

# ELECTIONWATCH

## JAPAN



### Japan Pre-Election Watch: July 2010 Legislative Elections

On July 11, Japan will hold elections for 121 seats of the 242 seat House of Councillors (*Sangiin*), Japan's popularly elected upper body in the legislative branch, known as the *Diet*. Members of the House of Councillors serve six-year terms which are staggered; half are up for election every three years. The national elections mark the first held since Japan's long-time ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), was overwhelmingly removed from power by the opposition, center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) which campaigned on bureaucratic reform and improved accountability.

Members in the House of Councillors are elected through either constituencies (single non-transferable vote) or nationwide open-list proportional representation; in the former, 73 seats are up for election and in the latter, 48 seats. Candidates belonging to the ruling DPJ must win 60 seats in order to achieve an outright majority. The ruling coalition as a whole will need to win 56 seats to retain its majority. DPJ's current majority is possible only through its coalition with the much smaller People's New Party; the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was previously part of the coalition but recently withdrew over disagreements in the handling of the U.S. military's Futenma Air Station in Okinawa. LDP, whose representation has been dwindling in both houses since the upper house elections in 2007 and the 2009 general elections, faces a critical juncture in terms of future prospects for the party.

DPJ control of government is not at stake: the party's control over the House of Representatives (Japan's lower house, known as the *Shugiin*) ensures the party will retain a majority of seats within the legislature as a whole. However, in light of DPJ's recent leadership changes, LDP has tried to capitalize on perceived instabilities in DPJ by issuing a motion of no-confidence against the cabinet and non-binding censure motions against new Prime Minister Naoto Kan. DPJ control of both houses limits the impact of LDP maneuvers. But if LDP regains control in the upper house, political and legislative deadlock is expected to ensue as the two chambers bifurcate.

Since its post-World War II constitution, Japan operated essentially as a single-party government; with only a brief period in 1993 out of power, LDP had ruled continuously since the party was established in 1955. Contrary to this seeming lack of political competition in modern-day Japan, the tenets of democratic governance date much earlier.

Japan has a long record of democracy in the history of its political development, most notably during the period of "*Taishō* democracy." At the height of the *Taishō* period, roughly from 1912-1926, Japan experienced considerable advances in the development of political parties and elections. Japan's first-ever elections occurred in 1890 during the rapid industrialization of the *Meiji* period.

While these early experiences laid the groundwork for democracy in Japan, several

countervailing factors impeded an earlier onset of the country's democratization. For example, Japan's history is also marked by an extreme emphasis on centralized governing authority, remnants of which exist today through the highly consolidated structures of the country's party and electoral systems. Its roots trace back to the *Tokugawa* period in which the *shogun* functioned as a military authority with central control. This system predominated despite a relatively decentralized feudal structure.

During the post-World War II occupation, Japan's bureaucracy began to fill the gap between occupier and occupied, an important crossover in the face of vast cultural and linguistic barriers. They filled this gap with the implementation of democratic institutions and processes.

## An Entrenched Party and Electoral System

For generations, Japanese elections have had little to do with issues and more to do with personalities. The system of single non-transferable vote - whereby voters cast one vote for one candidate in multi-member districts - was the mainstay of Japanese elections until the electoral reforms of 1994 and 2005. Eventually, voters became impatient and incensed at needs being ignored and at the blatant scandals involving elected officials. This ardent sentiment unraveled the LDP in 2009.

Since its 2009 election loss, LDP has suffered a humiliating downward spiral. From low public opinion ratings to defections amongst its own ranks, LDP faces an identity crisis: a party without an ideology. Without its lucrative streams of patronage to support it, the party will need to reinvent itself and its internal structures in order to evolve with Japan's changing politics. Even LDP's favorite DPJ scapegoat, Yukio Hatoyama, is now a thing of the past as the prime minister resigned from office on June 2, 2010.

