

November 2021

country report

Country Programme Japan

**KONRAD
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General Election 2021

Results and Implications

By Naoki Takiguchi

Introduction

The current ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito won the 2021 general election. Fumio Kishida took over the Prime Ministership from Yoshihide Suga only weeks before and has already pledged many reforms for the new government and Diet to put in action. This includes a 'new capitalism', revised distribution policy, and economic security.

I. Election Results

The results of the general election were difficult to predict (to the extent of how many seats LDP might lose) as there were differences in prior surveys by media outlets. As mentioned in my previous paper published in September¹, the opposition parties united in picking one candidate from within for single-seat constituencies, which resulted in tight contests in many districts^a. As a prime example, the incumbent LDP Secretary-General Akira Amari was defeated in his single-seat constituency. It was the first time an incumbent LDP Secretary-General has failed his re-election bid in his single seat constituency and this loss eventually led to

^a The election cooperation was between the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Japanese Communist Party, Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), Reiwa Shinsengumi, and Social Democratic Party. All parties except for the DPFP agreed on common policies, which included opposition to "bad" constitutional amendments, stronger COVID-19 counter measures, and rectifying disparities and poverty.

Amari announcing his resignation from his post as LDP Secretary-General^b. On the other hand, it also seems that this election cooperation of the opposition parties ended in failure, since the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), which is the largest opposition party, ended up reducing its number of seats. In addition, the opposition party which was not involved in the cooperation, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), which aimed to become a “third pole”, made a breakthrough.

The following table is the election results, which shows that the distribution within the parties has not changed as much after the recent election:

| Political Parties | Seats gained | Occupation | Seats at dissolution |
|--|--------------|------------|----------------------|
| Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) | 261 | 56.1 % | 276 |
| Komeito | 32 | 6.9 % | 29 |
| Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) | 96 | 20.6% | 110 |
| Japanese Communist Party (JCP) | 10 | 2.2% | 12 |
| Japan Innovation Party (JIP) | 41 | 8.8% | 10 |
| Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) | 11 | 2.4% | 8 |
| Reiwa Shinsengumi | 3 | 06.% | 1 |
| Social Democratic Party (SDP) | 1 | 0.2% | 1 |
| Party fighting against NHK in the trial for violating Article 72 of the Attorney Act | 0 | 0% | 1 |
| Independent | 10 | 2.2% | 12 |
| Others | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Vacant | / | / | 4 |
| Total | 465 | - | 465 |

(Source: NHK and Jiji News Agency)

II. Considerations on the Election Results

On 4 October, the Suga Cabinet was replaced by the Kishida Cabinet, and the approval rating for the Cabinet recovered to 48%² from 29% in October 2021. However, this number was much lower than 62.4%, which was the figure when former Prime Minister Suga took office in September 2020, indicating that public expectations were not particularly high for the Kishida Cabinet. The LDP leadership election in September seemed to have had a certain effect of tightening the organisation and exposing the party to the media, but the LDP's approval ratings only recovered from 33% to 38.6%. Meanwhile, since approval ratings of the largest opposition party was low as well, the LDP was still able to enjoy its relative advantage over the opposition. However, voter turnout for the general election was only 55.93%, making it the third lowest participation in the post-war era.

The LDP won 189 seats in single-seat constituencies, down from 218 in the previous election in 2017, while winning 72 seats in proportional representation blocs, up from 66 in the previous election. Even though the LDP's single-party majority was reportedly threatened prior to the vote, it was still able to win tight contests in single-seat constituencies, which prevented the LDP from losing a significant number of seats and allowing the party to overtake the opposition parties overall. In addition, the current government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was approved by 59% of the people,³ and as of 31 October, the latest average number of new cases per week was only 260⁴, with the vaccination rate for the second time exceeding 70%⁵. It certainly helped that the election took place when the COVID-19 situation had become quite stable.

^b Prime Minister Kishida appointed Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi as the succeeding Secretary-General.

<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20211101/k10013330911000.html>

^c Refers to parties that do not belong to the traditional ruling or opposition parties.

At the same time, due to the cooperation amongst the major opposition parties, it was a fact that 40%⁶ of the 289 single-seat constituencies were closely contested. In 2017, the ruling and opposition parties had a two-horse race in 57 constituencies, compared with 132 this time. As a result of the relatively low approval rating of the opposition parties, e.g. CDP at 8% by NHK poll one week before the general election, the LDP was ultimately able to prevail. CDP lost as many as 14 seats from the previous election, which cost the party leader Yukio Edano his post⁷. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) lost two seats as well- interestingly enough, it seems that the two major parties who played a central role in the opposition cooperation had lost. Before the election, CDP had expressed support for the JCP, stating that it would obtain cooperation from JCP outside the Cabinet if it ever took power. This, in hindsight, might have led some CDP voters to give up their support. On the other hand, the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), which was distancing itself from JCP, increased its number of seats to 11.

