to be ensured so that there was something to distribute. In short, Kishida reboarded the Abenomics train. After all, 'redistribution through growth' is shorthand for 'trickle down' and a commitment to neoliberal economic policies; never mind that most economic experts now believe that eight years of Abenomics did not accomplish most of its goals – and hence turned out to be a failure overall.

Why the LDP could still win

There are three main reasons why, nevertheless, the LDP is once again ahead in the polls. First, the widespread disenchantment with politics, which has led to a dramatic fall in turnout since Shinzo Abe's period in office. While up to 2009 around 60 to 70 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote, since 2012 the figure has been only around 50 per cent. This favours the LDP, however, because of its staunch voter base. The opposition, by contrast, only has a chance if it manages to mobilise non-voters in large numbers. This happened in 2009, for example, when a record turnout of almost 70 per cent led the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to an overwhelming election victory.

The LDP is trying to stir up fears of a 'red menace'.

Second, few voters trust the opposition to govern Japan efficiently. The image of the DPJ stricken by the threefold catastrophe of 2011 – a major earthquake in eastern Japan, a tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear accident – continues to blight the opposition. And the LDP misses no opportunity to rub salt into the wounds of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), the DPJ's successor party.

Third, the Covid-19 situation in Japan has recently improved. Although, according to international polling, the Japanese people didn't particularly like Abe's and Suga's Covid-19 measures, since September infections have been falling and the fifth wave seems to be over. This has eased popular resentment at previous failings in curbing the pandemic and boosting the vaccination campaign, and made it harder for the opposition to cultivate support.

The loyal LDP base will make sure that the party wins a majority of the 289 direct mandates. Even if the opposition parties achieve a higher percentage of second votes than the LDP, and manage a larger share of the 176 seats allocated by proportional representation, at the end of the day the LDP will remain the strongest party. If it fails to win an absolute

majority of 233 seats, however – which would mean a loss of over 40 seats (currently 276) – this is likely to lead to more turmoil within the party.

There is a spark of hope for the opposition at the constituency level, at which direct mandates are allocated. While two or even more opposition party candidates often compete for a single mandate in constituencies, leaving the LDP candidate to sweep in to take the prize, this time the PCD and other opposition parties – including the Communist Party – have agreed to put up joint candidates. In response, the LDP is trying to stir up fears of a 'red menace'. It has clearly been rattled by this cooperation – similar to recent election campaigns in other countries. But if the opposition parties' strategy succeeds, politics in Japan could be given new momentum.



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