

# Japan's Upper House Election, July 29: Down or Dawn for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe?

Bert Edström

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E-mail: [caciz@jhuaig.admin.jhu.edu](mailto:caciz@jhuaig.admin.jhu.edu)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Niklas Swanström, Director, at either of the addresses above (preferably by e-mail).

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## The Right Man at the Right Time?

After ten months in office, Japan's young prime minister, Shinzo Abe, encounters a make or break situation on July 29, when Japanese voters go to the ballot box to cast their votes in the Upper House election. Despite the fact that he was elected president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and became prime minister with sizeable majorities, speculation began immediately who would succeed him. This reflected the feeling among voters that Abe might become just another short-lived premier of the kind that Japan saw so many of in the 1990s. Despite that this period of political instability is recent, it tends to be shrouded in hindsight by the exceptional longevity in the prime minister's office of Abe's predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, who became the third-longest serving premier in postwar Japanese politics.

In recent years, Abe has been one of Japan's most popular politicians. When the LDP was choosing a successor to Koizumi, it was clear that Abe was the man to pick. As prime ministerial hopeful, he was relatively inexperienced with only one senior government post on his curriculum vitae; but this was compensated by his popularity in the opinion polls. The Mr Nice Guy of Japanese politics was seen as the right man to succeed the popular Koizumi and head the LDP party in the upcoming election. Now, the moment of truth has arrived for Abe.

## Election Issues

The political issues in focus since Abe became prime minister have shifted. One thing is for sure: The way in which the months preceding the election have unfolded have not been to Abe's favor. Affairs and scandals have wreaked havoc over both his and his party's planning for the election. Most events have had adverse effects on Abe and his party. But to some extent both he and his party have been to blame for the fact that their campaign has derailed.

Not least, Abe himself has to shoulder responsibility. He is one of Japan's most high-profile politicians and known for his strong convictions. His personal political agenda emphasizes nationalism and patriotism. Before he became premier, he built his strong support in public opinion on his denunciation of the kidnappings in the 1970s and 80s of Japanese citizens by North Korea. Abe's strong anti-North Korean stance went down well with many Japanese people, who found the kidnappings outrageous. Abe saw them as totally unacceptable and became the flag carrier for a popular movement working for the kidnapped victims. Sympathy for victims was thus projected onto this young and relatively inexperienced politician, and he gained political stardom.

Although Abe was popular, he was a bit too right wing for many voters. This worried the leadership of the LDP as well as the party's prospective candidates in the Upper House election. To make his image more palatable, Abe softened his stance in his campaign for the post of chairman of the LDP last year. Indulging in vague statements and ambiguities, this hard-hitting political slogger seemed to undergo a metamorphosis during the campaign. From sharp and clear-cut one-liners that could not be misunderstood, Abe began to excel in equally chiseled ambiguous statements in an attempt to keep contentious issues at arm's length. Even when he was challenged on his home ground – the right-wing revisionist view of history and an unbending unwillingness to blame earlier generations of Japanese for wrongdoings – he did not stray from the strategy of ambiguity he adopted during his campaign for party leadership, when even many members of the conservative LDP were worried that Abe's rightist leanings would alienate voters.

Abe's strategy of ambiguity worked well and he was elected chairman of the LDP and subsequently prime minister in September last year. By and large, he was appointed because party members who cast their vote in the election for the LDP presidency assessed the likely impact that Abe and his competitors would have on the electorate as well as on their own chances as candidates in the Upper House election a year later. The outcome was self-evident. In the opinion polls, Abe's competitors were trailing far behind. It was natural for the party to elect Abe.



What worried the LDP leadership, as well as party activities and the candidates in the upcoming election, was that Abe's right-wing political agenda was out of tune with voter preferences. Consequently, Abe designed his political platform for his campaign for party presidency to lure party members and voters. He toned down his signature issues, with their nationalistic flavor, and focused on issues that mattered to voters. What Abe did was to present his party and voters with a two-forked strategy. On the one hand, his political platform was very much a continuation of Koizumi's reform policy. On the other, his credentials as a nationalist with a tough stance on international issues were well established after years of prolific political activities in rightist circles and in no need of emphasis since both his party and voters were aware of it. In addition, both his party and voters were aware that Abe's moderate political platform was a move so as not to frighten voters away from his party.

