

Japan election gives hope to rising grandson

EVENT

Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso announced that he would call a general election on 13 July, raising the possibility of a rare change of power in the country.

Japan is readying itself for fundamental political change. The Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) near-perpetual rule since the party's creation in 1955 is apparently coming to an end.

As Japan now heads to a general election with rare uncertainty over the victor, the Japanese population has lost confidence in, and even patience with, the LDP's crumbling ability to govern amid the worst post-war economic slump.

History repeating itself

The last and only time the LDP lost power was in August 1993, when it was toppled after almost four decades in government by the Morihiro Hosokawa administration, with weak coalitions then holding on to power for just over 10 months before the LDP returned.

The current political climate in Japan increasingly resembles that summer of 1993. The 18 July general election of that year followed a crushing defeat for the LDP in elections to the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly on 27 June. The newly born Japan New Party secured 20 seats in the assembly, heavily damaging the then-Kiichi Miyazawa administration and bringing about the non-LDP coalition government under Hosokawa.

This year, Aso called for sudden elections one day after his party suffered a major defeat in the Tokyo metropolitan election held on 12 July. The LDP won 38 seats in Tokyo - down 10 seats from the previous election in 2005 - while its coalition partner, New Komeito, won 23 seats, leaving the ruling block three seats short of the 64 needed for a majority. Meanwhile, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), won 54 seats - up 20 seats from the previous election.

The current political situation bears other similarities to history. The chairman of the DPJ, Yukio Hatoyama, is the grandson of former Japanese prime minister Ichiro Hatoyama (1954-56), who was involved in a rivalry with his predecessor, Aso's grandfather and former prime minister, Shigeru Yoshida (1946-1947 and 1948-1954). Yoshida and Hatoyama created the LDP in 1955 when their two parties merged, with both men fighting for control of the political and party agenda.

Now, their descendants are battling from different sides of the party political system: Aso for the conservative LDP that has dominated Japanese politics for more than half a century and Hatoyama for the reformist DPJ.

Hatoyama appears to be winning. The DPJ is already a clear front-runner in the polls. Jiji Press news agency reported on 16 July that 18.6 per cent of 2,000 respondents said they supported the DPJ (up 3.1 percentage points from one month earlier and more than the 15.1 percent who said they support the LDP). This is the first time that support for the DPJ has exceeded support for the LDP since the opposition party was established in 1998.

One-track mind

The probability of a DPJ win will have far-reaching effects, not only in helping to create a genuine two-party system after more than half a decade of one-party domination, but also in the country's security and defence policy.

Most significant will be changes to the country's traditional alliance with the United States. Unlike right-leaning Japanese politicians, especially in the LDP, DPJ members aim to strengthen Japan's relations with Asian countries, a perceived economic growth centre in the 21st century.

The DPJ has often criticised the single-track Japan-US alliance by advocating that Tokyo needs to diversify diplomatic and economic relations. The party has called for a more equal partnership with the US, while supporting policies of multilateral co-operation. The DPJ has often refused to support US policies, notably on the war in Iraq and the Maritime Self-Defence Force's refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean. Having gained a majority in the upper house of the Diet in July 2007, the DPJ temporarily blocked the extension of legislation that would have allowed for the continued deployment of Japanese naval vessels to the Indian Ocean to refuel ships involved in the conflict in Afghanistan, effectively ending the re-mission for three months from November 2007.

At the moment, it is unclear whether pragmatism would ensure that the DPJ will succumb to some pro-Washington policies. The US is likely to remain Japan's primary ally, and in the face of a rapidly growing China that relationship will be perhaps more crucial to Tokyo.

Nonetheless, some change does appear likely. An official in charge of defence policy in the DPJ told *Jane's* on 16 July: "We will soon announce the DPJ's manifesto for the Lower House election. That will fall in the scope of the policy progress that we have made."

In addition, the 37,000-strong US military presence in Japan may face an uncertain future. Ichiro Ozawa, former head of the DPJ, supports the idea that the US 7th fleet, based on Yokosuka, would be sufficient enough to secure the US presence in East Asia from a strategic viewpoint, suggesting that he supported the withdrawal of all other forces in Japan.

FORECAST

The end of Japan's dominant-party system appears to be imminent, and the country is likely to undergo fundamental political change from the end of August. This could increase political volatility in one of the world's most stable democratic systems. In addition, the DPJ is likely to introduce greater equivocality into the traditional relationship with the US, while bolstering regional relations and easing tensions with neighbouring powers concerned by Japan's steady remilitarisation.