



# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## **Defeat looms for Japan's ruling party**

Geoffrey York. *The Globe and Mail*. Toronto, Ont.: Jul 25, 2007. pg. A.20

Dogged by pension scandal, Prime Minister could be forced to resign if he loses Sunday's vote.

In the final days before a crucial election test, Japan's ruling party is in trouble. Its campaign rallies have turned into woeful recitals of apologies, abject self-criticisms and pleadings for another chance.

Barely 10 months after taking office, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe could be forced to resign if he loses Sunday's upper-house election, his popularity crashed in a morass of scandals and gaffes.

If he is forced to step down, it could spell the end of his controversial plan to modernize Japan's military posture and get rid of the pacifist constitution that has hobbled its military freedom for decades.

The centrepiece of Mr. Abe's campaign was to be his pledge to revise the pacifist constitution, introduced after the Second World War when the country was under Western occupation. But the gaffes of his cabinet - especially the revelation that his government had misplaced the pension records of 50 million people - have shattered his election strategy and forced him into the apology sessions.

His governing Liberal Democratic Party, which has ruled Japan for almost all of the past half-century, is expected to suffer a rare defeat in Sunday's election.

But because of its majority in the lower house of parliament, the LDP will maintain its grip on power, even if Mr. Abe decides to resign.

When he became Prime Minister after winning the LDP leadership last September, the 52-year-old scion of a famed political dynasty was supported by more than 60 per cent of the voters.

Now, after the pension scandal and the premature departure of three cabinet ministers in various other disgraces, Mr. Abe's support has plunged to below 30 per cent.

His own members are scrambling to distance themselves from the government, criticizing their cabinet ministers and demanding reforms.

"If the LDP doesn't change, we will lose the trust of the voters," said Masaaki Taira, a 39-year-old member of parliament.

"We, the younger LDP members, have a sense of crisis," he told an election rally in Tokyo this week. "What the party has done so far is always too late. We have to change. We can't survive with the current LDP. Those who make mistakes must resign as soon as possible."

Some LDP candidates are trying to survive by associating themselves with popular figures such as Shintaro Ishihara, the hawkish nationalist who is governor of Tokyo.

One LDP candidate's campaign literature has him posing with Mr. Ishihara, an independent, rather than with Mr. Abe.

Nationalist themes have become popular. At a campaign rally yesterday, LDP politicians warned the voters that an election defeat would provide comfort to Japan's enemies in North Korea.

But these diversionary tactics might not be enough to stave off defeat. Most analysts are predicting that the LDP will lose heavily. The only question is whether it will be enough to force Mr. Abe out.

"The feeling among the voters is very bad," admitted Koichi Kato, one of the most senior LDP members of parliament.

Mr. Abe may have erred by focusing his campaign on constitutional reform - seldom a vote-winning strategy, as Canadian politicians can attest. But he is also paying the price for the aggressive reform policies of his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, who broke up the LDP's power base by attacking the entrenched interests of business and social groups.

Japan has never had a true two-party system. However, the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, has been campaigning hard on the pension issue.

"Fifty million people's pensions have disappeared somewhere," the DPJ's vice-chairman, Katsuya Okada, said at an election rally yesterday. "Everyone works so hard, and yet their pensions are lost without any reason. We need to smash and destroy the old politics of the LDP."

The opposition leader, Ichiro Ozawa, is a veteran insider and former LDP member who lacks much popular following. But the collapse of Mr. Abe's support might give him a chance.

"The government has been messing things up," long-time LDP voter Shigezo Nakamura said. "I want to give Ozawa a try and see how it goes."

Even if Mr. Abe retains his job, the LDP could lose control of the upper house of parliament. The lower house is more powerful and can override the upper house's veto on most issues, but the loss of the upper house would still be a setback for the ruling party.

"It would become an unstable government," said Takao Toshikawa, an analyst who edits a political newsletter. "And Abe's power would be very weak at the political centre."

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## **CRUCIAL VOTE**

Sunday's election will not topple the Liberal Democratic party, which controls the house of Representatives, but Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will be under pressure to step down if his party does poorly.

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## **HOUSE OF COUNCILLORS**

(as of July 23, 2007)

### **Ruling coalition**

Liberal Democratic Party: 109

New Komeito: 23

Democratic Party: 83

Communist Party: 9

Social Democratic Party: 6

Others: 10

Absent: 2

### **121 of the 242 seats are up for election**

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## **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

(after 2005 election)

Liberal Democratic Party: 296

New Komeito: 31

Democratic Party: 113

Communist Party: 9

Social Democratic Party: 7

People's New Party: 4

New Party Nippon: 1

New Party Daichi: 1

Others: 18

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### **IN THE LEAD**

What political party would you vote for in the House of Councillors election?

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ): 28%

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP): 21%

New Komeito (Kt): 5%

Communist Party of Japan (CPJ): 4%

Social Democratic Party (SDP): 2%

Undecided: 34%

TONIA COWAN / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SOURCE: AP, Angus-Reid

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### **Houses of the Rising Sun**

JAPAN'S LEGISLATURE

Voters in Japan go to the polls Sunday to elect half of the upper House of Councillors, which, together with the lower House of Representatives, make up the legislature known as the Diet.

**VOTING:** The House of Councillors has 242 seats and its members, who must be at least 30 years old, serve for six years, with half of the seats filled by election every three years.

The House of Representatives, where members must be at least 25 years old, has 480 members elected to four-year terms. Three hundred are chosen from single-member constituencies in a first-past-the-post vote, and 180 are chosen from 11 multimember constituencies through proportional representation.

**POWERS:** The upper house is the weaker of the two chambers, as it lacks the authority to select a prime minister. Budgets and treaties can be enacted without its approval, but the chamber can reject other bills approved by the lower house, in which case the legislation can be enacted only by a two-thirds majority of the more powerful lower chamber.

#### JAPAN'S LEADER

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a member of the House of Representatives, isn't up for re-election Sunday, but if his Liberal Democratic Party has a poor showing in the House of Councillors vote, he will be under pressure to resign. These are some of the politicians waiting in the wings to take his place.

**TARO ASO:** The 66-year-old Foreign Minister is a political veteran who shares much of Mr. Abe's policy agenda but is known for his love of *manga* comics and for verbal gaffes, such as a recent joke about people with Alzheimer's disease. He is widely seen as the front-runner.

**SADAKAZU TANIGAKI:** The former finance minister, 62, is more dovish than the Prime Minister and isn't tainted by voter dissatisfaction with the current cabinet.

**YASUO FUKUDA:** The former chief cabinet secretary, 71, dropped out of the last party race against Mr. Abe. He favours a more accommodating approach toward China and more remorse about Japan's wartime past.

*Sources: Reuters, AP*