

Japan: Right-wing Osaka Mayor launches a new party

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Hashimoto to lead his national party but will remain mayor

OSAKA – Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto will head a new national party that he and his Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) local political group aim to form before the next general election, Osaka Ishin no Kai officials said Friday.

However, Hashimoto has repeatedly stated he will not run in the next Lower House election himself, raising questions over who would represent his national party in the Diet.

The news that Hashimoto will serve as leader of the new party comes as the mayor and influential supporters in both Osaka and Tokyo plan to meet over the coming week with a growing number of Diet members and others who they hope to tap as candidates for a Lower House poll.

Osaka Ishin no Kai plans to formally announce its plans to create a national party Sept. 8, Hashimoto said Friday.

A public debate is scheduled to be held the following day in Osaka between Osaka Ishin no Kai, Diet lawmakers and local politicians, and will be attended by Hashimoto's political allies and financial backers. Local Osaka media and the mayor's supporters are dubbing it Japan's political Å and social Å event of the year.

"A lot of people who have said they support Hashimoto are now nervous, awaiting an invitation. But we're in a position to pick and choose," an Osaka Ishin no Kai member, who requested to remain anonymous, told reporters earlier in the week.

The debate, which will focus on Osaka Ishin no Kai's political platform for the envisioned national party, will also serve as an opportunity to confirm the support of old allies – or to part ways with them. In recent weeks, Hashimoto's relations with longtime supporters Yoshimi Watanabe, head of Your Party, and Nagoya Mayor Takashi Kawamura, who heads the local Genzai Nippon (Tax Reduction Japan) group but has designs to go national, have been strained.

Your Party, which has five members in the House of Representatives and 11 in the Upper House, appeared in danger of splitting apart this week after three members indicated they wish to join Hashimoto's new party. Meanwhile, Kawamura's differences with Osaka Ishin no Kai over the tax system have been deepening, but Nagoya's mayor is still expected to participate in the debate.

On Friday, eight Diet members from several parties, including the ruling Democratic Party of Japan and the Liberal Democratic Party, met in Tokyo to discuss a potential tieup with Hashimoto. The group is expected to form a study panel next week to formally examine the possibility of cooperating with Hashimoto's new party. Most, if not all, of the lawmakers will travel to Osaka for the public debate.

Osaka Ishin no Kai remains confident its national party - which would aim to field 300 candidates nationwide and hope to win 200 Diet seats in the next election - will capture around 50 Lower House seats in the Kansai region alone. Pundits in the national media predict Hashimoto-backed candidates could grab anywhere from 80 to 130 seats in a national vote.

It also has agreed not to run in six Kansai electoral districts where New Komeito plans to field its own candidates, because the two groups are currently cooperating to form a majority in the Osaka Municipal Assembly.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Sep. 1, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120901a8.html>

Vows include more political control, defense boost: Hashimoto releases national manifesto

OSAKA - The policy platform for a new national party Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto and his local political group plan to establish calls for enhanced control by elected officials over the bureaucracy and an end to the ban on Internet campaigning.

The pledges released Friday night by Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) party also promise a tougher, more robust defense of Japan's sovereignty and to push for a national referendum on revising the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution.

Officially dubbed the "Eight Point Restoration" ("Ishin Hassaku"), the manifesto touches on more than a dozen topics and includes promises to abolish the Upper House, halve the number of Lower House seats to 240 and introduce a system to directly elect prime ministers.

It also calls for strengthening the functions of the Lower House and cutting Diet members' political party donations and perks by 30 percent.

The platform pledges to fundamentally reform the top levels of the central bureaucracy, including the appointment of vice ministers and bureau chiefs by politicians and throwing open many lower level positions to nonbureaucrats.

Many of these reforms are designed to meet another key pledge: the realization of a regional system of government that would end the prefectural framework, strip the central government of many of

its current powers and create between nine and 13 semiautonomous regional governments.

To achieve this goal, the manifesto includes promises to work to abolish the current local tax system and turn the consumption tax into a regional levy. But it does not state whether it supports or opposes a rise in the sales tax.

On Article 9, Hashimoto is proposing that its revision be put to a national referendum, a move favored by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, with whom Hashimoto has grown close in recent weeks.

