

Japan: Hopeless? by Brad Glosserman

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org), newly relocated to Tokyo, is a senior adviser to Pacific Forum CSIS and a visiting professor at the Center for Rule Making Strategies at Tama University.

For one brief moment last month, it appeared that Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had lost his touch. The man who had won four consecutive landslide national election victories – and who would soon make it five – was eclipsed by his nemesis, Tokyo Gov. Koike Yoriko, who launched a new political party, Kibo no To (Party of Hope) hours before Abe called a snap election to be held on Oct. 22. The commentariat was aflutter over the new party and the prospect, finally, of a real challenger to Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

After the brief flurry of excitement, hopes for Hope were dashed. Koike’s decision to remain governor, her managerial style, and the party’s conservative orientation all undermined its electoral prospects. Kibo no To may yet prove to be a milestone in Japanese politics, but not as intended: Koike’s determination to ensure that her party is ideologically pure may help sort Japanese politicians in ways that promote the competition of ideas that has long eluded the nation’s politics.

Abe called the snap election to claim a mandate for difficult economic policy decisions – a long delayed jump in the consumption tax – and the commencement of a national dialogue on constitutional reform. To do so, he sought to capitalize on six straight quarters of growth, a disorganized and dispirited opposition – its main component, the Democratic Party (DP), was falling apart – and a recovery in his Cabinet’s popularity, both of which he would use to grow his parliamentary majority and ensure his occupancy of the Prime Minister’s Office until the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, which would be his valedictory moment.

The launch of Kibo no To looked capable of upsetting those plans, but the party quickly sunk under its own weight. First, Koike disappointed voters when she decided not to contest the election and remain instead as governor. It was a lose-lose proposition for her: if she ran, she would be pilloried for abandoning a campaign promise to serve her full term. If she did run, she would have traded the governor’s office for head of the opposition, a powerless position where she could harass the ruling coalition, but little more. Staying out of the race, however, allowed the LDP to paint her as feckless and insufficiently committed to her party.

That image was compounded when she failed to pick a parliamentary leader for Kibo no To. That failure was glaring given reports that Koike was micromanaging other elements of the campaign. Especially damaging for the party was Koike’s ideological purity test: recognizing that it was imploding, the

Democratic Party said it would not contest the election and encouraged candidates to fight as part of Kibo No To. Koike was discriminating, however, and turned away prospective members who did not fit her conservative ideology.

That made sense if the goal was to build an ideologically consistent and coherent party. But it also meant that Kibo no To could not present itself as a real alternative to the LDP. Koike’s predilections ensured that her party was just as conservative as the LDP on foreign and defense policy, although it leaned a little more to the left on economics.

Kibo no To’s refusal to accept centrist or left-leaning candidates was a boon for Edano Yukio, leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ). The party was formed on Oct. 2 by DP members and other liberals who couldn’t find a home in Kibo no To. For once, progressive forces were largely united under a single banner (although the Communist Party continued to go its own lonely way).

The result was another victory for Abe and his party as the opposition – Kibo no To, the CDPJ, and the Communists – Balkanized the anti-LDP vote. The LDP won 284 seats and its partner Komei claimed 29. The CDPJ assumed the title of leading opposition party with 55 seats, while Kibo no To had to settle for just 50.

Abe can now claim a mandate for a third term as party president and, barring scandal or crisis, will complete his term as the Olympics closes. He must be cautious, however. Most polls show little affection for him and his party; fortunately for the prime minister, there is even less for the opposition. Abe may again delay the consumption tax hike – he said he will proceed but the increase is contingent on economic conditions – but he is certain to push debate on constitutional reform. That does not mean that change is likely in the near term (or even in his term). The issue remains deeply divisive in his party, the ruling coalition, and the country as a whole. Even those who seek changes to the national charter don’t agree on what is to be amended and how. This debate is just beginning.

Edano now has the best opportunity to forge a real opposition to the LDP. His task is to stick to a progressive platform and refuse to compromise as opposition parties before him have, diluting their message and creating unwieldy coalitions that had no glue other than opposition to the LDP.

Koike remains governor of Tokyo and appears chastened: she apologized for “arrogance” as the election results came in. She also complained of an “iron ceiling” in Japan even more formidable than the “glass ceiling” in the United States, implying at least that part of her party’s problems were not of her making. To my mind, a loss is good for Kibo no To. The worst result would have been an extremely good performance, which would have created unrealistic expectations. Now, the

party can work on acquiring a personality of its own, differentiating itself from the LDP, and learning how to govern.

In fact, that is unlikely given Koike's preferences. If she remains the party's patron and guiding light, then the most likely outcome is Kibo no To's eventual absorption in the LDP, with Koike returning to the fold as well after a successful 2020 Olympics – she is the host after all – and a real shot at being Japan's first female prime minister when she succeeds Abe. Maybe there is hope after all.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.

Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.