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Japan's Domestic Politics Prior to President Obama's Visit

BY CHIHIRO OKAWA

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) currently maintains high approval ratings prior to President Barack Obama's visit to Japan later this month. Abe has learned a great deal from the failure of his first cabinet in 2006-2007, and this time around is determined not to make the mistakes that cost him the premiership seven years ago. However, data from the University of Tokyo–Asahi Survey (UTAS), conducted by Masaki Taniguchi of the University of Tokyo and the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, show that Abe still has to win the confidence of the Japanese public on a number of critical economic and foreign policy issues.

One question for Abe to consider is what policies he should prioritize going forward. Judging from the UTAS data, the answer is the economy. During the long economic recession in Japan, voters and politicians have consistently emphasized economic and welfare issues.

The LDP's base has traditionally been rural voters and previous LDP governments have consistently redistributed the fruits of postwar economic growth from cities to rural areas to solidify that political base. However, the economic stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s led many urban voters to grow increasingly frustrated with the government's generous allocation of fiscal resources to rural districts.

In 2001, LDP leader Junichiro Koizumi became prime minister, a position that he held until 2006. His neoliberal program of structural economic reforms during this period attracted many Japanese voters—especially urbanites. Koizumi's policy of economic reforms also influenced other LDP politicians, including Abe. A UTAS poll of politicians from 2005 shows a decline in support for Abe and other LDP members for their policies of promoting "more public works and government spending," instead there was a dramatic policy position shift in favor of Koizumi's policies of economic reform.

In contrast, Taro Aso was a proponent of increased government spending and when he was prime minister from September 2008 to September 2009, the LDP shifted back once again to major government funded works. By the 2012 general election, voters were again more interested in the economy, as were LDP politicians. Today, Abe's economic policy, known as "Abenomics," emphasizes the importance of public works and government spending, though with some structural reforms.

Voters remain supportive of the public investment element of Abenomics, but if the LDP redistributes too much income to rural areas, there is a potential for backlash from urban voters, who appear to be increasingly interested in issues such as healthcare, welfare, childcare, and education. Furthermore, urban voters have more weight in elections, and these voters are more prone to change party affiliation. Today, it is urban voters who hold the key to electoral victory and Abe has to take their concerns into account.

Chihiro Okawa, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Kanagawa University, explains that "Looking ahead to President Obama's visit, Abe knows that the economy is his number one domestic priority and clearly Japan's economic revival and reform are also issues of interest to the United States."

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On non-economic issues Abe’s political ideology, however, is more conservative and hawkish than many of those in his own party, and certainly more so than lawmakers in Komeito—the LDP coalition partner—and the average Japanese voter. His visit to Yasukuni Shrine last December provoked both China and Korea, and “disappointed” the United States. In March, Abe speaking in the Diet once again referred to the need for Japan to “escape the postwar regime.” Few doubt that Abe is a genuine conservative, heavily influenced by his late grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi.

Abe’s conservative beliefs are very controversial in Japan. Once the administration’s support starts to ebb—for example, if Abenomics begin to stall—it will become more difficult for him further his conservative political agenda. That is why he is attempting to speed up a review of the constitutional interpretation of Article Nine to enable Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense. According to a UTAS poll of politicians in 2012, Abe strongly advocated exercising that right whereas most Komeito politicians do not. Other LDP politicians are also more willing to exercise Japan’s right to collective self-defense than before, though a number of prominent LDP figures have publicly insisted that further informed debate on the matter is required.

Japan has not experienced a military confrontation since World War II, so it is very difficult for many voters to comprehend the meaning of the right of collective self-defense. At the same time, many in Japan are becoming increasingly concerned about rising tensions between Japan and its neighbors, specifically China. The Abe administration has to carefully explain how constitutional reinterpretation of Article Nine would contribute to regional stability and further strengthen the US-Japan alliance. It is this author’s concern that excessive emphasis by Abe on Japan’s need to “escape the postwar regime” may create divisions in the LDP-Komeito coalition, and centrist and moderate voters may withdraw their support for Abe.

Opposition parties are too small to threaten the LDP at this moment in time as there is no one party that has enough public support to challenge Abe, and this is contributing to Abe’s political survival. There are also policy differences between the parties over political system reforms and foreign policy. Issues such as Japan’s participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations or the restart of nuclear power plants reveal a wide range of policy positions, not only within the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)—the largest opposition party—but also within other parties.

As long as Abe can continue to maintain public support, the opposition parties will have a difficult task in regaining power. The DPJ continues to remain in political limbo since their resounding defeat in 2012. Indeed, it is currently uncertain whether the DPJ will be able to survive intact as a single party, so serious are the internal divisions. In terms of policy positions, however, the DPJ has a more centrist stance than other opposition parties. It is still possible that the party might be able to build a consensus with others, particularly on socioeconomic issues. One fact that could emerge by the next Lower House election is that the opposition parties cooperate together in some form against the LDP, though at this moment in time it is still too early to predict how that may unfold.

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Looking ahead to President Obama’s visit, Abe knows that the economy is his number one domestic priority and clearly Japan’s economic revival and reform are also issues of interest to the United States. Strengthening the US-Japan alliance is also an important point for both countries. However, Abe’s goal of revising Article Nine, which the United States appears to support, is not yet a top priority for Japanese voters. In addition, Abe’s conservative position continues to alienate neighboring countries including South Korea, another close US ally in Northeast Asia. Taking all this into account, it is feasible to predict that it is going to a difficult task for Abe to revise Article Nine and it may even cost him his premiership.

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