Both Abe, who is expected to run in the Liberal Democratic Party's presidential election later this month, and Osaka Ishin no Kai have said they favor some form of cooperation between the LDP and Hashimoto's national party after the next general election.

On other issues, the platform comes out in support of Japan's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade initiative and calls for Japan to end its dependency on nuclear power, although it provides no plan to achieve this goal.

With an eye toward the territorial disputes with China over the Senkaku Islands and South Korea over the Takeshima islets, the manifesto calls for enhanced self-defense measures.

"We will improve policies and defense measures to use our own power to protect Japan's sovereignty and territory," it states.

On foreign relations, it is oriented toward maintaining the status quo, describing the Japan-U.S. security treaty as the cornerstone of the nation's foreign and defense policies. Reflecting previous comments by Hashimoto, the platform pledges to create a new plan that would oblige the rest of the country to do more about U.S. military bases in Okinawa Prefecture, though it fails to provide any details.

"We'll create a new road map for all of Japan to reduce Okinawa's burden" from hosting the bases, the manifesto says.

But it does not touch on the relocation of U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma from Ginowan to the less populated Nago area, both on Okinawa Island, or the scheduled deployment to Futenma of controversial MV-22 Ospreys next month.

Finally, the manifesto calls for lifting the ban on election campaigning via the Internet. Under current law, candidates are not permitted to use social media during official campaign periods, a law that Hashimoto, who at times sends out dozens of messages a day on Twitter, has said is more reminiscent of a dictatorship than a flourishing democracy.

The platform is expected to be formally adopted by Osaka Ishin no Kai next Saturday, and the new national party is set to be launched sometime in mid-September.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Sep. 2, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120902a1.html>

Defections to Osaka mayor's new political force expected to climb —

Hashimoto sets new national party, names it Nippon Ishin no Kai

OSAKA - Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto's new national party, Nippon Ishin no Kai, or the Japan Restoration Party, was announced Saturday at a meeting of his local party, Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka).

The new party aims to capture a majority of the 480 seats in the next Lower House election, for which preparations are continuing to accelerate.

The party decided that Hashimoto will be the head of the new party and Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, secretary general of Osaka Ishin no Kai, will be the secretary general of the national party until the next Lower House election.

"After the national election, the party will vote for who it wants to lead it," Hashimoto said after the meeting, which was attended by politicians in the Osaka Municipal and Prefectural assemblies, as well as the Sakai Municipal Assembly.

It is most likely that Hashimoto will be elected as the party chief.

But Hashimoto said he won't run for a seat in the Diet, raising the prospect of the head of the ruling party being not the prime minister but mayor of Osaka.

"There are a lot of things I have to do as Osaka mayor to realize the creation of one Osaka political entity," Hashimoto said.

The name of the new party was decided after Hashimoto consulted with senior officials of his local group, including Matsui.

Internal affairs minister Kazuhiro Haraguchi, a Lower House member of the Democratic Party of Japan, heads a political group that already goes by the name Nippon Ishin no Kai, but Matsui said there will be no problems using it.

"It was important to keep the word 'restoration' in the party name and I don't think it's a problem to call it Nippon Ishin no Kai because it's a national party" and there will be little cause for confusion, Matsui told reporters Friday evening.

In addition, Hashimoto and Matsui reached an agreement with New Komeito not to field candidates in nine districts the Buddhist-backed party plans to contest. These include four districts in Osaka Prefecture, two in Hyogo, and one in each in Hokkaido, Tokyo and Kanagawa.

Osaka Ishin no Kai has a close relationship with New Komeito and must cooperate with it in the Osaka Municipal Assembly to form a majority. Cooperation after the Lower House election can be expected as well.

In his opening remarks at a meeting Saturday of the local group, Hashimoto, 43, thanked the members for their efforts to support the merger between the city of Osaka and the prefecture. He said those efforts kept pressure on the Diet to pass legislation last month that paves the way toward that goal. But the mayor said there is still work to be done at both the local and national level, including drafting a detailed merger plan and putting it to a referendum.

"The problem of the separation between Osaka and Osaka Prefecture is one that goes back to the Meiji Era. This created lots of friction between the prefectural and city assemblies and bureaucracies. Overcoming this divide is why we created Osaka Ishin no Kai," Hashimoto said.

