



Japanese Election 2017: An Assessment

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The ruling coalition of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its partner Komeito emerged victorious in the October 22 Japanese general election by retaining its two-thirds majority in the Diet. With a renewed mandate, Prime Minister Abe consolidated his position within his party and is set to become the longest-serving Prime Minister in post-War Japanese history. The October 22 election has witnessed a serious realignment of Japanese political opposition. Despite its strong start, the newly established political party of Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike's 'Kibo no To' or the Party of Hope failed to make headway. Meanwhile, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) another party formed just three weeks before the poll produced a remarkable performance to become the largest opposition party.

Japan's national parliament, the Diet is divided into the House of Councilors (upper house) and the House of Representatives (lower house). October 22 election was held to elect 465 members of the House of Representatives who are elected for a four-year term. Of these, 289 members are elected from single-seat constituencies, meaning that, voters in a given constituency have one vote, and the candidate who receives the most votes wins and becomes the only representative of that constituency. The remaining 176 lower house representatives are elected from eleven multi-member electoral districts by a party-list system of proportional representation. Under this system, in a given electoral district, voters do not vote for an individual candidate, but for a party. Each party's representation in the Diet is determined by the percentage of votes that it received. Parties will allot seats to its top candidates from a list submitted before the election.

Political Context of the October 22 Election

In a surprising turn of events on September 28 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe dissolved the Lower House of the Diet and called for a snap election on October 22. It was only in

August that Prime Minister Abe reshuffled his cabinet in an attempt to regain the public confidence in the government, which was plummeted by allegations of corruption involving Prime Minister Abe, political gaffe by cabinet ministers and information cover-up by the Defense Minister. Public disapproval of Prime Minister Abe was also reflected in Liberal Democratic Parties (LDP)'s loss in Tokyo election to the newly formed local political party of Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike.

In view of the improving public approval rating following the cabinet reshuffle and tough stand against North Korean nuclear and missile provocation Prime Minister Abe's call for a snap election, was a political gamble to take advantage of the disarray in Democratic Party (DP), the opposition party. The newly elected leader of DP, Seiji Maehara, the fourth leader in as many years, was struggling to stabilise the party following the resignation of his deputy but was also trying to keep rebellious DP members from leaving to ally with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Prime Minister Abe was also alarmed by the rising popularity of Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike and her eventual induction into national politics forming a party as a direct challenger and an alternative to LDP.

Prime Minister Abe's call for an election disintegrated Japanese political opposition with Seiji Maehara dissolving DP in an attempt to merge the party with Koike's Hope Party which was founded only on September 25. While the conservative-leaning members of the DP joined the Party of Hope, the left-leaning members who were rejected by Koike formed the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) under the leadership of former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano on October 2.

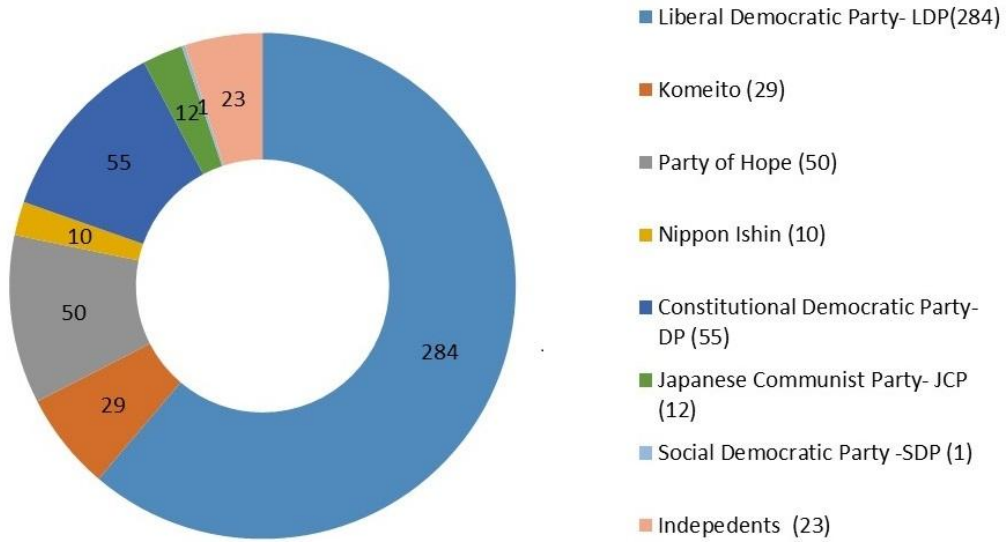
Following the fragmentation of the opposition parties, the October 22 election was effectively a three-way contest between the ruling coalition of LDP and Komeito, the reformist alliance of Koike's Hope Party and Nippon Ishin Party and the left-leaning coalition of CDP and Japanese Communist Party (JCP).

