

Japan's main opposition party dissolves itself ahead of general election

By Ben McGrath
30 September 2017

Japan's Democratic Party (DP, *Minshintō*?) came to a de facto end Thursday after party leader Seiji Maehara announced it would not run candidates in the snap national election on October 22. Instead, party members, including incumbent lawmakers, have been instructed to seek nominations under the newly established Party of Hope (*Kibō no Tō*?), led by right-wing nationalist and Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike.

The announcement came the same day Prime Minister Shinzo Abe officially dissolved the Lower House of the Japanese Diet or parliament so as to pave the way for the election. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) appeared set to retain power due mainly to mass abstention as few voters regard the DP as an alternative. The party's support in opinion polling has been sitting in the single digits for months.

The DP has been split between right-wing and so-called liberal factions, arguing over pro-war revisions to the constitution as well as cooperation with the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Yuriko Koike's establishment of the Party of Hope provided the DP's conservatives with an opportunity to salvage their political careers and potentially return to power while also breaking with the liberals.

Maehara, a member of the DP's right-wing faction, and Koike agreed to work together on the evening of September 26. A general meeting of all DP lawmakers on Thursday approved the proposal to essentially fold their party into Koike's. "We have to stop the Abe administration by all possible means," Maehara said at the meeting. "By realizing a change in government again, I want to bring down the Abe administration that is selfish and distorting politics."

It is unclear who would be nominated for prime minister should the Party of Hope win the election.

Maehara plans to run as an independent while Koike has stated she will remain governor of Tokyo, though there is speculation that she is planning to run for parliament.

As of Thursday, 62 DP incumbents, or 75 percent of those seeking re-election, had committed themselves to run under the Party of Hope. However, Koike announced that not all DP candidates will be accepted. "I want to narrow (the list) down from various standpoints, like how well they can fit in with our policies," she said yesterday.

Goshi Hosono, who left the DP in August to co-found the Party of Hope, stated that candidates will have to share a "realistic" stance on national security, i.e., supporting remilitarization. Like the LDP, the party supports revisions to Article 9 of the constitution that has limited the country's armed forces and other amendments to further the pro-war agenda of the Japanese ruling class. The Party of Hope is trying to avoid a discussion of constitutional revision during the election, conscious of the mass hostility to war in Japan.

Domestically, Koike is promising to freeze a scheduled sales tax increase in 2019 and halting the use of nuclear power, while calling for pro-market economic "reforms," without elaborating. On Monday, she declared, "When you look at the world, bold reforms are taking place everywhere, as represented by the corporate tax cuts undertaken by President Trump and President Macron (of France). Japan is lagging behind. I believe Japan needs a real reform-minded force."

Koike is posturing as an outsider and opponent of the political establishment. However, she had been a longstanding member of the LDP, joining in 2002, before leaving the party earlier this year. She served in

the Junichiro Koizumi's cabinet and in Abe's first government as defense minister. She first entered the Upper House of parliament in 1992 before being elected to the Lower House the following year. She is also a senior member of the far right-wing Nippon Kaigi, which whitewashes Japanese war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s and advocates emperor worship. Abe and most of his cabinet are also members.

The DP's decision to effectively dissolve itself into Koike's party is the end product of the upheaval in Japanese politics following the collapse of the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) in the 1990s. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ, *Minshut*?) was formed in 1998 to keep working-class discontent and alienation within safe parliamentary channels. It comprised not only former JSP members, but also disgruntled ex-LDP members.

The inclusion of Ichiro Ozawa's Liberal Party in 2003 pushed the DPJ further to the right. Ozawa, another former LDP member and political heavyweight, left the DPJ in 2012. His newly formed Liberal Party is also expected to join Koike's party.

After being swept to power in 2009, the DPJ was quickly discredited, after it reneged on its electoral promises to distance itself from the US military alliance and to make limited social reforms. Abe and the LDP defeated the Democrats in a landslide in 2012. The DPJ attempted to posture as a left-wing opponent of Abe, working with the JCP, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and other parties. This did not prevent it from merging with the far right Japan Innovation Party in 2016 to form the DP.

Not all DP members are satisfied with Thursday's de facto merger. DP members who do not intend to join the Party of Hope are expected to run as independents, with an eye towards forming a new party after the election. This leaves the JCP as the main, so-called "left" party in Japanese politics. Its leader, Kazuo Shii, criticized the DP, saying, "Maehara's proposal unilaterally abandons the agreement reached by the four opposition parties. It is a serious act of betrayal."

For years, the JCP has promoted illusions in the Democrats as leaders for the Left. The "betrayal" felt by Shii is not over the fact that the DP has joined a right-wing party, but that it leaves the Stalinists exposed for supporting the Democrats to begin with. This will not prevent the JCP, which is thoroughly

integrated into the political establishment and has abandoned any pretence of seeking to overthrow capitalism, from continuing to support former DP members running as independents.

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