But Osaka Ishin no Kai realized that many national regulations stood in the way, and that the central political and bureaucratic systems were not functioning because the politicians in Nagata-cho and the bureaucrats in Kasumigaseki were blocking change, he said.

“Thus, to continue to realize the goal of one Osaka, we have to reform Japan,” Hashimoto said. “For localities around Japan to stand on their own, we realized that we had to change the way things were being done at the national level.”

As of Saturday morning, seven Diet members from both chambers were planning to defect to the Japan Restoration Party.

From the DPJ they included Lower House members Yoriyori Matsuno and Takashi Ishizeki, and Upper House member Masahi Mito.

Others were Your Party members Fumiki Sakurauchi, Hiroshi Ueno and Shinji Oguma of the Upper House, and Kinki region Liberal Democratic Party member Kenta Matsunami of the Lower House.

All seven men were expected to be in Osaka on Sunday for a public debate on the Japan Restoration Party’s campaign platform, which it released at the end of August.

Former Miyazaki Gov. Hideo Higashikokubaru, former Yokohama Mayor Hiroshi Nakata and Nagoya Mayor Takashi Kawamura are also expected to participate.

The Japan Restoration Party is expected to be officially up and running after Osaka Ishin no Kai holds a fundraising party next Wednesday.

Sunday’s debate will center on its campaign platform, which is officially called the Eight Point Restoration plan.

It emphasizes smaller government, decentralization, and fundamental reform of the tax system, including turning the nationwide consumption tax into a regional tax.

The Lower House would be halved to 240 seats, with the office of prime minister open to public election.

A number of bureaucratic reforms designed to wrest power from the bureaucrats and return it to politicians will be discussed Sunday, including the creation of new Cabinet-level positions that would have greater authority over budgetary matters.

On foreign policy and defense, participants will reaffirm the importance of the U.S.-Japan security treaty and of Japan’s territorial and sovereign rights. Hashimoto’s platform calls for closer diplomatic and defense relations with South Korea and Australia, and is reminiscent of moves by the U.S. over the past few years to strengthen security ties with those countries.

Hashimoto’s popularity and his party’s emergence have created an upheaval in the political scene. With talk of a Lower House election in November growing, it appears that Japan Restoration Party candidates would likely capture around 50 seats in the Kansai region alone.

Media pundits and some members of Osaka Ishin no Kai say they might win up to 130 direct and proportional representation seats nationwide.

At the moment, it looks like the party is set to field anywhere from 300 to 350 candidates.

With the realization in Tokyo that the Japan Restoration Party could well be a member of the ruling coalition after the election, the established parties are likely to see defections climb sharply in the coming weeks.

But Osaka Ishin no Kai's leaders are hoping to reach a coalition agreement with politicians who share their goals, especially those in the LDP who support former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a nationalist who has close ties with Hashimoto and Matsui.

But while making national plans, Hashimoto and Matsui will have to deal with growing concern among Osaka Ishin no Kai members in the city and prefectural assemblies that Hashimoto and Matsui are overextending themselves.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Sep. 9, 2012
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120909a1.html>

New-right-wing Osaka Mayor: Seven in Diet quit parties to join Hashimoto's camp: Election-bent defectors hail from DPJ, LDP, Your Party

Seven lawmakers from the ruling and opposition parties submitted their resignations Tuesday and officially declared their intention to join Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto's new national party.

With the participation of more than five incumbent lawmakers, the new Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) will be able to legally become a political party and have its candidates run for both single-seat district proportional representation seats in the next Lower House election.

Hashimoto is expected to declare the party's official launch Wednesday in Osaka.

Former Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoriyoshi Matsuno, Takashi Ishizeki and Masashi Mito from the ruling Democratic Party of Japan gave their letters of resignation to the party's leadership Tuesday morning.

"I felt the limitations of existing political parties . . . and wanted to stand on a new stage without any strings attached to do my job for the people," Matsuno told a news conference.

Kenta Matsunami from the Liberal Democratic Party also notified his party's executives Tuesday afternoon of his decision to bolt, while Shinji Oguma, Hiroshi Ueno and Fumiki Sakurachi left Your Party.

"The current situation between the DPJ and LDP has turned into a political mudslinging match. To establish a system in which political decisions can be made, a new, different force . . . is necessary," Matsunami stressed.

