



Japan: creative leadership needed by Brad Glosserman

As expected, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were defeated in Sunday's Upper House election. And despite concerted attempts to lower expectations, the results were still an embarrassment for the ruling party. Yet to the consternation of many, Abe has vowed to stay in office to continue the work he began. That commitment is laudable, but a stubborn determination to stay the course is not what Japan needs. Rather, Japan needs a creative leadership that can adapt to new domestic political realities and an evolving security environment.

Half the Upper House's 242 seats were at stake in Sunday's ballot. Going into the vote, the LDP and its coalition partners held 133 seats, a healthy majority. By Sunday night, the number had shrunk to 103. The LDP won just 37 races, a net loss of 27 seats. Its coalition partner Komei claimed another nine. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) nearly doubled its share, winning 60 races, establishing itself as the largest party in the Upper House and claiming a solid majority for the opposition.

The scale of the LDP defeat was jaw dropping: the results reversed the positions of the two leading parties. The ballot marks the first time the LDP was beaten by a single opposition party since it was formed in 1955. Traditionally, the party head would have resigned over the results: then Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro stepped down in 1998 when his LDP won just 44 out of 126 seats.

Not Abe. After the results were clear, he informed the country "I made a promise to make this a beautiful country and I mean to carry that out." And, thanks to predecessor Koizumi Junichiro who waged war against LDP party machines, no one is in a position to force him out. (Of course, few smart politicians are ready to step into the breach given the very obvious ill will against the party.)

Some see this as proof that Japan is changing. DPJ leaders crow that the results signal Japan's movement – at long last – toward a genuine two-party system. We've heard this before.

The LDP took a beating because: 1) the government lost 50 million pension records; 2) the Cabinet has been freighted with old-style politicians who are prone to gaffes and tarred by scandal and Abe is too weak to demand better; 3) Abe permitted the postal rebels to return to the party after being kicked out by Koizumi, making him look like another leader devoid of principle; 4) the prime minister's desire to create "a beautiful country" hasn't struck a chord with most Japanese who are instead focused on bread and butter issues (see #1 above); and 5) DPJ President Ozawa Ichiro has proven again to be a master election strategist.

Those complaints look familiar: weak and out of touch leadership, unprincipled politicians, and shrewd campaign

tactics. But it's hard to see the election results as a vote of confidence in the DPJ, especially when the Upper House is the weaker of the two chambers and has historically been where Japanese cast protest votes against the LDP. Through this lens, it looks like the LDP lost, rather than a DPJ victory.

That is probably how Abe sees the results. It would explain his remark after the vote, that "The policies we have promoted are not wrong. I think people do understand that."

His message is clear: the government will not change course. On many foreign policy issues, that makes sense. Rapprochement with China and the ROK is one of the few real policy successes of his administration. Reversing course would alienate many Japanese and much of the region. Similarly, relations with the U.S. continue to be a pillar of Japanese national security policy: no prime minister can afford to antagonize Washington.

That raises a problem when dealing with North Korea. Abe has been a relentless campaigner on behalf of Japanese kidnapped by North Korean agents, and he has stuck to a hard line demanding a full accounting of their fate. There is the danger, however, that this position could isolate Japan in the Six-Party Talks if the other five countries make progress toward a resolution of the nuclear crisis and Japan remains a holdout. Abe must develop a more nuanced policy that affords Tokyo flexibility in the negotiations. The U.S. experience in the MIA talks with Vietnam could provide some lessons – and warnings for the prime minister.

Abe has shown commitment and determination. Now he must muster the creativity and flexibility that are equally important to success in office.

Most important is a fundamental dilemma of the prime minister's making. The creation of "a beautiful country" with all its accoutrements – instilling patriotic values, pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy, and the readiness to shoulder more responsibilities in dealing with peace and security issues – is the core of Abe's agenda, and has been the guiding principle in his political career. He won't give it up, nor is he likely to diminish its priority.

The election results make plain that the Japanese public doesn't share that priority. For the most part, they don't question the evolution of the country's security policy: a majority agrees that Japan can take on more international responsibilities, although there are disagreements over how far the country can and should go. And while there is a legitimate need for debate over the constitution and revision of Article 9, they depart from the prime minister over the need to do that *now*.

Most Japanese are worried about economic issues – jobs, pensions, savings – and they have received little attention during the first 10 months of Abe's term. The prime minister

has to refocus and address those concerns. It won't be easy. Many of the economic policy debates require Japanese to question core values and beliefs. For example, will reform endanger the egalitarianism of modern Japan? How will the country cope with increasing foreign economic influences? Despite the many changes that have occurred over the last decade, many Japanese – politicians in particular – appear ill at ease about the impact of continued liberalization.

The DPJ faces challenges of its own. The party leadership is pressing the LDP to call a general election (the next ballot isn't required until 2009) and has signaled that it is prepared to play hardball to force that vote. But the LDP's large majority in the Lower House – 296 out of 480 seats – should neutralize the Upper House. In addition, the DPJ has to earn the confidence of Japanese voters; mere obstructionism won't win supporters. That means devising a program and sticking to it. General and vague promises won't suffice. Moreover, compromise and working with the LDP risks blurring the lines between the two parties – already pretty indistinct on many policies – and could give the LDP a chance to encourage defections.

Sunday's election revealed a political system on the verge of dysfunction. Yet the very last thing Japan needs is paralysis and confusion. The prime minister has said that he doesn't intend to leave office, but he must reclaim public confidence and muster some policy accomplishments before the decision is no longer his. If he cannot provide the creative leadership required, the people, and his own party, will ultimately push him aside.

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