

The Ordeal of Japan's New-Generation Leader: An Assessment of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

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On September 26, 2006, the Japanese Diet elected Shinzo Abe as prime minister. This change of leadership happened because Junichiro Koizumi retired due to the expiration of his term as president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In fact, five days before, LDP called the conference of its parliamentarians to elect the new president. Three candidates ran for this election, and Abe gained an overwhelming victory by gathering 66% of the ballots (1). Abe is a new-generation leader of Japan's conservative establishment. Born in 1954, he is the youngest prime minister that Japan has seen in the post-war period. This means that he is the first prime minister who did not experience World War II (WWII). It also means that he holds only a short political career and limited experience of serving at significant governmental positions—it was in 1993 that he was elected to the parliament for the first time. At the same time, however, he comes from a major political dynasty and is unmistakably a member of Japan's political elite—his grandfather is Nobusuke Kishi, who served as prime minister from 1956 to 1960, and his father is Shintaro Abe, who occupied many important posts including foreign minister in the 1980s.

Former Prime Minister Koizumi was an impressive leader. He brought about visible changes to the Japanese politics, and was very popular among Japanese people. As compared with Koizumi's accomplishment, how well is Abe likely to perform? Unfortunately, I offer a pessimistic prediction in this article. Without doubt, Abe possesses a distinct worldview as a new-generation leader in Japan's conservative camp. Yet, LDP today is not what it used to be during the golden age of one-party dominance, and acutely lacks internal cohesion. Therefore, Abe is unlikely to secure a solid political base to realize his unique visions. Moreover, it is possible that Abe's failure will work as a catalyst for further realignment in Japanese party politics.

ABE'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Watchers often observe that Abe's worldview is influenced by his grandfather Kishi. Abe himself openly states that he makes efforts to learn from his grandfather. Still, superimposing Abe on Kishi can become a source of misunderstanding when trying to grasp the former's political philosophy. For we find not only similarities (most importantly, their commitment to constitutional revision and the U.S.-Japan security alliance) but also dissimilarities in their

ideas. As his nickname, "Showa's monster," implies, Kishi had many faces. For instance, he was a senior economic bureaucrat before the second world war. In that capacity, he was an imperialist who planned economic development in Manchuria and was one of the founding fathers of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) by creating the embryo of what came to be later known as "industrial policy." He even felt affinity with socialism. These aspects are not inherited by his grandson.

We can get a better picture of Abe's worldview by taking the perspective of generational analysis. We can see Abe's political philosophy as a prototype of his generation's conservative thinking. In fact, he has appointed politicians of the same generation to essential positions and considerably relies on them in his decision-making (2). Abe and his advisors belong to the so-called "*shirake sedai*" (unexcitable generation) (3), who were born in the 1950s. A noteworthy feature of this generation is that the trends of the Japanese society in the 1980s substantially affected their worldview. Because they graduated from university and began to work as professional in the early 1980s, the events of this decade played a vital role in their socialization. At concrete levels, as an example of *shirake sedai* conservatives, Abe has the political philosophy colored by three major characteristics: 1) detachment from the legacy of the WWII; 2) candid appreciation of Japan's achievement in the postwar era; 3) pro-business stance and commitment to small government.

For many years, Japan's public debates were structured around the legacy of WWII and following Occupation Reform, and there existed a sharp confrontation between the progressive and conservative camps. More precisely, there was the general agreement about economic policy between the two camps, so their confrontation was primarily concerned about the basic nature of political system and foreign policymaking. The progressives were committed to preserve democracy and Article 9 of the constitution (i.e., the no-war clause), and were critical about security cooperation with the United States. The conservatives were worried about detrimental impacts of democracy on the Japanese traditional culture, and wanted to strengthen the security alliance with the United States by rewriting Article 9.

Abe hopes to get the Japanese people's thinking to move beyond this traditional framework. His generation did

not go through WWII; neither did it live through confusion and poverty in its aftermath. Rather, high growth in the 1960s and 1970s and economic superiority in the 1980s leaves their impact. Hence, Abe and his fellows find it anachronistic for their nation's debates to be framed by the legacy of the old war. They feel that the debates should start with Japan's success in the post-war era. They seek to create a new national identity based on an economically powerful and democratic Japan. While they sometimes promote the same agendas as the old conservatives, they never mean to overturn progresses that the Japanese society made in the postwar era.