The new party will have an unusual structure of having its leader, Hashimoto, in Osaka, while the lawmakers will be based in Tokyo. But members brushed aside concerns that the geographical difference will affect the party's decision-making process.

"We've held internal talks on this, and agreed that the lawmakers will be able to make decisions independently but will discuss broad principles with our leader, Mr. Hashimoto," Matsunami said.

The popular Hashimoto is gearing up for the next Lower House election, which could be held as early as this fall, depending on when Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda ultimately decides to call it.

Political observers expect that no single party will be able to win a majority in the Lower House on its own and a coalition government will have to be formed.

MASAMI ITO, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Sep. 12, 2012
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120912a6.html>

Hashimoto launches party amid workload, universal appeal doubts

OSAKA - Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto's new national political party, Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party), was officially launched Wednesday with the aim of fundamentally changing the way the nation is governed.

Recruitment of candidates to run on the party's ticket in the next Lower House election will now begin, it was announced at a fundraising party Wednesday evening for Hashimoto's local political group Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka).

Hashimoto unveiled the group's logo to the more than 3,000 supporters who jammed an Osaka hotel ballroom for the occasion.

The event boasted a map of Japan that included not only the four main islands and Okinawa, but also the Japan-controlled Senkaku islets, which are also claimed by China, the Takeshima islets, which are held by South Korea, where they are called Dokdo, and the four Russian-held islands off Hokkaido that Japan has wanted back since Soviet forces seized them at the end of the war.

Hashimoto's party platform calls for proactive defense of Japanese sovereignty and territories. It did not specify how it would deal with territory Japan claims but no longer has control over.

Hashimoto's party will also be the first on a national level that is based in Osaka instead of Tokyo. Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, the party's secretary general, said there will be a branch in Tokyo and, if there is interest, in other locations.

Candidates for the next general election will be selected from among the current seven Diet members who joined the fledgling party, the 888 students currently attending Hashimoto's political training school and others whom Hashimoto judges to have sufficient government experience.

But amid bold predications by party leaders that they will take control of the Lower House, fundamental differences between Hashimoto and the seven Diet members who officially founded the party, growing concern in Osaka that the mayor has overextended himself, and worries about the party's nationwide appeal to a broad range of voters, particularly female, put something of a damper on the occasion.

The seven Diet members who joined the new party take exception to part of its platform, released at the end of August.

However, for Hashimoto and Osaka Ishin no Kai, differences over most issues are less important

than the fact all seven have shown strong support for the merger of Osaka Prefecture and the city of Osaka, and for the radical abolition of the current prefectural system, which dates to the late 1800s and the end of the feudal period, and for creation of an unprecedented semi-autonomous regional block system.

Hashimoto recently hinted there is room for flexibility in the platform, especially on the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade initiative, which he favors but over which former Democratic Party of Japan Lower House member Yoriyoshi Matsuno, who is emerging as the most influential Diet member in the new party, takes exception to. Lawmakers depending on voters from the government-subsidized rural regions generally oppose the TPP, as do farmers, formerly the mainstay backers of the ex-ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

“The platform is not a public promise. It’s a way to confront the DPJ and the LDP. It’s also a good opportunity to re-examine the idea of elections based on manifestos,” Hashimoto said before a discussion Sunday with the seven Diet members.

“When choosing candidates for his party, Hashimoto will prioritize their willingness to support the Osaka merger and push for decentralization via the creation of a regional system,” said Yuji Yoshitomi, an Osaka-based journalist and author of books about Osaka politics. “These are the issues he and members of Osaka Ishin no Kai got elected on. But he may not be as rigid on other issues, like the TPP.”

And Osaka voters have growing concerns about the new party. Local media polls Monday and Tuesday showed many did not understand why Hashimoto felt the need to create a national party now, and that he should concentrate on doing more as mayor.

Other Osaka residents worried he would be less effective as mayor while heading up the new party at the same time. And Osaka Ishin no Kai members in the city and prefectural assemblies increasingly fear a voter backlash if Hashimoto can’t devote his full attention to achieving the Osaka merger in the next couple of years.

