

Japan Lower Houwe Election - Abe's rightism: Campaign ploy or governance plan?

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The main election slogan of the Liberal Democratic Party, which polls say will prevail in the Dec. 16 general election, is "Restoring Japan," underlining its determination to reclaim the power it lost three years ago.

But which version of Japan does the LDP plan to restore?

Observers say that if the largest opposition party returns to power in the Lower House poll, it will likely reinstate two of its key mainstay policies - but in a much more radical shape than in the past.

In its campaign platform unveiled Nov. 21, the LDP advocates a hawkish foreign policy, a revision of the pacifist Constitution and a revival of the party's traditional economic remedy - huge public works spending, despite Japan's looming fiscal crisis and swelling social security expenditures.

More specifically, LDP President Shinzo Abe - the prospective prime minister - has pledged to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense, to make it easier for the Diet to propose revisions to the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution, and to rebrand the Self-Defense Forces as the National Defense Force (Kokubo-gun), which in Japanese sounds more militaristic.

All three issues have been considered strong political taboos since the end of the war.

Abe's rightist policies were originally advocated by the founders of the LDP, as well as his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who served as prime minister from 1957 to 1960 and bolstered the Japan-U.S. military alliance during his tenure.

During the last three years in the opposition, the LDP's traditional policies have become more conservative and rightwing than ever as it tried to cater to its core constituency, according to Jun Iio, a professor of politics at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.

"While in the opposition camp, a party usually prioritizes its original goals, rather than making realistic judgements on policies it would need to adopt if it were running the government," Iio told the *The Japan Times* in a recent interview.

"The core voters who have continued to support the LDP even after it lost power were those who can never bring themselves to support the ruling Democratic Party of Japan - they are too right-leaning," he said.

But Iio also noted that how far the LDP would actually pursue these campaign pledges if it wins power in December remains to be seen.

"It's clear (Abe) would not be able to carry out all that he is promising," Iio said, adding he believes Abe hasn't been able to form a solid consensus on his key diplomatic and economic policies even within the LDP. "Abe tried to differentiate the LDP from the DPJ by leaning far to the right. . . . It's possible that what he says as leader of the largest opposition party may be different from what he

would say and do as prime minister.”

Iio and many other political analysts point to the fact that the LDP, even with its major opposition ally, New Komeito, does not currently command an outright majority in the Upper House on its own, and could well find itself faced with a divided Diet if it forms the next government – at least until the next House of Councilors election in summer 2013.

New Komeito, and its sound electioneering machine, has supported the LDP since 1999, but as an advocate of pacifist policies, it opposes most of Abe’s ultraconservative diplomatic agenda, including similar goals he pushed during his brief stint as prime minister that ended five years ago.

“We should be cautious on changing the interpretation” of the war-renouncing Article 9 regarding the right of collective self-defense, New Komeito head Natsuo Yamaguchi said during a policy debate among the leaders of the nation’s 11 major political parties Friday at the Japan National Press Center.

The right of collective self-defense, as recognized under the U.N. Charter, allows a country to use military force against an aggressor attacking an ally.

Postwar administrations have all interpreted the Constitution as prohibiting Japan from exercising this right, but Abe and other rightwing LDP members have long argued the country should be allowed to use this right to strengthen its military alliance with the U.S.

Even if the LDP wins big in the Dec. 16 poll, Abe would still have to clear a number of tricky political hurdles to realize his dream.

To revise any of the Constitution’s articles, he would need to win the support of more than two-thirds of lawmakers in both chambers of the Diet and also put the issue to a national referendum, as required by Article 96. More than half of the voters would then have to support a constitutional revision in the plebiscite.

Abe’s LDP has said it would begin by proposing that Article 96 of the Constitution be revised to reduce the legislative requirement from two-thirds to half of the members of the Lower and Upper houses. However, this in itself would likely cause a big stir both inside and outside the Diet.

“(The LDP) may soften its stance if it takes office. In any country, (a party) trying to seize power tends to advocate somewhat exaggerated policies,” Iio, the politics professor, noted.

Abe may already be easing off a little. During the public policy debate held by the 11 party leaders Friday, he toned down his provocative and hawkish stance a little, while carefully trying not to give voters the impression that he is making any major compromises.

Abe earlier indicated his government would revoke a 1993 statement by then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono admitting Japan’s culpability for forcing women into sexual slavery for its military during the war, but when asked about the issue Friday, the LDP chief said he would have to consult with historians before reaching a decision.

As for his controversial visits to Yasukuni Shrine, Abe again refused to indicate whether he would visit the war-related complex as prime minister, although he emphasized that Japan’s leader should demonstrate respect to those who have sacrificed their lives fighting for the country.

At the same time, political momentum appears to be growing, especially among younger politicians and older ultraconservative lawmakers, for revising the Constitution in one way or

another.

If their parties were to win a sizeable number of seats and rightwing members of the DPJ quit the party following its anticipated defeat Dec. 16, constitutional revision could become the issue that drives a realignment of the political status quo during the postelection turmoil many are predicting.

Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party), the rising new national party led by ultraconservative former Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, 80, and hawkish Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, 43, has pledged to create a new Constitution and, like the LDP, to allow Japan to engage in collective self-defense.

Many in the DPJ, in particular younger members, believe Japan should eventually become what they term “a normal country” by allowing the SDF to engage in far broader military missions than at present.

A National Policy Unit panel chaired by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in July recommended that the nation be allowed to engage in collective self-defense by 2050, in line with the DPJ leader’s personal view.

National policy minister and DPJ member Seiji Maehara, a staunch supporter of collective self-defense, recently said Article 9 should be revised to clearly state that Japan can possess a military – as is the reality – adding he, for one, believes the issue might trigger a realignment of political parties.

“I’m not in politics just to work for the DPJ. I may join forces with people with whom I share a similar vision” after the Lower House poll, Maehara told reporters Wednesday in Kyoto.

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121202a3.html>