The lack of any need whatsoever of pushing for his nationalistic and patriotic personal agenda has been even more apparent as Abe's right-wing stance lures only a minority of voters and even meets with resistance among LDP party members. Both as a prime ministerial candidate and as prime minister, Abe has relied on a strategy of ambiguity in order, first, to succeed in being elected LDP chairman and prime minister and, second, to muddle through as prime minister in order not to stumble on the way to the Upper House election – his first real test as prime minister.

One of the paradoxes of Japanese politics today is that a politician whose political ideas and program are not particularly popular could garner such overwhelming support – as Abe did as prime ministerial candidate. It testifies in large part to the importance of television. Abe's main sales point was his good looks and his pleasant appearance on television, and the fact that he had won credence as a fighter for values that most Japanese treasure deep down.

In the election campaign, the voter intending to vote for the LDP faces a multilayered and more complicated scene than usual. One has seen the interesting phenomenon of the LDP trying to lure voters with three different agendas. Not only were voters offered the party's officially adopted election platform intended to guide its policy on the national level, Abe has his own distinctly different agenda that the voters know the prime minister will

implement if the LDP performs satisfactorily so that he can continue in his office. Furthermore, the voter has also to take into account the programs and platforms offered by the LDP candidates in the local constituencies.

Abe sees it as his political mission to accomplish his personal political agenda, which centers on nationalism and patriotism. This is a task that is not easy since his agenda is a bit too rightist even for the generally conservative Japanese. Consequently, already from Abe's start as premier and throughout the election campaign, he has endeavored to tone down his contentious personal political program in order to placate voters, who are weary of adventurisms that may threaten to have adverse consequences not only on Japan's economy but also on working and economic conditions for themselves.

### Scandal-Afflicted Election Campaign

When Abe was elected LDP chairman and subsequently prime minister, he enjoyed considerable support. Opinion polls taken immediately after his appointment showed that the wide support that carried him all the way the top spot continued. A poll taken by the *Asahi shimbun* newspaper and published on September 26 and 27, 2006 showed that the Abe cabinet enjoyed an approval rating of 63 per cent, which was the third-highest approval rating on record, while the non-support rate was as low as 18 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Support for the prime minister solidified, when he made a blitz tour to China and South Korea immediately after his appointment and succeeded in improving Japan's strained relationship with its two neighbors that had soured as a result of Prime Minister Koizumi's annual pilgrimages to the Yasukuni Shrine. Abe's surprise trip was a masterly move and demonstrated that this young and allegedly inexperienced prime minister had considerable diplomatic talents.

Abe's honeymoon with public opinion was short, however. In December 2006, only a few short months after Abe's cabinet was inaugurated, the first scandal broke when it was revealed that a political support organization of one of his ministers was involved in economic wrong-doings. The minister, Genichiro Sata, had to take responsibility and resigned.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Asahi Shimbun Emergency Opinion Polls on the Inauguration of the Abe Cabinet', September 26-27, 2006, The Mansfield Asian Opinion Poll Database, <http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/poll-06-10.htm>.

Abe has since lost two more ministers. In May, Farm Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka committed suicide amid a scandal involving the misappropriation of political funds. Shortly afterwards, Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma stepped down in the face of a storm of criticism caused by a comment he made that the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the closing days of the Second World War 'couldn't be helped'. Only days after Kyuma's resignation, the next scandal emerged, when it turned out that Matsuoka's successor, Norihiko Akagi, was involved in questionable expenses. It was a hard blow for Abe who tried to belittle the problematic activities by his new minister. Additionally, there were also lesser scandals that negatively impacted the Abe government as it added to doubts about Abe's competence and ability to govern.