There is also concern among Hashimoto’s advisers over how broad, nationally, the new party’s appeal will be. His biggest supporters are socially conservative urban males in their late 20s through late 40s, and media are already dubbing the party a “boy’s club.” Of the 105 local-level politicians in Osaka Ishin no Kai, only nine are women, and there were no female participants in Sunday’s discussion.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Sep. 13, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120913a3.html>

New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Osaka Ishin no Kai to vow Lower House cuts

OSAKA - A pledge to halve the number of seats in the Lower House will be included in the Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) manifesto for the next election, party founder and Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto said Sunday.

“If they’re squeezed to do more work, the Lower House doesn’t need 480 members,” Hashimoto told

an audience in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture. "Our party will seek to halve the number to 240."

Hashimoto didn't specify whether the reduction would impact mainly single-seat constituencies or the proportional representation system.

"Lots of Diet members are now approaching Osaka Ishin no Kai and saying, 'Let's work together.' But if we ask them whether it's OK to reduce the number of seats from 480 to 240, most of them just fade away," he added.

Hashimoto's group, which is aiming for national status, will finish putting together its platform for the next Lower House election this week. Other pledges are expected to include a 30 percent cut in pay and political donations for all Diet members. Hashimoto and Diet members weighing a tieup with Osaka Ishin no Kai will hold a public discussion on the party's platform in Osaka in early September.

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is being courted by Hashimoto and Osaka Ishin no Kai, said on a TV program Saturday he might cooperate with the Osaka mayor on such issues as revising the Constitution.

One shared target is Article 96, which stipulates a two-thirds majority of Diet votes is required to amend the Constitution. Hashimoto and Abe want to lower the threshold to a simple majority.

Hashimoto has yet to formally sign on to another ambition of Abe and other conservatives - revising Article 9, the so-called war renouncing clause, but past comments indicate he would favor its revision.

Abe, who is likely to run for president of the Liberal Democratic Party next month, has ruled out forming a new party with Hashimoto. But he has left open the possibility of an LDP-Osaka Ishin no Kai coalition after the Lower House election.

A recent adultery scandal and his claim there was no evidence Korean women and girls were forced into sexual servitude by the Japanese military during the war don't appear to have dented Hashimoto's popularity.

In mid-August, local and national media polls and Osaka politicians predicted that Osaka Ishin no Kai supporters would be able to secure at least 50 Lower House seats in the Kansai region and as many as 160 nationwide.

Hashimoto said his group aims to field 300 candidates in the election and win 200 seats.

Other emerging local political groups that plan to support national candidates, such as Aichi Gov. Hideaki Omura's Chukyo Ishin no Kai, share many of Hashimoto's goals and are potential partners.

In Ehime, Gov. Tokihiro Nakamura, long a Hashimoto ally, is expected to back local Osaka Ishin no Kai-backed candidates.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Aug. 28, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120828a9.html>

New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Platform pushes major Diet, national revamps. **Hashimoto calls Diet ranks to form party**

OSAKA – Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto will personally appeal to Diet members to join a new political party he is forming in mid-September and run in the next Lower House election, sources in his local political group said Tuesday.

The formal announcement of the new party is expected to be made at a fundraiser for Hashimoto's Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) on Sept. 12. A public discussion between Hashimoto and Diet members interested in Osaka Ishin no Kai's platform for the national election, which is expected to be finalized by the end of this week, will take place in Osaka on Sept. 9, immediately following the end of the current Diet session, the sources said.

"We're not going to call on political parties to participate in the public discussion. We want to speak to Diet members individually," Osaka Gov. and Osaka Ishin no Kai Secretary General Ichiro Matsui said Monday.

In addition to halving the number of Lower House seats to 240, the new party platform is expected to call for ending the prefectural system of government and creating a system of between nine and 13 regions with greater autonomy.

Fundamental reform of the tax system, including turning the national consumption tax into a local tax, will be part of the platform. Hashimoto is also expected to support Japan's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade agreement.

To become a national party, Hashimoto needs the formal participation of five current Diet members. Democratic Party of Japan Lower House member Yoriyoshi Matsuno and Liberal Democratic Party Lower House member Kenta Matsunami have been in talks with Hashimoto for the past few weeks about forming a new party and are expected to join, and Osaka Ishin no Kai officials are confident they already have five members lined up.

