

Japan : Parties jockey over tax, nukes, TPP

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OSAKA - Whether to hike the consumption tax, join the Trans Pacific Partnership free-trade talks or abandon nuclear power are the three main issues on which the 16 parties vying in the Dec. 16 Lower House election will stand or fall, especially the smaller, single-issue groups that may be sought out for partnerships after the campaign.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's Democratic Party of Japan and its main rivals, the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito, worked together last summer to pass Noda's key bill to hike the consumption tax, but they strongly differ in their views on the TPP and nuclear power.

The position of Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party), which was founded by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto and is now run by former Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, is that the consumption tax should be a local-level levy, not a national one.

All of the other major parties, including Ichiro Ozawa's Kokumin no Seikatsu ga Daiichi (People's Life First) and Midori no Kaze (Green Wind), oppose the tax increase.

The TPP has created sharp internal divisions within the LDP and the DPJ, with members elected from rural districts largely opposed to the initiative, seeing it as dooming the farming sector, whereas legislators installed by urban voters tend to largely, like big corporations, advocate the initiative.

On Monday, former farm minister Masahiko Yamada effectively resigned from the DPJ and said he will team up with Shizuka Kamei, a veteran lawmaker who left the ruling bloc in April in protest of Noda's consumption tax hike.

Noda said that DPJ candidates who oppose the tax hike and his plan for the party to pursue Japan's participation in the TPP will not be officially endorsed in the election, which may trigger more defections as new allegiances are formed.

The LDP's position is more complicated. Party head Shinzo Abe has expressed a desire to join the negotiations, but the party opposes removing all tariffs, especially on agricultural products.

Nippon Ishin no Kai basically supports joining the TPP negotiations unless the agreement goes against the national interests. Your Party favors the TPP, as does Shinto Kaikaku (New Renaissance Party). All other parties oppose the agreement.

The nuclear power issue divides parties even more.

The DPJ position remains that it will try to end nuclear power as quickly as possible and promote renewable energy, though no target date has been formalized in its platform.

But the strongly pronuclear LDP's position is that it will decide on reactor restarts based on whether they are safe. However, the LDP wants all 48 still-idle reactors to be restarted within three years. The party remains hostile toward rushing into renewables, saying only that it hopes to introduce a stable supply of renewable power in a decade.

Nippon Ishin no Kai has gone from getting out of nuclear power by the 2030s, as Hashimoto had proposed, to a vague, general policy agreement with the pronuclear Ishihara that effectively scraps this goal. The party also favors the export of nuclear technology.

Some new parties hope to spur cooperation among themselves against big parties using their opposition to nuclear power, the TPP and the tax hike.

On Monday, Ozawa expressed readiness to join hands with the new party Kamei and Yamada created. Both parties oppose nuclear power.

« It's possible for us to fight together. We would like to promote cooperation with groups that can have the same stance in major policies such as nuclear power, the consumption tax and the TPP, » Ozawa said.

His party is calling for complete abolishment of nuclear plants in 10 years.

Ozawa is also reportedly seeking cooperation with Midori no Kaze, which was formed based on its opposition to nuclear power.

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P.-S.

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121121a1.html>