The way in which Abe has tried to handle the political scandals added to popular distrust. The scandals made 'money and politics' and the competence of the government hot issues and easy targets of the political opposition. Abe has demonstrated a lack of skill in managing the problem created by his ministers' gaffes and questionable activities. When Defense Minister Kyuma encountered sharp criticism because of what the Japanese public in general saw as his inexcusable statement, Abe did not order him to resign but defended him. It was a mistake since Kyuma decided almost immediately afterwards to resign amid the political storm he had created. When Farm Minister Matsuoka committed suicide hours before he was to be questioned in the Diet, Abe chose a successor who only days after his appointment was accused of the same questionable money handling that had forced Sata to resign. As if this were not enough, on July 20, Abe's right hand in the government, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, was accused of being involved in the shady money dealings that sank Matsuoka and may force Akagi to leave.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the prime minister made a cleverer move when he appointed the popular and outspoken Yuriko Koike as Kyuma's successor. As a former newscaster she is well equipped to handle the media: She declared that she saw improving trust in the Abe government as one of her important tasks, and

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<sup>2</sup> 'JCP accuses Shiozaki of dubious fund reports', *The Japan Times*, July 20, 2007.

immediately distanced herself from Kyuma's statement, with the result that the media storm faded away.<sup>3</sup>

Abe has had evident problems in disassociating himself from responsibility for the scandals caused by his ministers' gaffes and murky activities. After all, he cannot evade his personal responsibility for having appointed those ministers and high-ranking officials, and has had to defend himself against allegations of incompetence and lack of leadership.

Other scandals have also troubled the Abe government. The worst of them all hit the front pages in early May, when it was disclosed that the national pension system was in a chaotic state. 14.3 million pension accounts had not been entered into the computer system of the Social Insurance Agency and the rightful beneficiaries of over 50 million pension accounts were unknown.<sup>4</sup> This Godzilla of all scandals to have jolted Japanese politics in recent years hit the voters where it hurt them most: the wallet, or, to be more precise, the money they expected to receive when they retired. It undermined Abe's claim that his government represented competence and responsibility.

The mishandling of the pension system outraged the public and has tarnished the image of both the LDP and Abe himself. One of the strongest cards the LDP plays with voters is its track record of governing the country. The mess surrounding the pension system has been a hard blow to Abe and his government, because it revealed serious mismanagement that they had to shoulder the blame for. For Abe personally the scandal had serious repercussions, when it was revealed that both he and a key official, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, had been alerted to the problems surrounding the pension system already in late 2006 but had not taken any action.<sup>5</sup>

That the government was aware of the adverse effects of the pension scandal on the upcoming election was immediately clear. A drastic change in the LDP election campaign was seen. Abe's plan had been to focus on his pet issues, constitutional reform and the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea;

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<sup>3</sup> 'Koike shinboeisho ga junin e. Abe seiken "fu no supairaru" kara dakkyaku naru ka', *Sankei shimbun*, July 4, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> '14.3 million pension accounts remain offline', *Asahi shimbun* [English online ed.], June 8, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Hiroko Nakata, 'Abe admits knowing pension problem last year', *The Japan Times*, June 23, 2006.

but the pension system scandal derailed campaign planning. In an attempt to regain voter confidence, the party's leadership decided instead to shift the focus of its campaign to the pension system problem alongside the abduction issue. To reclaim lost ground and regain popular trust, Prime Minister Abe announced in the Diet that the problems linked to the pension system would be resolved by April 2008.<sup>6</sup> The problem for Abe was that his announcement was not seen as trustworthy. A poll revealed that 75 per cent of respondents answered no and only 16 per cent yes when they were asked if they considered that the government's actions to rectify the problem were trustworthy.<sup>7</sup>

### Polls and Politics

An element of modern politics that has increased in importance is that of opinion polls measuring the support of government and political parties. Japan is no exception. The Japanese media landscape is variegated with a number of large dailies, whose circulation makes them among the world's largest newspapers. Added to that are news agencies like Kyodo News and Jiji Press, several television channels and radio stations, and a large variety of journals, magazines, and special interest publications. The poll business thrives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the polling activities of the media and various institutes have been frantic in the run-up to the Upper House election.