Election Result

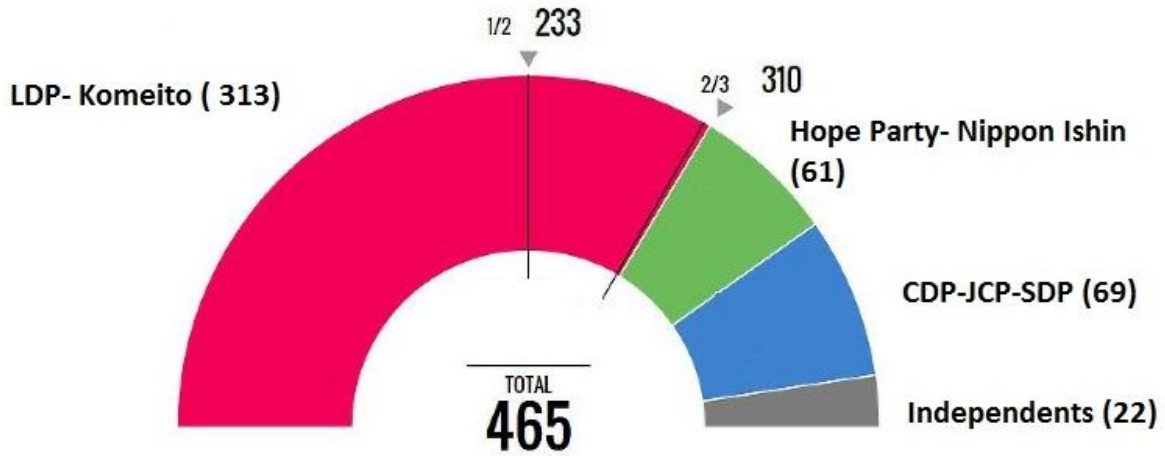
When the results of the October 22 election announced, Prime Minister Abe's ruling coalition defeated the Party of Hope by a big margin, once thought to pose a severe challenge to the status quo. Surprisingly CDP performed better than the Party of Hope. Out of the 465 seats, LDP and Komeito secured 313. LDP retained its pre-election strength in the Diet by winning 284 seats. Komeito won a total of 29 seats short by six seats from its pre-election tally.¹

The Hope Party which was expected to secure more than 70 seats when it was established by Tokyo Governor Koike in the last week of September, managed to secure only 50 seats. Hope Party had the strength of 57 members at the time its formation. Its coalition partner Nippon Ishin won 10 seats, down from 14.

