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Japan

After the elections

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The results of the Japanese lower house elections on November 9, 2003 revealed a complicated political situation. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) gained 237 seats out of a total 480, ten seats less than its pre-election strength.

Despite the LDP's losses, the three-party ruling coalition won 275 seats and an absolute stable majority in the lower house. With the LDP's loss of seats, the influence of its governmental coalition partner, the Komei Party (a centrist Buddhist party) is now certain to increase. The Komei Party, backed by a powerful Buddhist religious organization (Sohka Gakkai) played a decisive role in helping the ruling coalition to maintain its absolute majority. Without support from the Komei Party, the LDP would not be able to win in the single-seat constituencies which elect 300 seats out of the total 480. [1]

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3563301.jpg>]

Meanwhile, the New Conservative Party, the smallest member of the ruling coalition, said on November 10 it would merge with the LDP, unveiling the measure a day after taking a beating in the election. The biggest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) supported by the biggest trade union federation "Rengo" (Japanese Trade Union Confederation), increased its representation by 40 seats to 177. [2] It gained more than 22 million in total votes from the regional proportional representative constituencies which elect 180 seats, more than the LDP's vote of less than 21 million. The DPJ, which merged with the smaller right-wing nationalist Liberal Party (LP) just before the general election, is an amalgam of former members of the Social Democratic Party and a conservative split from the LDP. It is now the only opposition party in parliament which is capable of challenging the LDP's monopoly of government for nearly 50 years.

Another serious result of the general election was the devastating defeat of the traditional reformist left parties of the post-Second World era, the Japan Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party. The JCP gained nine seats, 11 less than the previous election in 2000, while the SDP gained only six seats, against 18 before the election. In the single-seat constituencies, the JCP couldn't gain a seat and the SDP gained only one seat in Okinawa Prefecture (the southern islands where very big US military bases are located). Although the JCP and SDP each gained 7.8% and 5.1% in proportional representative votes, they represent together only 3% of the seats in the Lower House. As a result we can say that "left" forces have almost disappeared in the Japanese parliament.

When the SDP joined a coalition government with the LDP in 1994 and SDP president Ki'ichi Murayama became prime minister, backed by the LDP, the SDP abandoned its traditional pacifist position, accepting the Japan-US military pact and a strong presence of Japanese troops (the Self Defence Force), which it had opposed for several decades. After the SDP left the governmental coalition in 1996, it returned to its previous pacifist position. But it had lost support from its voters through this confusing process and many of its members of parliament left the party and joined the DPJ. In the meantime, attracting some former supporters of the SDP, the JCP gained more than 14% of the vote at the Upper House elections in 1998 and increased its influence in the Japanese political arena. On this occasion, the JCP tried to become a "reliable" political force for the ruling class. It followed the SDP's example, saying that it would accept the Japan-US military pact when it joined a coalition government with the other non-LDP parties such as the DPJ. The JCP also claimed that it would adopt policies which strictly remained in the framework of capitalism. But this fundamental "right turn" was the beginning of continuous setbacks for the JCP at every level of elections after 1998. The JCP has lost nearly half its vote in this five-year period and, as one of the biggest post-Stalinist parties in the imperialist countries with 300,000 party members, is now facing a very serious ideological crisis of historical identity.

The emergence of a “two-party” system

All the spokespersons of the ruling class and the mainstream mass media welcomed the results of the general election. They claimed that a “realistic two-party system” which enabled a smooth change of regime had been established for the first time and that through electoral competition between these two parties, the LDP-Komei bloc and the DPJ, Japan could resolve its imminent economic and social crisis by eliminating the old-style corporatist system. Supported by the “Rengo” trade union bureaucracy, the DPJ has presented itself as a neo-liberal “reformer” party. Naoto Kan, the DPJ's president, said “We should carry out both Margaret Thatcher's and Tony Blair's projects at the same time”. When Jun'ichiro Koizumi took office after victory in the LDP's presidential race in April 2001 saying “I will break with the LDP if the majority of the party does not accept my “reform project”, Yukio Hatoyama, the DPJ's leader at that time, welcomed Koizumi's discourse to facilitate neoliberal policies. The DPJ's platform at the election campaign proposed speeding up privatization of public services and deregulation of job security. It stressed the destruction of an outdated social system controlled by the state bureaucracy and encouraged free competition of the private sector. In the name of “civil society”, DPJ represents the interests of big business.