From April support rates for the Abe government, as reported in opinion polls, began to show modest increases but this development was reversed in the later half of May when support plunged. The *Asahi shimbun*, one of the large dailies, has published weekly polls so that readers could follow the standing of the political parties. On June 12, the fifth such poll showed that Japan's two main political parties, the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) – the latter the largest opposition party – were in the lead with 23 per cent and 29 per cent, respectively. A number of smaller parties were trailing far behind. The Buddhist New Komei Party, which forms the coalition government together with the LDP, got four per cent as did the Communist Party (JCP), while the Social Democratic Party (SDPJ) captured just one per cent. A slight consolation for Prime Minister Abe and his party was that the fall in government support that

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<sup>6</sup> 'Abe: Pension chaos resolved by April '08', *Asahi shimbun* [English online ed.], June 6, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> 'Minshu 29%, Jimin 23%', *Asahi shimbun*, June 12, 2007.

had been seen in previous polls had stopped and had actually increased– not by a large margin though, having risen from 30 to 34 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

The *Asahi shimbun* poll presented the extent to which the Abe government was supported by voters. It showed that the government was in a precarious situation with a support rate of a mere 34 per cent and a non-support rate of 48 per cent. It was in sharp contrast with the situation when it was inaugurated at the end of September 2006, when it enjoyed considerable support. After an initial honeymoon that was unusually short (only a few weeks), Abe was forced to endure a steady fall of support and an equally worrying increase of non-support that continued for the rest of the year. Eventually, in polls from January onwards, the government's support and non-support rates stabilized but at levels that were far from flattering for Abe and his ministers.

The drastic fall in the support rate for the LDP, as revealed by the *Asahi shimbun* poll, from 44 per cent in the May 19–20 poll to 30 per cent in the June 2–3 poll, proved that voter support was in free fall. Such a decrease in support shortly before a general election could easily sink any party; but the LDP is not just any party but a party that has shown itself throughout its half a century long history to have an unsurpassed ability to muddle through. Its track record in governing the country has been highly rated by voters in election after election. This time, it seems the problems that had emerged and caused the fall of popularity of the government had been tackled but not in a way that was satisfactory to the public.

The government tried frantically to regain public trust but measures announced did not do much to restore public confidence. The hope that the four per cent increase in the support rate seen in the June 12 poll was dashed with the next weekly poll published by the *Asahi shimbun* on June 19, when support stood at 32 per cent and non-support amounted to 51 per cent. It was the third straight week with support for the government hovering around a level as low as 30 per cent. Worse was that respondents did not give the prime minister and other government leaders much credit for measures announced to rectify the problems linked to the pension system. Not much of a consolation was that members of the LDP were less negative, since as much as 48 per cent of LDP members

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

indicated displeasure as compared to 39 per cent who said that they were dissatisfied.<sup>9</sup>

And on it went. Every week saw new polls published by the large dailies and news agencies. This must have been dispiriting not only to the Abe government and the LDP but also the members and activists of the party. With two weeks to go before the election, the Jiji Press presented the lowest support rate for the Abe government yet to be reported with 25.7 per cent, down 2.9 per cent from the previous month and a momentous 13.7 per cent from two months before. The non-support rate was a staggering 53.2 per cent, up no less than 19.6 per cent from two months before.<sup>10</sup> Three days later both the Kyodo News and the *Asahi shimbun* published polls that confirmed the downward spiral of the Abe government's support. Kyodo reported a support rate of only 28.1 per cent, down two per cent from the previous week.<sup>11</sup> The figures in the *Asahi shimbun* poll confirmed that the government was in rough waters. Its support rate was 30 per cent and non-support rate 55 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

### LDP's Crisis Management

The 'free fall' of voter support for the LDP in the *Asahi shimbun* poll of June 2-3 was troublesome for the LDP and its candidates, especially in lieu of the forthcoming Upper House election. But there is a reverse side of the coin that could be a cause for some optimism. The swiftness of change in support for the government that the poll revealed can be turned on its head. If the support rate can fall by 14 per cent from one week to the next, astute activities undertaken by the party can cause the support rate to climb upwards equally rapidly.

