



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 195 | January 10, 2012

Japan's Election: Watching the Wrong Hawks

BY CRYSTAL PRYOR

Most assessments in Washington immediately after Japan's December 2012 election have centered on what the old guard, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), coming back into power means for the US-Japan alliance, and the wider repercussions on Japan's relations in Asia, particularly given recent Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Western media coverage has also focused on the fact that newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe returned to power with an expressed desire to revise Japan's pacifist constitution and a hard-line stance on the conflicting sovereignty claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Such coverage not only misses the mark, but has obscured some important dynamics that make both this recent election and its results notable.

Crystal Pryor, recent Japan Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "While Abe has been termed a 'hawk' or 'nationalist' in Western media outlets, these terms carry different connotations in American discourse than they do in Japan."

Not About Nationalism or the LDP

First, while Abe has been termed a "hawk" or "nationalist" in Western media outlets, these terms carry different connotations in American discourse than they do in Japan. This is exemplified by domestic debates over "collective self-defense" or the dispatch of Japan's Self-Defense Forces to UN sponsored Peace Keeping Operations (PKOs). As the Japanese constitution is currently interpreted, Japan cannot take military action if an ally, the United States, is attacked because Japan does not have the constitutional authority to engage in collective self-defense. Even activities such as sending the Japanese Self-Defense Forces on UN PKOs in the 1990s or on refueling missions in the Indian Ocean after 9/11 in support of the US-led operation in Afghanistan faced major domestic hurdles. Japanese politicians calling for Japan to shoulder its half of the security alliance or to send troops on PKO missions can hardly be considered "hawkish" by American standards. When outsiders discuss the pro-military factions in Japan's government, it must be recognized that Japan is working from a different baseline than its peers.

Second, even if Abe and the LDP are "nationalist" in orientation, if not quite hawkish, nationalism did not lead to the LDP's big win over the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Like voters in the United States, Japanese people are primarily concerned with the domestic economy. They voted the LDP back into power because they disapproved of the DPJ's economic policies, not because of Abe's nationalist posturing. As Abe himself admitted the day after the election, the LDP's landslide victory was not a vote in support of the LDP, but rather a vote against the DPJ and its three tumultuous years in office.

Technicalities Matter

What also tends to be overlooked in the American media is the confluence of factors that led to the LDP's landslide win. One is that the low voter turnout—at 59 percent,



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the lowest in Japan’s postwar history—most likely disproportionately hurt the DPJ, which had previously captured the floating vote. The rise of multiple opposition parties also offered voters disenchanted with the DPJ other places to cast their vote. Finally, Japan’s electoral system of proportional representation and single-member districts created a situation in which small gains in votes resulted in major gains in seats for the LDP.

A “Third Force” in Japanese Politics?

In this electoral season, the Japanese media focused on the emergence of a “third force” (*daisan-kyoku*) in Japanese politics: non-LDP or DPJ alternatives, such as Your Party or the Japan Restoration Party. The emergence of this third force is one of the most noteworthy features of this election. In particular, the Japan Restoration Party (JRP) won 54 seats, a close third after the DPJ with its 57 seats. The JRP was only launched in September 2012 by Osaka governor-turned-mayor Toru Hashimoto and merged with Shintaro Ishihara’s Sunrise Party less than a month before the election. Ishihara, who gave up his position as governor of Tokyo for this election, is a hawk even by American standards. Most recently, he played a central role in reigniting the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute by declaring that Tokyo would purchase and develop the islands. Ishihara has also called for Japan to revise its current constitution and develop nuclear weapons. Since Hashimoto will retain his position as Osaka mayor, Ishihara will serve as the JRP’s chief representative in the Diet.

Not only has the idea of a third force, and in particular the real challenges posed by the JRP’s extreme policy positions, gotten little play in the Western media, but not much has been said about the pacifist New Komeito party—also known as the Clean Government Party—which won all nine single-member districts in which it fielded candidates plus an additional 22 proportional-representation slots, for a total of 31 seats. This was Komeito’s best showing since 2003. Yet since the LDP and Komeito ran a coalition government from 1999-2009 and are aligned again today, they are often treated as a single entity. Yet Komeito should be recognized for the restraining force it has had and will continue to have on the LDP’s right-leaning members.

This matters because the JRP and the LDP are actually very similar on some policy fronts, particularly national security and constitutional revision. Moreover, LDP General Secretary Shigeru Ishiba recently expressed a willingness to align with the JRP on national security issues. Although Komeito, due to its alliance with the LDP, cannot be considered a true “third force” in Japanese politics, its role as a counterweight to the JRP and the nationalist elements of the LDP deserves more attention.

What to Look for in Japanese Politics?

It is unlikely that Abe will make any big moves on contentious issues that might cost his party votes in the next Upper House election, which is slated for July. He has already turned down his campaign rhetoric in which he said he would station Japanese officials on the disputed islands, and is now calling for improved relations with China. One thing to watch for is whether the JRP will try to align with other “third force” parties against the LDP in the upcoming election.

Takeaways

Any immediate analysis of the recent Japanese elections should acknowledge that Japanese voters are similar to American voters in that economics and social welfare are their most pressing concerns. Second, it is a mistake to read too much into the LDP’s most recent win, and particularly to attribute it to the Japanese public desire for more hawkish or nationalist policies. Third, by focusing on the LDP, there is a tendency to miss out on the role to be played by Komeito, which is dovish on foreign policy despite its political alliance with the LDP, or more importantly, the future role of the Japan Restoration Party which has a genuinely hawkish leader at its helm.