DPJ may have finally have the upper hand in running in elections while not in the opposition, but the recent resignation of party boss Ichiro Ozawa has already impacted candidates. Ozawa's strategy for running two DPJ candidates in most open-list proportional representation seats has already been altered in his absence, leaving some candidates unsure of who is supporting them, both within the party and among the public. Ozawa, the head of DPJ since 2006, may no longer be a key figurehead of the party, but behind the scenes he still has a cadre of loyal supporters willing to follow his lead. Election losses for DPJ may be just enough to spur Ozawa back into the upper echelons of the party.

Also marring the party's image is the sudden resignation of then-Prime Minister Hatoyama, whose approval ratings plummeted to new lows just before he stepped down. The underlying issue prompting his departure - the Futenma Air Station - is still a lightning rod with citizens. Though polls dramatically improved for the cabinet after new Prime Minister Naoto Kan assumed office (support around 60 percent, [according to \*The Wall Street Journal\*](#) (subscription required)), this support waned as he outlined plans for a significant tax increase.

## The Campaign and Beyond

The campaign period began on June 24, with strict regulated use of the Internet, including blogging and tweeting. Japan's election laws pre-date the Internet and thus do not account

for the use of modern technology during the campaign period. These social mediums are considered crucial in attracting younger voters, a demographic which played a key role in the August 2009 national elections.

Younger voters and restrictions on campaigning are not the only matters weighing heavy on candidates: two main issues that had a hand in bringing down Hatoyama - the Futenma Air Station and the economy - remain at the forefront.

Following years of protracted negotiations, the U.S. and Japan reached agreement in May 2010 on the relocation of Futenma out of Okinawa. In the August 2009 national elections, DPJ campaigned on a pledge to strike a new agreement with the US. When the May announcement merely reaffirmed earlier decisions made by the two countries in 2006, Hatoyama and his government were unable to sustain the criticism.

Yet the base issue is not simply one of international power politics; rather, it underscores a larger societal dilemma in Japan involving Okinawans as one of several minority communities. Contrary to generations of imperial belief that its isolation as an island was a sign of strength in terms of ethnic homogeneity, Japan has a number of ethnic minority groups that to this day maintain distinctive cultures and traditions. Though there is no legal basis for discrimination against minority groups, such groups are also not explicitly protected under the constitution nor do they often find many sympathizers for minority rights. That Okinawa is home to a politically influential issue such as the Futenma Air Station is in stark contrast to its peoples' long-held desire for autonomy.

Perhaps the most salient campaign issue other than the status of the U.S. military base on Okinawa is Japan's economy, and more specifically, the proposed increase in sales tax. Based on Reuters data collected from Japanese news sources, [DPJ voters appear more likely to support such an increase](#) - particularly with Kan at the helm - [than do LDP voters](#). However, the tax increase as a whole still remains largely unpopular. Japan's overall economic situation remains tenuous and has never fully rebounded following the recession ending in 2009; the size of Japan's current public debt in relation to its GDP is perilously high. Strong economic campaign themes helped propel DPJ to power in the August 2009 national elections. Yet any debt reduction plans the DPJ may have in store should they come out on top his time would need the support of smaller parties, especially as support from LDP seems unlikely.

Prime Minister Kan's approval with the public is currently solid, but it may not be enough for an outright majority for DPJ on Election Day. While it seems unlikely LDP will make significant gains, the true barometer will be evident in the coalition DPJ will have to cobble together amongst the smaller parties. Given the unceremonious departure of SDP from the coalition, the potential exists for DPJ to alienate other parties as well, a dynamic further complicated by the first-time presence of several parties in the upper house race. Kan's predecessor swept into office on a message of change, but the voting public became quickly disenchanted. Whether these same voters decide to hold Kan and his government responsible for Hatoyama's shortcomings remains to be seen.

## IRI in Asia

The International Republican Institute (IRI) assists countries throughout Asia that have undergone transitions to democracy as well as those taking steps toward democracy by

encouraging transparency, pluralism and open elections. In an effort to improve political processes, promote good governance, increase government accountability and enhance civic engagement, IRI supports and provides expertise to political parties, civil society, women and youth. IRI's closed society programs aim to build the capacity of political activists located either inside or outside a country's borders and to expand information available to ordinary citizens.



**JOIN OUR  
MAILING LIST**



Facebook



Twitter

Email Marketing by