Obviously, Abe saw the writing on the wall. A step in the direction of handling the crisis could soon be noted from the LDP. A showdown over who was to blame if the LDP performed miserably in the Upper House election was front page news a month before the election was due, when Prime Minister Abe laid down an ultimatum and strong-armed his party to extend the Diet session in order to seize an opportunity to pass legislation seen to be critical for his

<sup>9</sup> 'Naikaku shiji 32% fushiji 51%', *Asahi shimbun*, June 19, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Jiji Press, poll published July 13, 2007, <http://www.jiji.com/jv/e?g=eo4&k=naikakushiji-01>.

<sup>11</sup> Kyodo News, poll published July 16, 2007, <http://www.47news.jp/topics/saninsenkyo/index.php?num=5>.

<sup>12</sup> 'Minshu 30% jimin 23%, naikakufushiji 55%', *Asahi shimbun*, July 17, 2007.

political survival. One of the bills likely to pass through the Diet was a bill to revise the National Public Service Law, meant to resolve problems stemming from the much-criticized practice of post-retirement hiring of bureaucrats in government affiliates, the so-called *amakudari*. Opinion polls showed that it was a nuisance to voters and a stumbling-block for the government in its attempt to regain lost ground.

Prolonging the Diet session, which had stalled Diet deliberations because of bitter struggles with the opposition parties, meant that the Upper House election was moved from July 22 to July 29. Officials of the LDP and the DPJ, the two parties in the government, did not bother to paper over that the reason for extending the Diet session was ‘to ensure enactment of key laws that would help their fortunes in the Upper House election’.<sup>13</sup>

Not only did an extension of the Diet session enable the passage of legislation that demonstrated the ability of the coalition parties to govern the country, it also gave Abe an extra week for intensive campaigning. As was also noted by the *Asahi shimbun*, it is ‘extremely rare’ for the date of an Upper House election to be changed less than one month before the official announcement.<sup>14</sup> This measure by the LDP is proof of its ingrained habit of adjusting to the situation in a way that has made it garner support among voters; and which has helped it to form the government almost without interruption from the founding of the party half a century ago.

Neither the opposition parties nor the LDP leadership in the Upper House were pleased. The powerful head of the LDP Upper House caucus Mikio Aoki was blunt, when he made it clear the implications of postponing the election: ‘Prime Minister Abe is responsible. The line between victory and defeat is keeping a majority. This Upper House election will be fought after demonstrating where responsibility lies.’<sup>15</sup>

In a sense, Abe succeeded. When the session of the Diet closed, the pending bills had been rammed through the Diet. But the question is whether this will be to Abe’s advantage in the end. Abe was gambling with high stakes and this will

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<sup>13</sup> ‘LDP’s needs may push back Upper House race’, *The Japan Times*, June 17, 2007; ‘Reports: Japan’s ruling coalition seeking extended parliament session’, *International Herald Tribune*, June 20, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Saninsen: Raigetsu 29 nichi tohyo e’, *Asahi shimbun*, June 20, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Kakushitsu shinkoku’, *Asahi shimbun*, June 21, 2007.



be turned against him if the LDP does not perform well enough in the election. There is a political price to pay. Not only has he alienated the LDP caucus in the Upper House, especially the powerful Aoki, but the LDP's way of forcing the bills through the Diet did not sit well with the Japanese public in general. For the history conscious it smacked a little too much of Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi's (prime minister 1957–60) political maneuvering. When he had wanted the Diet to approve an important bill and had even called police into the Diet, he faced country-wide demonstrations and resistance. Kishi succeeded in gaining parliamentary approval for the bill but his handling was seen as sly and undemocratic and he was dumped by his party and forced to leave office.