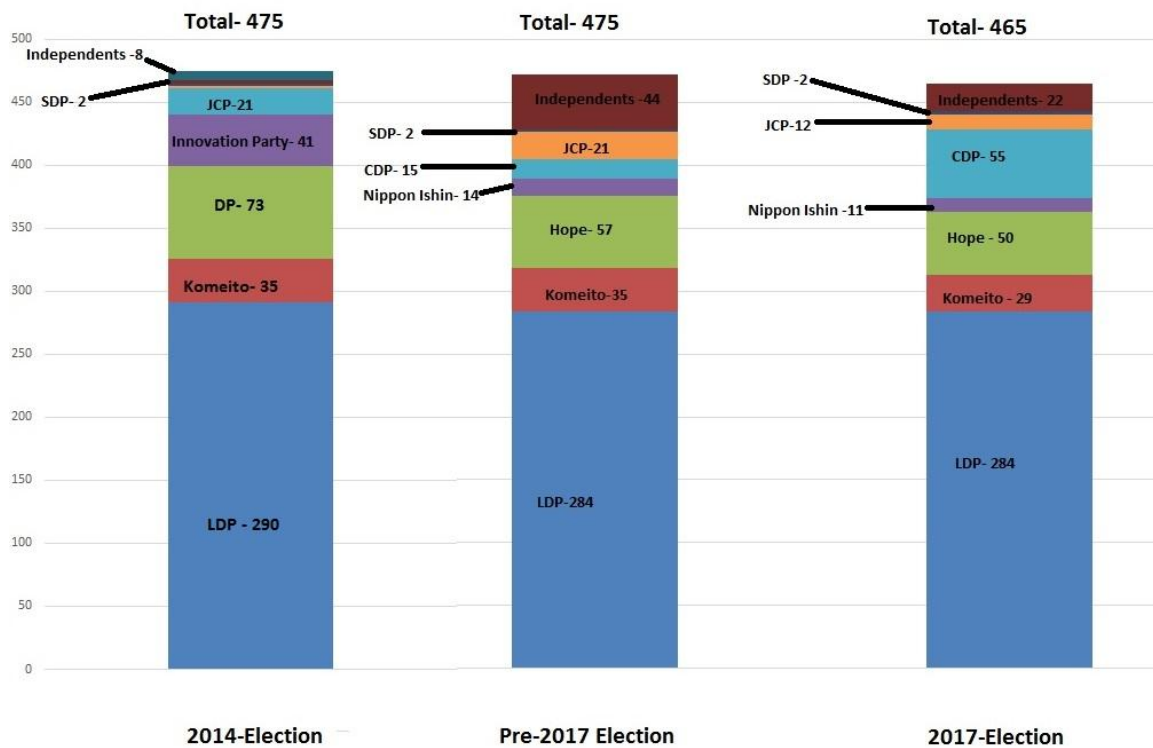
Total Seats- 465



2017 Japanese Election Results²



2017 Japanese Election- Political Coalition³



Lower House Representation of Japanese Political Parties- Comparison⁴

CDP became the second largest party in Diet by winning 55 seats. The party had only 15 members when it was established in the first week of October. CDP coalition partner JCP could not retain its pre-election strength of 21, managed just 12 seats. Independents won 22 seats. Due to reapportionment, there was a reduction in 10 seats for this year's election compared to the 475 seats during the 2014 election.

Most important factor that helped the ruling coalition in securing the two-thirds majority is the apparent split of the anti-government vote between the two opposition parties. Out of the total 289 single-seat constituencies, the ruling coalition faced multiple opposition candidates in 226 electoral districts, out of which it won 183 seats. However, in the 57 seats where the ruling candidate was in a head to head fight with just one opposition candidate, the opposition won 18 seats.⁵

Another factor that helped the ruling coalition is the low voter turnout. According to Ministry of Internal Affairs, October 22 elections had 53.8 percent polling, slightly above the post-war record low of the 2014 election.⁶ There exist a positive correlation between the low voting and the number of seats that the LDP wins, indicating a strong core support base for the party. Whereas the chances are higher for the opposition when unaffiliated voters turn out in large numbers.

Koike's rejection of the liberal-leaning candidates of DP was a primary factor that contributed to the poor performance of the Hope Party. Most of the winning candidates

were former DP incumbent representatives or political veterans, while most of Koike's close allies and core members of the Party of Hope failed to make it to the Diet including Masaru Wakasa, co-founder of the party. Koike's decision not to contest in the election has also had a negative impact on the electorates. Of the 25 single-seat constituencies in Tokyo stronghold of Koike, Hope Party managed to win only one.⁷

The emergence of CDP as the second largest party in the Diet to become the main opposition was the most surprising outcomes of the October 22 election. CDP was established 20 days before the election and managed to field only 78 candidates, whereas the Hope party supported 235 candidates. CDP won 37 proportional representative seats capturing 19.8 percent of the total vote polled. The CDP could have won one more seat in the proportional representation because the party didn't register sufficient candidates to match the number of votes it received, it conceded that seat to LDP.⁸ A major factor that helped CDP was its alliance with JCP which coordinated with CDP by withdrawing its candidates enabling the CDP candidates to secure seats that may have been taken by non-liberal parties. For instance, out of 26 constituencies where there was no JCP candidate and witnessed a three-way competition between CDP, Hope Party alliance and LDP coalition, CDP won in 13 of those seats.⁹

LDP's coalition partner Komeito could not retain its pre-election position. The reduction in the number of seats allotted to four proportional representation blocks-Tohoku, northern Kanto, Kinki and Kyushu, where the party has a strong support base has had an adverse effect on Komeito's performance in the October 22 election. Out of the 29 seats that the party won, 9 are single-seat constituencies, and 21 are from proportional representation in comparison to 9 and 26 seats in the 2014 election.¹⁰ Another factor contributed to the weakening of the 'centrist' Komeito in the proportional seats is the emergence of the 'left-centrist' CDP. CDP managed to attract a number of 'centrist' voters who supported Komeito in the previous election however detached themselves from the party in the October 22 election because of its cooperation with Prime Minister Abe in enacting security laws and the "anti-conspiracy law".¹¹

Implications

Prime Minister Abe's vindication of his bold decision to call for the snap election has enhanced his grip on power in the government and the party. Despite his low public approval rating, election mandate testifies electorate's faith in Prime Minister Abe's leadership in bringing stability into Japanese politics. With such a mandate he quashed all possible challenges that could have emerged from within LDP for his third consecutive term as LDP president. The election of LDP President is scheduled for September 2018. The supermajority in the diet, in theory, gives a free reign to Abe to pass any legislation as he wishes. This would mean continuity in 'Abenomics', implementation of 'consumption tax' and hardline approaches to foreign and security policies including constitutional reform.

