



The end of Abe's agony by Brad Glosserman

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced his resignation Wednesday afternoon in Tokyo. Despite widespread agreement that he should have resigned after his party's rout in the July Upper House election, the decision still stunned many, especially since it came only two days after he had vowed to "stake his job" on extending the Maritime Self-Defense Forces' (MSDF) mandate to refuel vessels in the Indian Ocean.

While this may end Abe's political career, it is a brilliant tactical move: it robs the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) of political momentum and gives the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) a chance to reconnect with voters. Much depends on who the LDP picks to succeed Abe: a party determined to reassure voters will opt for an older, known quantity, even though that may herald a return to the old LDP and a retreat from the dynamism of the Koizumi years.

Traditionally, a Japanese prime minister would have resigned after his party took the beating the LDP received in the July parliamentary vote. That Abe didn't step down as expected was taken as proof that the prime minister truly had a "tin ear" for politics. While he pledged to refocus in his new administration, the daily drip of scandals that forced the resignation of Cabinet ministers and other party officials quickly ended any hopes for a fresh start. (There are now reports that Abe himself is involved in financial wrongdoing.) After a brief reversal, his new Cabinet's approval ratings have been sliding.

Ozawa Ichiro, president of the DPJ, has exploited every misstep to realize his goal of forcing the LDP from power. His brilliant electioneering (along with the government's blunders) produced the July victory. Ozawa has vowed to fight the extension of the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law, which permits the MSDF to refuel vessels as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, to bring the government down and force a Lower House vote. Thus far, the wily opposition leader has outfoxed the government.

Abe's resignation changes the dynamic. Stepping down eliminates a lightning rod for criticism. Giving up the prime minister's office is the sort of sacrifice that Japanese expect from their leaders. It changes the focus of the political debate from Abe to Ozawa, who many believe is making a technical argument against a deployment that he would have supported under other circumstances. The MSDF is refueling ships from many countries (only 30 percent of the fuel has gone to U.S. vessels this year), supporting a multinational force that is struggling to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and making precisely the type of international contribution that Ozawa fought hard for in the first Gulf War. Abe's retiring from the scene means that Ozawa's arguments, rather

than Abe's behavior, will be the focus of debate. (The speed with which Abe reversed gears also feeds speculation that a deal may have been struck with the DPJ on the MSDF issue; such backroom maneuvers are not unknown in Japan.)

Much will depend on who the LDP selects as the new prime minister; the vote is scheduled for Sept. 19. The frontrunner is LDP General Secretary and former Foreign Minister Aso Taro. He is viewed as a more experienced politician and has the gravitas for the office. He also made several verbal gaffes while serving as foreign minister and his views on foreign policy are closer to Abe's, which may be too conservative for many Japanese. He also belongs to a small faction, which means he may not be able to muster sufficient support among party heads to win the office.

If the LDP is looking for a figure that can reassure voters alarmed by Abe's youth and outlook, then former Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo may get the nod. He is rooted in the LDP's more pacifist traditions and would project the competence and seniority that voters seek. And if the Upper House result was more of a vote against the LDP than a vote for the DPJ (as argued in "Japan: Creative Leadership Needed," *PacNet* #30, July 31, 2007), then the presence of a more statesmanlike figure in charge, coupled with (residual) sympathy for Abe, could be all Japanese voters need to stick with the party they know and have historically trusted. (Fukuda is also likely to get support from party leaders who prefer that party posts be allocated the traditional way – by decision among elders, rather than by an empowered party president as Koizumi did.)

The foreign policy implications of Abe's decision are likely to be muted. No prime minister – even Aso – would embrace an openly confrontational policy toward China, absent a provocative gesture by Beijing. Japan still seeks better relations with South Korea, but there is agreement that top-level initiatives will have to await the December 2007 South Korean presidential election results. Abe's resignation could open the door to movement in relations with Pyongyang, which is much needed as other components of the six-party process move forward.

Nor would relations with the U.S. be hurt. Japanese security decision makers and analysts remain committed to the alliance: External developments have underscored the vital role the U.S. plays in Japan's security. And, even though Ozawa has picked a fight over the Indian Ocean deployment, he, like most Japanese, believes the country can and should do more internationally – the debate is over the terms of that contribution. Progress in relations with North Korea would help reduce frictions between Tokyo and Washington in the six-party process.

The U.S. will have to be prepared for indecision and perhaps even paralysis among decision makers in Tokyo on a

host of issues. Patience will be essential. In one sense, Japan is entering into uncharted territory with the opposition ascendant and in control of one house of the Diet. At the same time, however, this situation may result in a Japan that is all too familiar: hesitant in its policy, insular, slow to respond, and dominated by bureaucrats.

Or Koizumi may come back, in which case all bets are off.

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