For example, Abe proposes revising the constitution. Unlike the old conservatives, however, he never intends to alter the democratic nature of the Japanese political system. He is unquestionably committed to democratic values. His purpose in constitutional revision largely concerns its symbolic value, except for the right of collective self-defense and legal status of the Self Defense Forces; by rewriting the current constitution, which was drafted by American occupation officials, he wants to make Japanese people feel more the sense of being their own master. Similarly, Abe's commitment to the U.S.-Japan security alliance is driven by different motives from those for old conservatives. He regards the United States as more than just the partner in security and trade. He believes that Japan and the United States share faith in liberal democracy and are bound by ties that are akin to trans-Atlantic ties between the United States and Western European countries. Likewise, while Abe thinks that Japan should carry more military burdens in both the U.S.-Japan alliance and United Nations' activities, he does not yearn for its pre-war status as a military power. His aim is to have a better balance between Japan's economic and security roles. He also emphasizes the importance of traditional culture and patriotism in education. Yet, he does not intend to resurrect the Emperor-centered nationalism.

Abe's ideas about economic policy are more ambiguous. No doubt, at the general level, he is interested in promoting pro-business environments, and is a believer in small government who is anxious about the wastes of social welfare programs. However, like many colleagues in LDP, he has an uncertain attitude toward the structural reform of the Japanese economic system, the most important issue that Japanese leaders have faced in economic policymaking in the last decade. Through its high growth, Japan built up a unique economic system characterized by long-term relationships and extensive governmental intervention. Since the early 1990s, however, this system has consistently failed to produce growth, and some argue that it should be remade on the model of Anglo American-type capitalism. Koizumi agreed with this argument, and implemented liberalization programs including the privatization of the postal service. Abe states that he will inherit Koizumi's spirit of reform, but Abe has yet to explain the details of his reform policy. It will take time to know exactly where Abe is heading in economic policy-making.

ABE'S UNSTABLE POLITICAL FOOTING

Unfortunately, it is very uncertain whether Prime Minister Abe can actually incorporate his novel visions into policy meaningfully. This is because he has unstable footing within his party. Indeed, his overwhelming victory in the party's presidential election never indicated a solid intra-party base. At present, the LDP's internal conditions are more disorderly than ever. Whoever may lead it will have great difficulty in controlling it. Ironically, it is this confusion that enabled Abe to reach the top position despite his lack of credentials that his predecessors commonly held.

As known well, LDP is composed of factions (4), which play a major role in its internal management. In the past, competitions and negotiations among factions determined the outcome of its presidential election. In turn, this meant that one must obtain support from one's own faction in order to win the party's leadership. And only established politicians with long political careers could expect to obtain such factional support because of seniority. Recently, however, the factions have been losing power rapidly. This is mainly the product of the electoral reform of 1994, which imposed stricter regulations on factions' fundraising and made their electoral activities obsolete by introducing a single-seat district system. In addition, Prime Minister Koizumi dealt a fatal blow to it. In 2001, he won his party's presidential election by crushing the powerful opponent endorsed by factional bosses. Further, he made conscious efforts to weaken factions through his tenure. Consequently, the faction no longer had the ability to control the presidential election.

Abe's victory was not attributable to the existence of a powerful coalition of factions that supported him. Rather, it resulted from the confluence of two unconventional forces:

The first force was the support derived from Abe's status as Koizumi's protégé. In today's Japan, the public image of party leaders is a key factor that determines electoral results. This is the case in part because the television has come to hold immense impact on the formation of public opinion. It is also because the realignment of political parties since the mid-1990s has transformed the Japanese party system into a quasi-two-party system where open debates between party leaders are more common. In actuality, Koizumi's high approval rates helped LDP recover its electoral performance substantially. Thus, LDP politicians wanted Koizumi's successor to possess broad grassroots support. Abe was the heir designated by Koizumi, and Abe's image tended to overlap with Koizumi's because the former continuously occupied important posts in the latter's cabinet. As a result, many LDP politicians calculated that Abe would be able to take over Koizumi's high level of popularity.

The second force was the factional bosses' opportunistic support. It was a group of young LDP politicians that began to push for Abe's candidacy first. They believed that such a young candidate as Abe could give them new chances by breaking down the principle of seniority, which penetrates many systems in LDP. On the other hand, factional bosses naturally kept a distance from Abe at first. Indeed, they tried to field former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo

Fukuda as their own candidate. Yet, while Fukuda decided not to run at the last minute, they were unable to come up with other viable candidates. As a result, they had no choice but to get on Abe's bandwagon.

The two forces that worked behind Abe's election as LDP president clearly demonstrate that he holds only a weak internal base. By nature, the first force cannot constitute a needed base for Abe. After all, its existence depends on Abe's popularity among the public; it will evaporate instantly if he turns out to be less popular than expected. Evidently, the second force is not truly pro-Abe. Once he reveals his vulnerability, the factional bosses will not hesitate to withdraw support.

