

Japan's ruling party trounced in Tokyo regional election

By Ben McGrath
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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was soundly defeated in the July 2 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections in what is broadly seen as a referendum on the policies of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his cabinet. The outcome suggests trouble for his party ahead of national parliamentary elections next year.

Voters were choosing members for the assembly in the Tokyo metropolitan area, which includes the capital city itself and surrounding suburbs, home to approximately 38 million people. Tomin First no Kai (Tokyo Citizens First Association), a regional party, seized 49 seats. Its electoral ally Komeito won 23. A handful of independents, who joined Tomin First after the election, also won seats, giving the bloc 79 seats out of 127.

The LDP took only 23 seats, down from 57 and well below previous record lows of 38 seats in 1995 and 2009. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) won 19 seats, while the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) took a paltry 5, underlining its complete disarray. Voter turnout was higher than in the previous election, with 51.3 percent of voters going to the polls compared to 43.5 percent in 2013.

Significantly Komeito, a junior partner in Abe's government, aligned with Tomin First, rather than the widely disliked LDP, in the Tokyo election. The LDP has been reliant on Komeito, which promotes itself as a Buddhist, pacifist party, to push through laws that make deep inroads into democratic rights and remove restrictions on the country's military, or Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

LDP heavyweight and former defense minister Shigeru Ishiba exploited the party's losses to question Abe's legitimacy, saying, "We must recognize this as an historic defeat," he said. "Rather than a victory for

Tomin First, this is a defeat for the LDP."

Ishiba, who formed his own inner-party faction in 2015 to challenge Abe, is positioning himself for a run at the party's presidency and thus the prime ministership. He has been critical recently of Abe's proposed revision of Article 9 of the constitution—the so-called pacifist clause—demanding far more sweeping changes to accelerate Japan's remilitarization.

Support for the Abe government is dropping rapidly. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* poll, the Abe cabinet's rating has fallen to 38 percent, well down from 54 percent in January, while non-support rose to 42 percent.

Much of the support for Tomin First was a protest vote against the LDP and its policies. The LDP has been embroiled in scandals, including one surrounding Kake Gakuen, a veterinary school set up in a special economic zone. Abe allegedly intervened on behalf of his friend and the school's director, Kotaro Kake, to win approval for the school's establishment.

Kono, a 40-year-old voter, told the *Japan Times*: "I cannot trust the LDP after the recent scandals, such as the gaffes by the party's lawmakers. So I voted for Tomin First, hoping that many of the assembly seats held by the LDP will be replaced by Koike's party."

Defense Minister Tomomi Inada also angered voters after she overtly invoked the SDF in a campaign speech in support of an LDP candidate in the Tokyo election. "I ask for your support on behalf of the Defense Ministry, the Self-Defense Forces, myself and the LDP," she said. Legally, the SDF—Japan's military—is required to be politically neutral.

Despite calls for Inada to resign or be replaced, Abe defended her, though she may not retain her post in a likely upcoming cabinet reshuffle. The reaction to her comments reflects broader anti-war sentiment in Japan

and hostility to the Abe government's agenda of remilitarization.

Tomin First is no less right-wing than the LDP. It is led by Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike, a longstanding LDP politician who now postures as an outsider and was elected to lead the city last July. She served in the cabinets of Junichiro Koizumi as environment minister and Shinzo Abe as defense minister in 2007 during his first stint as prime minister. She challenged the preferred LDP candidate for governor and went on to establish her new party.

Koike was hailed by the domestic and foreign media for becoming the first female governor of Tokyo. During the latest election campaign she confined herself to local issues, creating controversies over the relocation of the Tokyo fish market and the cost of the 2020 Olympic Games in the city.

The governor promotes herself as an opponent of the elderly, male political establishment and vested interests. In reality, she has a long pedigree in establishment politics, entering parliament in 1992 as a member of the Japan New Party, a breakaway from the LDP. She won a lower house seat in 1993, which she held until 2016. She joined the LDP itself in 2016.

During the Tokyo election, Koike kept quiet about her right-wing, pro-militarist views. She is a senior member of Nippon Kaigi, the ultra-nationalist organization that seeks to whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s. It opposes gender equality as well. Abe, the majority of his cabinet, and many other lawmakers, are also members of Nippon Kaigi.

Along with this organization, Koike advocates the revision of Article 9 of the constitution to allow a standing army and the ability to wage war overseas. She supports visits to the Yasukuni war shrine, which symbolically inters the dead from Japan's past conflicts, including 14 class-A war criminals.

After the Tokyo election, Koike stepped down as head of her party, ostensibly to focus on being governor. However, she is likely attempting to use her party's victory to pursue her goal of becoming prime minister. She previously ran for LDP president in 2008 before supporting Abe's rival Shigeru Ishiba in the post four years later.

Tomin First is not the first regional party to gain country-wide prominence. A plethora of parties and

independents have emerged to exploit the widespread disgust and alienation from the major parties. None of them has any solution to the deepening economic and social crisis confronting the majority of working people.

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