Constitutional reform has long been a core principle for the LDP, but only in the recent election that the party included it in its election manifesto. Prime Minister Abe has proposed to amend the constitution including Article 9, which constrains Japan's use of

military role and fails to recognise the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Prime Minister Abe in May 2017 proposed the addition of a new clause to Article 9 to establish the legality of the SDF while keeping the peace clause intact. Prime Minister Abe's proposal is a departure from LDP's original plan, which calls for a radical revision of Article 9, "allowing Japan to fully exercise the right of collective self-defence" including military aid to an ally even when Japan is not under attack.¹² In addition to article 9, Prime Minister Abe has also proposed three more items for revision. They are extraordinary powers for Prime Minister in emergency situations, reforming the electoral system for the Upper House and making higher education free.¹³ Prime Minister has also suggested 2020 as the year to have the constitution revised. For any constitutional amendment, in addition to a two-third majority in both houses of parliament, Prime Minister Abe would also need to win a national referendum on the issue, which opinion polls suggest could be a struggle.

The recent election has also witnessed an increasing debate and support for the revision of constitution not only within LDP but also in Komeito, Hope Party and Nippon Ishin. However, they disagree on what to prioritise. JCP and CDP are against the review.¹⁴ Prime Minister Abe has stated that he would look forward to working with Hope Party on the subject. It will not be a surprise if Prime Minister Abe proposes a quid pro quo with Hope Party on the important issue of constitutional reform.

Prime Minister Abe's immediate priority would be to deal with the North Korean threat. In the short term, the focus be in close coordination with Washington, would be on putting maximum pressure on North Korea and also to seek support from China and Russia to bring North Korea to the negotiating table. The long-term goal would be to enhance Japan's defence posture by building own anti-missile defence capability, challenging the post-War legacy of pacifism.

The reconstitution of the Japanese political opposition would be a significant development. The future of Hope Party is at stake with rising criticism over Koike's leadership and the uncertain loyalty of the former DP members. However, with the emergence of CDP, an ideologically unified opposition could become a constructive check on Prime Minister Abe and his policies in the Diet.

Conclusion

The October 22 election was not much about policy or ideology but was more about stability necessitated by North Korean nuclear and missile provocations. The election also underpins the electorate's trust in Prime Minister Abe in bringing stability in the Japanese government despite his widespread unpopularity. The election was carefully watched in the region because of its implications for Japan's international security role. The mandate for the ruling coalition would imply Abe is getting another and perhaps the final chance to achieve his ambition to rewrite Japanese constitution to make Japan a "normal" country in international politics.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnote

¹ "VOTE 2017: Coalition retains two-thirds majority as all seats finalized", Asahi Shimbun, October 23, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201710230012.html> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

Notes

² "Ruling coalition wins two-thirds of seats in lower house election", The Mainichi, October 23, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/japanelection2017/> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

³ "Ruling coalition wins two-thirds of seats in lower house election", The Mainichi, October 23, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/japanelection2017/> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

⁴ "Lower House Election Results", The Japan Times, December 15, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/12/15/national/politics-diplomacy/lower-house-election-results/#.WfAjImiCyM8> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

⁵ "VOTE 2017: Abe's LDP lifted by disarray in opposition bloc, Koike's plummet", Asahi Shimbun, October 23, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201710230060.html> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

⁶ "Japan's general election in four charts", Nikkei Asia Review, October 23, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-s-election/Japan-s-general-election-in-four-charts> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

⁷ "Much of LDP's success rests in electoral system itself", The Japan Times, October 23, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/10/23/national/politics-diplomacy/much-ldps-success-rests-electoral-system/#.Wfw9CGiCyM8> (Accessed on November 2, 2017)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ "Communist party fares poorly in election but sees link with CDP as silver lining", The Mainichi, October 23, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171023/p2a/oom/ona/021000c> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)

¹⁰ "LDP's coalition partner Komeito suffers election blow", The Mainichi, October 23, 2017, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171023/p2a/oom/ona/032000c> (Accessed on November 2, 2017)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² "Article 9 revision justifying SDF under review by LDP", The Japan Times, June 21, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/21/national/politics-diplomacy/ldp-weigh-abe-proposed-new-article-9-clause-justifying-existence-sdf/#.WfwvwWiCyM8> (Accessed on November 2, 2017)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ "VOTE 2017: Constitutional revision backed by over 80% of Lower House", The Asahi Shimbun, October 23, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201710230048.html> (Accessed on October 23, 2017)