



Japan replaces government in landslide election

Results from Sunday's landslide election indicate Japan's governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was ousted from power in the lower house of parliament after more than 50 years of almost uninterrupted rule.



The left-wing opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) surged in representation from 115 seats to 308 out of 480 after making promises of tax cuts, more benefits, and a shift in foreign policy. After taking control of the less-powerful upper house in the 2007 elections, the DPJ is expected to form a ruling coalition with, among others, the socialist party — giving the Democrats firm control over the nation's government until at least the next election. A two-thirds majority is needed to pass bills in the lower house.

The losing LDP, considered more conservative and business-friendly, managed to hold on to 119 seats, down from 300. Its coalition partner lost about a third of the representation it held before the election.

Prime Minister Taro Aso acknowledged the voters' fury, announcing that he would take responsibility and resign as the LDP's leader. "The result of the election is very severe. I believe this is the judgment of the public and we have to accept that and reflect on what we did," he explained at a press conference in Tokyo, noting that he would continue to serve as the party's chief only until a new leader is chosen. "The people have shown their disappointment with the party and I have to accept that as my destiny."

At the opposition's headquarters, the Democrats were celebrating and unofficially nominating cabinet ministers. "This is a victory for the people," said DPJ president Yukio Hatoyama, widely expected to be elected Japan's next prime minister when parliament reconvenes later in September. "We want to build a new government that hears the voices of the nation." After the polls closed, he said, "The nation is very angry with the ruling party, and we are grateful for their deep support."

But is it really "deep support?" On Monday the Associated Press reported that "voters were seen as venting dissatisfaction with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party more so than endorsing the policies of the opposition" and that "the Democrats are made up of an inexperienced group of left-wing activists and LDP defectors." It quoted an elderly woman who noted that the party has no record and she felt "very insecure."

Many experts agreed with the analysis. "The high level of negative voting may impact the long-term prospects of a DPJ Cabinet," said Dennis Yasutomo, a politics and East Asian studies professor at Smith College in Massachusetts. He told MarketWatch that the DPJ had continually revised its policy positions up until the election. "The voters seem more interested in ousting the LDP than in supporting a DPJ vision."

According to an article entitled "Japan's Long-Ruling Party Suffers Crushing Defeat in Elections" by the Associated Press on Sunday, "The vote was seen as a barometer of frustrations over Japan's worst economic slump since World War II and a loss of confidence in the ruling Liberal Democrats' ability to tackle tough problems such as the rising national debt and rapidly aging population."

Despite Japan's out-of-control government debt — almost 200 percent of the nation's gross domestic product — the DPJ rode to victory on promises of more handouts to families and farmers, "free"



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 31, 2009

government high school, raising the minimum wage, a bigger “safety net,” more toll-free highways, and tax cuts. They claim they will fund the extravagances by “cutting waste” and using “untapped financial reserves.”

DPJ president Hatoyama and other party leaders have also made repeated statements about scaling back the nation’s special relationship with the United States and strengthening bonds with Asian countries like China — though they have said that the United States will remain Japan’s key ally. The U.S. Department of Defense currently has almost 40,000 personnel on the island nation.

But despite the new leadership’s rhetoric, the U.S. government appeared eager to continue the deep and long-standing ties with Japan. “The challenges we face are many, but through our partnership our two great democracies will meet them in a spirit of cooperation and friendship,” said the new American ambassador to Japan, John V. Roos.

The U.S. State Department also released a statement congratulating the nation for its “historic” election and saying it would work closely with Japan on “addressing the threat of climate change and increasing the availability of renewable energy,” among other things.

The economic effects of the election are still not certain, though the currency rose slightly and stocks went up briefly and then fell again. Public debt is expected to increase even more as the new government rolls out plans for massive new spending.

Unfortunately for the Japanese people, letting government hand out ever more money while promising to reduce taxes is a recipe for disaster, assuming the policy changes are indeed implemented. The nation officially climbed out of recession just recently, and analysts are already speculating that wrong-headed policies could tip the scales and spark another decline in the economy. It is to be hoped for Japan’s sake that the nation’s new leadership will understand this.

As far as the United States’ relationship with Japan, there is no need or proper constitutional authority for maintaining any military forces there at all, let alone today’s massive presence. And with the country’s new government expressing the desire for more “independence” from Washington, now might just be a perfect time to finally bring our troops home.

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