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Japanese Politics: “Season Three”

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Japanese Lower House elections were held last month in which the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won a staggering 294 seats, more than twice what it had before the election, with the incumbent Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) seat tally decimated from 230 to 57. Together with the LDP’s coalition partner the Clean Government Party (CGP or New Komeito), Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s second administration has control of more than two-thirds of the seats in the Lower House, which enables him to still pass legislation even if rejected in the Upper House.

Hirofumi Kawaguchi, Ph.D.
Candidate at the University of Tokyo, explains that “The LDP’s landslide victory does not mean that Japanese voters enthusiastically support the LDP.”

However, the LDP’s landslide victory does not mean that Japanese voters enthusiastically support the LDP. First, voter turnout for this election was only 59 percent, the lowest turnout since WWII. In addition, the LDP did not collect an overwhelming number of votes, despite its high seat tally. Japan has a mixed parallel electoral system for the Lower House, which is composed of 300 single-member district (SMD) and 180 proportional representation (PR) seats.

Since most of the seats are distributed through SMDs, the system tends to favor large parties. Though the LDP won 237 or 79 percent of the SMD seats, only 43 percent of voters actually supported the LDP for these seats. Furthermore, the remaining 57 PR seats are actually only two more than what they won in the last election in 2009 and the actual total number of votes cast this time around for the LDP is actually lower compared to that election. The LDP only ended up winning because voter turnout was low and the DPJ radically lost votes to other newly created parties.

So what did the Japanese people vote for? Japanese voters were more interested in domestic economic issues than foreign policy. A public opinion poll conducted immediately after the election by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper reported that 35 percent of respondents were most interested in the economy and employment. On other issues, 30 percent mentioned the consumption tax and social security; 12 percent constitutional revision, foreign policy, and security; and 17 percent energy issues, including nuclear energy.

In a reflection of the popular attention to economics, Japanese media is focusing on Abe’s economic policy, “Abenomics,” including setting inflation targets and closer governmental policy cooperation with the Bank of Japan. The fact that Abe has selected former Prime Minister Taro Aso as his Minister of Finance has been taken to signal Abe’s prioritization of economic issues.

The December 2012 election appears to be “Season Three” in the now long-running sitcom of recent Japanese politics, with the timing of Upper and Lower House



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elections resulting in opposing parties in control of each chamber. In the Lower House election of 2005, the LDP won 296 seats, 62 percent of all the seats and in the 2007 Upper House election, the LDP only won 37 seats, 31 percent of the available 121 seats. From 2007 to 2009, the LDP administration remained very weak since opposition parties in the Japanese Upper House were relatively strong resulting in a different LDP prime minister every year.

In the Lower House election in 2009, the DPJ gained 308 seats, but in the 2010 Upper House election, the DPJ only secured 44 seats out of the 121 contested. Like the LDP, the DPJ administration remained weak with a new DPJ prime minister once a year. Thus, although the LDP has overwhelmingly won this past election, it does not mean that its future ability to rule is ensured.

Though illness was cited as one of the main reasons for Prime Minister Abe’s resignation in 2007, the LDP’s earlier loss in the Upper House election that year was another factor. Based on failures from that last administration, Abe will have to carefully manage this administration to win the next Upper House election scheduled for next July. Since the ruling parties do not have a majority in the Upper House yet, much hinges on the results of that election. If the LDP loses, the legitimacy of Abe’s new administration will be damaged. So even though new medicine may have made Abe healthier, whether he has improved his ability to run the country remains to be seen.

Abe is considered “hawkish” on foreign and security policy. However, he does not have a free hand on these policies. The CGP/New Komeito, the LDP’s coalition partner, is considered relatively dovish. This author, working at the University of Tokyo with Professor Masaki Taniguchi, Jeyong Sohn, and Michio Umeda, along with staff at the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, is analyzing just-released data from the Asahi-Todai Elite Survey, a questionnaire that was distributed to all election candidates in the Lower House.

The response rate to the survey was high, with 454 of 480 new House members answering. While 96 percent of LDP members agree with the idea that Japan’s defensive power should be increased, only 20 percent of CGP members concur. And 96 percent of LDP respondents believe that either the constitution or its interpretation should be changed so that the government can exercise the right to collective self-defense, but only 13 percent of CGP members think likewise. This gap between the LDP and the CGP may prevent Prime Minister Abe from realizing his ideas on foreign policy issues, at least until the next Upper House election.

But if the LDP does gain a single-party majority in the Upper House or a combined majority with the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) and/or the Your Party (YP), the CGP’s power in this administration may be weakened. In fact, on foreign policy issues, the JRP and the YP are closer than the CGP to the LDP. The Asahi-Todai Elite Survey data shows that 94 percent of JRP members and 83 percent of YP members want to increase Japan’s defensive capabilities, with 96 percent of JRP members and 83 percent of YP members thinking that Japan should be able to exercise collective self-defense.

However, the LDP is not consistent with the JRP and the YP on trade policy. While only 8 percent of LDP members agree with the idea that Japan should participate in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), 78 percent of JRP members and 78 percent of YP members agree with the idea. Whether Abe will reach out and coordinate with the JRP and YP is a matter of great importance for both Japan’s foreign and trade policy, along with Japan’s future role in the Asia-Pacific.