As for the JIP, it increased its seats by more than three-folds this time by positioning itself as a “third pole”. The party had no intention to join the opposition cooperation and was not interested in supporting the ruling parties either. Its deputy leader, Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura, who was quite popular for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to the increase, but more so was the party’s strong beliefs and pledges on bold deregulation, reform, as well as decentralisation. However, the most important factor was that the party has a solid foundation in west Japan’s Kansai region, and especially in Osaka. In the Osaka prefectural assembly, for example, JIP (or more precisely, their affiliate Osaka local party, Osaka Ishin) holds 47 seats out of 84, surpassing LDP’s 17 seats. JIP was initially in a slump after its predecessor, the former Japan Restoration Party, was split in 2014 over internal differences even though they had won 54 seats in the 2012 general election. But after the party reformed as JIP, they were able to win seats in areas (e.g. Tokyo) other than the Kansai region in the 2019 House of Councillors election. For this general election, the number of proportional blocks where they won seats increased from 4 to 10 blocks.

III. Implications and Conclusions

As mentioned before, this general election was characterized by the fact that there were many tight contests in single-seat constituencies but ultimately, the LDP was able to demonstrate its strength.

With the LDP continuing to be the leading party, it gained the confidence and mandate of the government, but with the number of seats lost, Prime Minister Kishida is required to carefully manage the government and Diet- a fact which he himself mentioned on the day of the election. In addition, it is possible that the LDP will have to make more concessions to Komeito with its relatively larger presence. With Amari, the incumbent Secretary-General, losing the election in his district but re-elected from the party list in the proportional representation, controlling the party's centripetal force is also an issue for Prime Minister Kishida, especially with the House of Councillors election coming next summer.

As each party's leader admitted on the day of the voting, the unified cooperation amongst the opposition had a certain effect, but it did not entirely work out for the opposition parties. With the House of Councillors election scheduled for next summer, the opposition parties will have to change their strategies, and also make adjustments in the selection of their candidates. Many insiders have so far expressed doubts about CDP's cooperation with JCP due to differences in their policies. In addition, the powerful Federation of All Toyota Workers' Unions (based in Aichi Prefecture) which had previously supported moderate opposition parties, moved away to narrow their distance to the ruling parties. Labour Unions usually work and vote for opposition parties. However, with the opposition parties not being influential in actual policy implementation, the Federation has turned to the ruling parties to work on the topic of

carbon neutrality, which is an issue that would have a tremendous impact on the automobile industry. If similar movements like this are triggered elsewhere or at a higher level, the opposition parties would lose these essential support bases. Regardless, it takes a long time to gain ground to win any election without a tailwind so it is necessary to strengthen the opposition's foundation over the mid to long term.

The fact that JIP increased its number of seats by more than three times (mainly in Osaka, but also across the country), means that JIP will likely continue to increase its influence nationwide. In addition, LDP, Komeito, and JIP in number total to 334 seats, exceeding the 310 seats, which is two-thirds of the number of seats needed to propose constitutional revisions in the House of Representatives⁸. With their total adding more than 20 seats to the two-thirds majority, they can submit bills to the House without support from any other parties. This means that that they can preserve the originality of their conservative agenda.

This was the first general election held since the "All and Only Abe (*Abe-Ikkyo*)"-era came to an end. In a way, this election tested the possible success of not only the LDP but any political party and its candidates. The conclusion was that the vast majority of the people that voted gave power to the LDP and Komeito. A Diet session will be convened on 10 November, and the second Kishida Cabinet will be inaugurated then.

Needless to say, measures against COVID-19 are an urgent issue. The security environment continues to deteriorate, with North Korea conducting ballistic missile tests even during the election period, and Russian and Chinese naval vessels jointly crossing the Tsugaru Strait, the waters around the Izu Islands, the Osumi Strait and navigating toward the East China Sea⁹. In addition to security, issues around economic recovery, fiscal consolidation, energy, etc. can no longer wait. Thus, Japan looks to constructive discussions between the newly composed ruling and opposition parties on these and other issues. After all, as no change of government was expected before the election, the result of this general election came as no surprise for most Japanese. With the absence of a viable alternative to the LDP, the party will continue enjoying this advantage. The continuation of the LDP and Komeito government was the result of the election and Kishida's emergence as Prime Minister, whose call for fixing neoliberalism which has caused disparities, matches people's desire for fairness and equality. Kishida does not necessarily abandon the three elements of Abenomics- active monetary policy, flexible fiscal policy and growth strategy- but he also seeks to rebuild the middle class with a 'new capitalism.' There are no details to it yet, and at this time, the government has just set up an experts' panel to flesh out the idea. It is Kishida's challenge whether to make it his real agenda and appeal to the people. He has only just arrived at the start line.

The Author

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Note: The links are not necessarily available in English.

- ¹ Naoki Takiguchi General Election Outlook 2021 September 2, 2021
<https://www.kas.de/ja/web/japan/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/49-opinion-piece>
- ² NHK Poll October 25, 2021 <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/>
- ³ Ibid
- ⁴ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare Current situation in Japan October 31, 2021
https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/covid-19/kokunainohasseijoukyou_00006.html
- ⁵ Prime Minister's Office Re: Covid-19 October 28, 2021 <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/headline/kansensho/vaccine.html>
- ⁶ Yomiuri Shimbun Newspaper Last Stage of the General Election October 29, 2021
Frontpage
- ⁷ NHK Edano Resigns Leader November 2, 2021
<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20211102/k10013331691000.html>
- ⁸ Two thirds of both Houses of Representatives, and Councillors are required to propose constitutional amendments to the people. They are put on a referendum.
- ⁹ Ministry of Defense Minister's Press Conference October 26, 2021
<https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/kisha/2021/1026a.html>

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November 3, 2021



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