In addition to his weak internal foundation, Abe is burdened with difficult tasks in policy-making. Abe's personal agendas include many contentious issues. Even apart from them, though, he must cope with a number of policy problems that divide his party sharply. If he mishandles any one of them, he will lose centripetal force and become a lame duck immediately. One example of such difficult policy problems concerns the inheritance of Koizumi's market-oriented reform. Today, opinions about economic policymaking are polarized among LDP parliamentarians. So, whichever direction Abe may head for, he will be criticized unavoidably.

Another example is the policy on consumption tax (a valued-added tax). While the increase of this tax is regarded as indispensable to recover budgetary balances, there remain strong oppositions to it within LDP. A further example is China policy. By visiting Beijing only two weeks after his inauguration, Abe has already signaled that he is not going to follow Koizumi's less conciliatory line straightforwardly. Yet, China policy will remain a major source of intra-party conflict, including his future pilgrimages to the Yasukuni Shrine.

The weakening of the traditional policymaking system makes it all the more difficult for Abe to deal with divisive policy problems. In the past, *zoku* (policy tribes)—namely, groups of senior and middle-level LDP politicians who specialize in a particular policy area with abundant knowledge and extensive networks—played the dominant role in the LDP's policymaking. These groups summarized diverse opinions in the party and mediated political deals between disagreeing players. At the same time, however, they tended to form "iron triangles" with ministries and industries, and were often condemned as the obstacle to economic reform. Especially, Koizumi saw *zoku* as opposing to his drive for economic liberalization, and assaulted them severely. Consequently, the *zoku*'s power has declined, which in turn makes the LDP's policymaking more fluid and volatile.

Certainly, in the past, the factions and *zoku* at times tended to constrain the prime minister's power. Therefore, it can be observed that the deterioration of these institutions creates room for the prime minister's more assertive role. Moreover, the recent political reform programs have improved resources that the prime minister can use in controlling policymaking. For example, the single-seat district system introduced by the electoral reform of 1994 increased the significance of the prime minister's power to grant party endorsement in elections. The Central Government Reform

of 2001 reinforced the prime minister's staffing functions. Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of institutional changes depends on individual leaders.

In this regard, it is fair to say that Abe is never in a good position to take advantage of recent institutional innovations. First, he is too inexperienced. His 13-year career at the Diet is too poor. As a typical second-generation politician, he does not possess knowledge and expertise accumulated outside the political world either. Second, whereas a leader needs to maintain high popularity to make full use of new institutions, Abe is unlikely to satisfy this requirement. According to *Asahi Shinbun*, Abe's approval rate reached a high level of 63% on his inauguration, but rapidly fell to 47% by the beginning of December. It is likely to fall more as people disassociate Abe from Koizumi in their image.

FUTURE OF JAPANESE POLITICS

Abe's first test will probably be upper-house elections next July—he looks determined not to start on contentious legislations until then. Yet, this test seems likely to be a tough one. First, the number of LDP incumbents whose term will end then is much larger than usual because of the "Koizumi Fever" that brought a landslide victory to LDP in the 2001 election, and it is practically impossible to get all of them to be reelected. Second, Ichiro Ozawa, who assumed the leadership of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) last April, will pose a serious threat to Abe. Unlike Abe, Ozawa is a seasoned politician with a long political career. Most importantly, he maintains strong popularity among Japanese people as the charismatic leader who plotted the establishment of the non-LDP cabinet led by Morihiro Hosokawa in 1993. His impressive credentials are likely to compensate for the DPJ's perceived weaknesses.

If LDP is defeated badly in the upper-house election next summer, Abe will probably be required to step down. Even if he survives it, his ordeal will most likely continue. There will be no reason for us to expect the difficulties Abe faces in his party to disappear soon. After all, the current confusion of LDP reflects the on-going transformation of larger Japanese party politics. The restructuring of the Japanese party system that began in the mid-1990s has still been carrying on. Most importantly, both LDP and DPJ fail to present clear choices in policymaking. Both parties include a wide range of opinions among their ranks, so their policy position is highly ambiguous. This situation got more visible under the Koizumi cabinet; Koizumi diluted the LDP's traditional inclination toward rural interests by putting an emphasis on market-oriented reform. Given the truth that political parties exist to allow people to make choices in policymaking, the state of today's Japanese party politics is irregular. Another major realignment of political parties seems unavoidable. Abe's possible failure may become the ignition point of this realignment.

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