Disappointed with the JCP and SDP, some NGOs supported the DPJ as an alternative to the LDP-led government but many people who couldn't find any difference between the LDP and the DPJ chose abstention. In spite of a strong media campaign to vote to change the political map, the voting percentage was the second lowest among general elections after the Second World War era - 59.86%. Under the “two-party system”, the LDP and DPJ both stood on the same political base; two big parties both pursuing policies of neo liberal “structural reform” and militarization under the US imperialist strategy. For ordinary people, there was no choice between voting for the LDP or the DPJ; it was the choice of a different type of “evil” rather than between a “lesser evil” and a greater one.

Social crisis and chauvinist frustration

After two years and ten months of the Koizumi administration the economic and social crisis in Japan has continued to deepen. Official statistics show that the rate of total unemployment stays above 5%. But according to the official statistics, workers who work only one hour in the last week of a month are not counted as unemployed. Moreover workers who give up looking for jobs because of the lack of decent wage and working condition are also not counted as unemployed. So in fact the percentage of workers unable to find jobs is more than 10%. In particular, young and middle aged people experience difficulty in finding regular jobs. 40% of students who will graduate high school in March 2004 and want to be employed are unable to find regular jobs. Meanwhile, working hours including unpaid overtime are increasing even in firms with trade unions. The trade union leadership sometimes accepts this illegal overtime in the name of “business logic”.

The real income of working people continues to decrease. Under the pressure of a public debt that has now reached nearly US\$7 trillion, the social security system has deteriorated radically. Social expenditure on education, health care and pensions has been cut enormously. The leaders of the Keidanren (Employers' Association of Japan) have insisted on a massive increase in VAT from the current 5% to 15% in the near future. Prime minister Koizumi has repeated the slogan that “without structural reform, there will be no economic growth”. But it is clear to people that Koizumi's neoliberal “structural reform” policies have brought about suffering for working people. More than 30,000 people commit suicide every year. Nevertheless, because of a lack of effective resistance against the capitalist offensive, the desperate atmosphere among working people is easily channelled in a chauvinist and nationalist direction. Young people are uninterested in trade union activity because there has been no mass strike action by workers for about 30 years. Throughout 2003, during the “war against terror”, massive chauvinist feelings against North Korea have been growing, stimulated by the crimes of the Kim Jon Il dictatorship, particularly abductions of Japanese citizens carried out by North Korean secret agents in the 1970s, which Kim Jon Il himself confessed to in September 2002 at the summit talks with Koizumi in Pyongyang.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3563401.jpg>]

These chauvinist feelings are also targeted at Korean residents in Japan and illegal migrants from China. These ultra-right fascist groups, some of which criticize the pro-US line of the traditional ultra-right forces, have threatened the teacher's union and the Korean residents' organization with symbolical gunfire attacks on their offices. These fascist groups have been encouraged by famous ultra-right nationalist politicians such as Shintaro Ishihara, the governor of Tokyo Metropolitan or Shingo Nishimura, a member of the Lower House for the DPJ.

Sending Japanese troops to occupied Iraq

After Koizumi took office in April 2001, he showed his eagerness to redefine the Japan-US security pact to transform it into a more effective military alliance that allowed the exercise of the right of "collective self defence" jointly with US troops, similar to the US-British alliance. For this reason, Koizumi stressed the necessity to revise the Japanese Constitution, particularly Article 9 of it, which prohibited holding any military force.

