

EIR Feature

The elections of July 6: turning point for Japan

by Linda de Hoyos

It may not be until the 21st century that the world fully comprehends the significance of the landslide victory for Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's Liberal Democratic Party in national elections this July 6. But if Nakasone's promised program for Japan's transition to the 21st century is realized, the July 6 elections will have been a turning point in Japan's history and its role in the world.

The high voter turnout in the elections, and the votes cast for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), giving the ruling party 304 seats in the 580-seat Lower House of the Diet (parliament), broke all precedent in the postwar period. The vote was a surprise reversal of the defeat dealt to the party in elections in December 1983, when the LDP scraped by with only 250 seats.

The manner in which the elections were called was equally uncharacteristic of Japanese politics. In 1983, Prime Minister Nakasone, then closing his first term, would have by all expectations stepped down in the wake of the "chastisement" delivered by Japanese voters to the party. However, he demanded to remain in his post, and with the backing of political chieftain and former prime minister Kakuei Tanaka, head of the most powerful faction in the LDP, Nakasone did so.

Nakasone's term would be up again on Oct. 31 of this year. However, he again stated his desire to remain prime minister in order to "take Japan into the 21st century." To do so, he had not only to flout the LDP's written rules, but the equally important assumed strictures of consensus in the ruling party.

The LDP, which has been the ruling party since the end of World War II, rests on a framework of political factions representing various interests and constituencies. It is through loyalty to such factions, headed by each faction's most senior member, that prospective candidates receive both the political backing and funding to run for office. Harmony within the party derives from the strict apportioning of political power among the factions, according to rotation and number of Diet seats each faction has acquired. Given that the LDP usually wins by far the most seats in parliamentary elections, the president of the party automatically becomes the prime minister. The post of party president is limited to two, two-year terms.

Nakasone, however, has challenged this long-standing ruling. In deliberations



NSIPS/Carlos de Hoyos

A street scene in Tokyo. Prime Minister Nakasone has received overwhelming popular support for his effort to shift Japan's concern from the domestic preoccupations of postwar reconstruction, to an international role befitting the nation's economic strength.

July 22, on the basis of the mandate delivered to the party, Nakasone was granted an extension of his term one year beyond the end of his current term. The possibility of his remaining in office a full third term remains open.

Nakasone's major opponents in the party are, understandably enough, those who under party traditions would be vying for the highest post had he relinquished power: former Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe, a member of the faction led by former Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda; former Finance Minister Noburo Takeshita, a leader of the faction of Kakeui Tanaka; and chairman of the LDP executive council, Kiichi Miyazawa, from the faction of former Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki.

A popular mandate

Nakasone circumvented these factional obstacles to his personal drive to take Japan through the transition to the 21st century, by taking the issue directly to the Japanese people through elections. Despite the downturn in the Japanese economy, due to the revaluation of the yen under pressure of the failing dollar, Nakasone's popularity rating has gone steadily upward over the last year, reaching as high, according to polls, as 57%. In May of this year, Japan's political observers believed that if Nakasone scored a success at the Tokyo summit of OECD leaders, he would have a good chance of following through on a scenario for dual house elections that would give him a fresh mandate before his term expires. The unified stance of the United States and Western European leaders against Japan's calls for currency stability, however, appeared to destroy that option.

Or at least, that is what the Japanese and Western press said. Nevertheless, within a month, Nakasone had succeeded in pushing through a measure which would turn the already scheduled Upper House elections into full national dual elections—thus enabling him to seek the mandate he would require.

According to agreements worked out within the party, the following were projected as the options to emerge from the elections: If the LDP received less than 250 seats in the Diet, then Kiichi Miyazawa, whose economic policies are most at variance with Nakasone's fiscal austerity, would become prime minister in a coalition with perhaps the National Liberal Club or the Democratic Socialist Party. If the LDP received between 250 and 270 seats, then Abe or Takeshita, both from within Nakasone's cabinet, would be tapped for the prime ministership. Anything over 270 seats, would be a victory for Nakasone. No one expected a victory as high as 304.

The winners and losers

The overriding factor in the LDP victory was the high voter turnout, just as low voter turnout had nearly crushed the party in 1983. Nakasone's call for a strong alliance with the United States and his demand that Japan take responsibility as a leading nation in the world found a ready response in the Japanese voting public.

