

LDP success in Upper House elections against the backdrop of Abe Shinzo's assassination

Jean-Yves Colin

N#2022-07

July 12th 2022

About Asia Centre:

Founded in 2005, Asia Centre is an independent research institute that holds debates and issues publications on matters relating to international, strategic, economic relations, as well as the political and social transformations underway in the Asia-Pacific region. At the crossroads of university research as well as public and private decision-making, Asia Centre researchers identify critical regional issues and analyse them in-depth, taking into consideration both local and global dimensions. Asia Centre's programs are developed with a vast network of partners, companies and major specialist centres in Europe, North America and Asia. The Centre carries out joint operations with these groups, for a better interpretation of ideas and issues. The conclusions of these meetings, such as the results of the work carried out using original sources by our researchers, are widely distributed through the Centre's publications as well as through international journals, books and media.

About the author:

A former student of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Jean-Yves Colin worked for the French Treasury, where he was Financial Advisor to the French Embassy in Japan (1987-1990). He then joined the Crédit Agricole Group, where he was Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the asset management subsidiary, now known as Amundi, and Director of Compliance for Crédit Agricole S.A. Since leaving the banking group in 2013, Jean-Yves Colin has joined Asia Centre, where he is a member of the Board of Directors and an expert on North Asia.

LDP success in Upper House elections against the backdrop of Abe Shinzo's assassination

Jean-Yves Colin

July 12th 2022

During the elections on July 10th, Japan's ruling coalition won 76 councillor seats in the Upper House of the Diet, marking a resounding success. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won 63 seats and its ally, Komeito, a centre-Buddhist party, won 13 seats in the 125-seat contest (half of the Upper House is renewed every three years by direct vote). They now respectively hold 119 and 27 seats, out of 248, in the second assembly. Together with two other parties: the Party for Japan's Innovation (Nippon Ishin no kai) and the Democrats for Japan Party, which have 21 and 10 seats respectively - and are in favour of a revision of the 1947 Constitution - the coalition has a potential majority (177 councillors) of more than two-thirds (166) which is essential to push forward a possible revision.

The big loser is the main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), whose number of seats fell from 45 to 39. The Communist Party retained 11 seats. The other opposition parties have only a few seats each, and independents hold 13. PDC leader Kenta Izumi, in acknowledging his defeat, stressed: "The only way to change Japan's politics is for the opposition to fight together. I want to move decisively on this point. Such a union of the opposition was attempted in the 2021 Lower House elections, but without success. The union between the CVP, the Communist Party and other parties appeared artificial to the voters. As for the Social Democrats, descendants of the former Socialist Party, there are now only two in the Diet...

These elections were characterised by a slightly higher turnout than in 2019 (52.05% compared to 48.8%), which is probably due to the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo two days before. His disappearance probably generated sympathy for the LDP.

It can be observed that 35 women were elected among the 125 renewed seats, which shows a slow but continuous evolution of the Japanese political world, favoured by the legislation. There is also a significant share of personalities ("talento" in Japanese vocabulary, "people" in French!), former singers, personalities from the media and communication world or various authors of books and manga. This has been a characteristic feature of Japanese political life for about 30 years. Finally, several candidates who identified themselves as part of the LGBTQ communities were running for office.

It is certainly easy to say that once again the LDP, by winning, dominates political life in Japan, giving the impression of a *de facto* single party in the eyes of many observers. It is true that since the social-democratic interlude 2009 - 2011, the LDP has governed the country: Abe Shinzo for 8 years, with Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio as successors. However, voters have been called to the polls several times since the deputies of the Lower House are renewed every 4 years and the councillors of the Upper House, elected for 6 years, by half every three years. The electoral system also includes

a dose of proportional representation: voters cast two ballots, one to choose a representative in a constituency and the other to enter the name of a party or candidate on a list. On July 10th, 75 seats were under the first system (including one under the so-called non-renewable part) and 50 under the proportional system.

Tired of LDP governments, and in particular the first Abe government (2006-2007), the Japanese tried with some enthusiasm (voter turnout was 70% at the time) a social democratic experiment that did not convince - with three prime ministers Hatoyama Yukio, Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko, each for about a year - and that did not withstand the Fukushima earthquake, and the subsequent tsunami and nuclear disaster. They therefore returned to a more assertive and managerial LDP. Moreover, since 2012 the opposition parties have suffered from dispersion, change of name, lack of leader and weak programmes.

This victory for the LDP and its ally took place against the backdrop of Abe Shinzo's shocking death. The Japanese population had forgotten that their political life could be so violent, even though the mayor of Nagasaki was shot dead by a yakuza in 2007, and other examples of murders or attempted assassinations during the 1990s and 2000s could be cited. The last assassination of a Prime Minister was that of Inukai Tsuyoshi in 1932, another failed attempt had taken place during the coup of 26 February 1936, as well as that of Abe Shinzo's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, in 1960.

After an short and emotional initial speech a few hours after Abe Shinzo's assassination, Prime Minister Kishida made remarks emphasizing the duty to conduct an economic policy and political strategy in continuity with the former Prime Minister, and placed himself as his heir. However, this is not certain because, despite the two-thirds majority (a majority of all members, not just those present), he now has to pass a parliamentary bill to revise the Constitution, prior to a referendum set by its Article 96. He has so far been more cautious than Abe Shinzo, probably aware that a consensus is not reached within his party, Komeito and its two possible allies, and that this potential majority is not a given. The Prime Minister has often been considered as a "dove" within a LDP whose centre of gravity has shifted to the right. He has promised to deepen the parliamentary debate and perhaps he is not fully convinced of the need to revise the Constitution to strengthen the security of the archipelago. On the other hand, the disappearance of Abe Shinzo will certainly lead to personal readjustments between the LDP factions, the scope of which he will have to measure. Finally, public opinion, while recognising more than in the past the importance of security and defence issues, is above all worried about the effects of inflation on purchasing power, the state of the health system and the rebound of the Covid-19, and more generally about the economic situation. However, the LDP leaders know that the Japanese support their party first of all because, in the now distant past, it was able to bring growth and well-being, and that despite the economic crisis that began in the early 1990s, it preserved most of the gains made. In this context, the constitutional revision can appear as a "luxury" or a political fixation, and open up a national debate favourable to an opposition that is seen today less as an alternative to government, but rather as the expression of the concerns or recriminations of public opinion. Barring the dissolution of the Lower House or a "coup" within the LDP, the Prime Minister has a relatively long time ahead of him since no election is scheduled before 2025.