The so-called "Peaceful Constitution" of Japan was a result of the defeat of Japanese imperialism in the Second World War. Soon after the "Peaceful Constitution" was enforced, however, US imperialism changed its strategy of disarmament of the Japanese state and began to re-establish Japanese military force in the name of the creation of a "Self Defence Force" to counter "threats of invasion from the Soviet Union and Red China". Whereas Japan's new "Self Defence Force" grew up to become one of the most modern and powerful armies in the Asia-Pacific region, the Japanese ruling class couldn't revise Article 9 of the Constitution because of strong pacifist sentiments among the Japanese people. Bush's "global anti-terrorist war" strategy encouraged Koizumi's intention to revise the "peaceful article" of the Constitution.

After September 11, 2001, the Koizumi administration passed a special law, backed by the majority of the DPJ, to send Japanese fleets to the Indian Ocean to support the US-led multinational military forces in Afghanistan. The Koizumi administration has unconditionally supported George Bush's war against Iraq. After the occupation of Baghdad, the Koizumi government finally passed a special law to send Japanese "Self Defence Force" to occupied Iraq and join the US-led "coalition force".

This was the historical turning point for Japanese imperialism after the Second World War. Japanese troops are now being dispatched to the battlefield of Iraq to support the "coalition force" and preparing to oppress the resistance of the Iraqi people. The "importance of the Washington-Tokyo coalition" was the only reason for Koizumi to justify the sending of the Japanese "Self Defence Force" overseas, violating international laws and the Japanese constitution.

Development of peace movement

Despite the marginalization of traditional reformist left parties such as the JCP and SDP, an independent peace movement was able to mobilize tens of thousands of people against Bush's war and against the Koizumi administration's support for it. The continuous demonstrations which were held in March and April 2003 were relatively moderate in form and their political character might be described as one of very primitive pacifism. But they were the biggest mobilizations since the era of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, young people, who had been deeply depoliticized and had become increasingly conservative, played a very active role in mobilization.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3563501.jpg>]

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Activists of the anti-globalization movement, such as ATTAC-Japan, have been very conscious of the need to make close links between the peace movement and the anti-neoliberal globalization movement. Given the absence of a mass collective resistance movement against the neoliberal offensive, the influence of the anti-globalization movement was very limited in Japan before the demonstrations of the peace movement in spring 2003. However now we can see that increasing numbers of working people and youth are supporting the campaign for the World Social Forum. Faced with a serious crisis of the traditional left parties, the problems for the revolutionary left in Japan are to take up the possibilities of growing mass opposition to Bush's war and militarization in Japan, and to facilitate the process of regroupment of the fragmented left groups through open and democratic discussions.

We are faced with the task of founding a credible anti-capitalist left alternative force. It should be projected on an Eastern Asia wide basis including Korea, China and Taiwan and has to establish strong links with people's movements in other Asia-Pacific countries. We have to seize this opportunity.

[1] The Japanese electoral system for the Lower House is a combination of single-seat-constituencies and regional proportional representative constituencies. Single-seat-constituencies elect 300 seats. Dividing the country into 11 regions, regional proportional representative constituencies elect 180 seats. People have two votes, one for candidates in their single-seat-constituency and another vote for parties at the regional proportional representative constituency level.

[2] The rate of unionization of workers in Japan is less than 20%. Most unions are not organized on an industrial basis but rather on a company and workplace basis. There are three main trade union federations. The biggest is "Rengo" (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) which has about seven million members. The leadership of "Rengo" supports the DPJ but some industrial and local unions are electoral bases of the SDP. The second biggest federation is "Zenroren" (National Confederation of Trade Unions) which has about 800,000 members. The leadership of "Zenroren" is dominated by the JCP. The third federation is "Zenrokyo" (National Council of Trade Unions) which has 250,000 members. The leadership of "Zenrokyo" is mainly constituted by non-DPJ and non-CP activists. Independent left activists (including the far left) are playing an active role inside "Zenrokyo".