This is reflected in the final tallies for the contending parties. In the Lower House, which is elected by prefectures (or districts) and is the most powerful of the two houses, the totals were:

	1986	1983
Liberal Democratic Party	300	250
Japanese Socialist Party	85	112
Komeito	56	53
Democratic Socialist Party	26	38
Japanese Communist Party	26	26
New Liberal Club	6	8
USDP	4	3
Independents*	9	16

* Four independents later joined the LDP, bringing the party's total to 304.

As various political observers put it, "The opposition parties did not have much attraction for the Japanese voters." For the most part, the parties limit themselves to criticism of Prime Minister Nakasone and the LDP, without offering an independent alternative policy. The four major opposition parties are the JSP, the Komeito, the DSP, and the JCP. The Komeito Party is the avowedly Buddhist Party of Japan, with an emphasis on anti-corruption and disarmament. Its level of support within the population did not significantly drop; however, it is known that many voting Komeito members were not displeased with the Nakasone victory. The Japanese Communist Party also registered a steady base of support over the last three years.

The Democratic Socialist Party, a party of loyal opposition, lost 12 seats, as its previous supporters went over to the more powerful LDP.

The loser in the election was the Japanese Socialist Party. The Japanese branch of Willy Brandt's Socialist International, the JSP under its chairman Masashi Ishibashi has been the most outspoken opponent of Nakasone's adherence to the alliance with the United States and his publicly stated personal commitment to the Strategic Defense Initiative. Even more than the Japanese Communist Party, the JSP has carried out a pro-Soviet diplomacy of its own. The JSP, for instance, recognizes North—not South—Korea, while the JCP has broken its ties to the Communist Party in North Korea. The Japanese voters rejected the JSP's appeasement stance. The party's drastic loss forced the resignation of Ishibashi, who announced the day after the election: "I feel a strong sense of crisis. Nakasone will push forward many dangerous plans, such as Japanese participation in the Strategic Defense Initiative."

Even within the LDP, the new distribution of votes to the factions bolsters Nakasone's own position. The factional breakdown of the 300 votes is as follows:

	1986	1983
Nakasone	59	47
Tanaka	34	65
Suzuki	58	51
Fukuda	55	46
Komoto	28	27
Unaffiliated	16	14

The biggest gainers were Nakasone's own faction and that of Tanaka, the latter having provided the power base for Nakasone's rise within the party. Combined, the Nakasone and Tanaka factions control 143 votes in the party, while the factions of Fukuda, Suzuki, and former Economic Planning Agency director Toshio Komoto, have only 141 votes.

The factional strength of the Nakasone-Tanaka complex is a rather impolite snub to the liberal Eastern Establishment in the United States, particularly to Henry Kissinger, who works more easily with members of the Suzuki faction. In 1973-74, in the heyday of the Kissinger years, as minister of the powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), Nakasone earned Kissinger's intense disgruntlement for his attempts to mediate in the 1973 oil crisis. As for Tanaka, he was watergated out of office in 1974 by a Kissinger-contrived Lockheed scandal. Tanaka's crime was his policy that Japan forge an independent policy toward the People's Republic of China, which put him at odds with Kissinger's own "China Card."

Just the beginning

In the aftermath of the elections, Nakasone has selected an entirely new cabinet, retaining only chief cabinet secretary Masaharu Gotoda. "It is important to form a powerful cabinet," said Nakasone July 21, "to strengthen our unity." As Abe and Takeshita moved over to powerful positions in the party, Nakasone appointed rival Miyazawa to the "hot seat" post of the finance ministry. In the foreign ministry, he has placed one of his closest aides, Tadashi Kuranari, indicating that Nakasone will personally take the point on foreign policy.

The July 6 mandate has cleared away obstacles to Nakasone's policies. As predicted by the JSP's Ishibashi, Japan is moving fast toward the SDI. Immediately after the elections, six cabinet ministers, led by former Defense Agency director Koichi Kato, began a series of meetings to formulate the institutional framework and details of a government-to-government agreement for Japan's full participation in the SDI.

On domestic policy, four days before the July 22 LDP deliberations, a government advisory panel issued its recommendations for a trillion-dollar program for the construction of 122 nuclear power plants to supply 60% of Japan's electricity requirements in the year 2030 (see *Science and Technology* section).

These two steps are but the beginning of a new era of self-confidence and global responsibility for Japan. In his official and campaign speeches over the last three years, Prime Minister Nakasone has fought for the idea that the self-designated task of his administration is to turn the nation's eyes away from domestic reconstruction and an inward concern with the debts of the past, and toward Japan's higher role in building a world for the future. On this task, the Japanese people are agreed.