Formal solicitation of potential candidates for the new party is expected to begin following the Sept. 9 meeting. While the majority are expected to come from the Kansai region, Hashimoto aims to attract candidates in other parts of Japan where he and Osaka Ishin no Kai are particularly popular, especially Ehime Prefecture, northern Kyushu, Niigata Prefecture and parts of the Kanto region.

A number of candidates will also come from the political school that Hashimoto established in March. There are 888 students there currently studying the art of political campaigning.

Hashimoto intends to endorse the most promising students in the Lower House election. But many in Osaka Ishin no Kai have long been concerned that selecting only students from the school as its candidates could result in a group of Diet members with no governing experience. In recent weeks, they have been sounding out experienced Diet members about joining the party.

Some, like former LDP Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, declined the invitation to join a new party but suggested that some sort of postelection tieup between the LDP and Hashimoto was possible.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times* Staff writer, Aug. 29, 2012

Diet passes Osaka merger plan; Hashimoto must sell it — Bid to gut ranks of the legislature, bureaucracies also no done deal

OSAKA - Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, achieving a major political goal, welcomed the Diet's passage Wednesday of legislation to merge the Osaka prefectural and municipal governments.

Now talk is turning toward the increasingly influential national role Hashimoto and his Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) local group will play in the next Lower House election, with the popular mayor announcing specific numerical goals for a slimmed-down Diet.

"It took a long time, but finally the Diet passed the merger legislation. However, we're just standing at the entrance and more work needs to be done," Hashimoto said Thursday.

The Diet's approval of the Osaka merger plan paves the way for turning the entire prefecture into one governmental entity, the same as Tokyo, with wards that have a great deal of autonomy. However, there is a long way to go to actually achieve this. The exact ward structure has to be decided and agreed on by local governments.

The plan then has to be put to a local referendum, which Hashimoto hopes to have held by early 2015. This has led to speculation about whether he and Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, who serves as secretary general of Osaka ish in no Kai, would remain in their posts until then or quit and run in the next Lower House election, which must be held no later than next summer.

Hashimoto and Matsui have both previously denied they will run for the Diet. they repeated that assertion following Wednesday's passage of the merger bill.

"To get the Osaka merger approved by referendum, we first have to present a convincing case, and we want to work to get a mandate," Matsui said Wednesday.

In the meantime, Hashimoto's plans for a national party were accelerating Thursday. A party platform is expected to be ready by around mid-September, but Hashimoto said earlier this week he wants to include a pledge to halve the number of Lower House seats from the current 480 to 240. At his regular press briefing Thursday, he offered more details.

"The problem with the current Diet structure is that electoral districts are too small, so Diet members spend a lot of time attending local festivals like Bon dances. That's the kind of thing that should be done by local politicians so Diet members can think about national issues." My idea is to expand the electoral districts, and reduce the number of direct representatives to 150, about one representative for every 1 million people, and the number of proportional representatives to 90," Hashimoto said.

While he did not provide a figure, Hashimoto added he wants to see a corresponding reduction in the central government bureaucracy. This, he said, could then lead to realization of a semi-autonomous regional system to replace the 47 prefectures, which have been in existence since 1888.

Hashimoto's announcement that he wants to halve the Lower House has created shock waves among many Diet members, who argue that the plan would lead to increased control by the central

bureaucrats because there would be fewer politicians to keep them in check.

Hashimoto said Thursday it is important to keep the roles of the bureaucracy and elected representatives separate, and that it isn't a question of numbers of politicians and bureaucrats as much as clearly defined roles and responsibilities between the bureaucrats and the politicians.

With Wednesday's passage, talks between Diet members who share Hashimoto's views about some form of cooperation are expected to accelerate. Osaka Ishin no Kai officials say they have approached ultraconservative members of the Liberal Democratic Party, including former Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa, about some sort of tieup that would lead to Hashimoto's group becoming a bona fide political party.

Nakagawa says such talks have been unofficial. As of Thursday, between 15 and 30 Diet members have expressed serious interest in either joining the new party or a coalition, Osaka Ishin no Kai officials said. That number will likely rise in the coming days, especially after a Sept. 9 public discussion in Osaka involving Hashimoto, Matsui and invited Diet members.

ERIC JOHNSTON, *Japan Times*, Aug. 31, 2012

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120831a3.htm>