### Election Prospects

With Election Day approaching, Prime Minister Abe is in deep trouble. Whatever he and his party have tried to do in order to regain voter trust seems to have been in vain. Opinion polls have simply not gotten better. If there is any trend in the popularity figures at all for Abe and his government, it is downwards. The LDP has got stuck in the doldrums and pessimism is spreading among the party's activists and candidates. The LDP could be saved by a good performance of its coalition partner, the New Komei Party, but electoral prospects are not encouraging for that party either, and its leader confessed that he saw prospects in the election for his party as gloomy.<sup>16</sup> His goal is that his party would keep its 13 seats. But when calculations began to be made of the probable outcome of the elections based on opinion poll results, the likelihood that the party would reach this goal did not seem high. It is predicted that when the two coalition partners assemble their forces after the election, they will not be able to secure the majority that they had before the election. One survey showed that the LDP might even fall short of the 44 seats it gained in 1998, when the party suffered a disastrous defeat.<sup>17</sup>

As always, it is good to remember that what counts is the election result and that opinion polls always leave a large room for error over the actual results. The percentage of voters who will actually vote is important for the outcome of

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<sup>16</sup> Masami Ito, 'Komeito to stay firmly in coalition camp. But Ota says party differs with LDP on preserving pacifist Constitution', *The Japan Times*, July 12, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> 'Survey: Ruling bloc's Upper House majority in jeopardy', *Asahi shimbun* [English online ed.], July 20, 2007.

the election. Many refuse to disclose how they will vote and many change their view during the final stage of the election campaign. It seems that voters who intend to vote for the main opposition party, the Democratic Party, are much more prone to actually vote. The *Asahi shimbun* reported recently that 62 per cent of DPJ sympathizers but only 43 per cent of LDP have a great interest in the election.<sup>18</sup> The much greater interest of DPJ sympathizers is probably because they sense that there is a real chance this time that the LDP will be dealt a blow, which increases their eagerness to vote, while LDP sympathizers despair under an unpopular leader and are resigned to the fact that their party will lose.

The last week is crucial. The undecided will decide how to vote or whether they will go to the polling station at all. Last minute events often have a decisive impact on election outcomes. An unfortunate event or a fortunate one may spell success or disaster for a party. The LDP leadership must hope that their candidates don't succumb to more scandals, to which they are prone. As previously mentioned, one recent gaffe was when one of the LDP's top leaders, Foreign Minister Taro Aso, made headlines with a contentious remark. He rushed to apologize but the damage was already done.<sup>19</sup> It was enough, however, to remind LDP sympathizers that Aso, while eager to replace Abe, is hardly a suitable choice.

This is, in fact, a strong reason why it can be expected that Abe will stay on even if his party falls to a severe defeat in the Upper House election. It is also the reason why not many voices are heard in the LDP advocating that Abe should be replaced, despite that the party is encountering massive resistance among the electorate. If Abe leaves, who is to replace him? Abe is so new in his office that no political crown prince has had the chance to be groomed, and those who competed with him to become prime minister last year did not attract much support, but rather trailed far behind the popular Abe. They had their chance and are unlikely to get another.

Abe came into office thanks to his popularity in the opinion polls, which made his party conclude that he was the man to lead the party in this election. This has shown itself to be a gross miscalculation. Instead of being the election

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<sup>18</sup> 'Tohyoritsu 60% chikai kanosei', *Asahi shimbun*, July 20, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> 'Arutsuhaima hatsugen, gaisho ga shasai...saninsen eikyo o yoto kenen', *Yomiuri shimbun*, July 20, 2007.

locomotive for the LDP, he is now even more unpopular than his unpopular party. So bad is the situation for the LDP and Abe that LDP candidates can only hope that the prime minister will not show up in their constituency; the LDP candidates fear that their own chances of being elected will suffer as a result.

Abe has even had to withstand disapproval from one of the candidates endorsed by his own party, who has criticized the prime minister for the key idea that carries the prime minister's signature, the slogan 'Beautiful Japan', which is what Abe wants to turn Japan into. It is a vague concept, nice sounding, but fairly empty as to its contents. To the chagrin of Abe, the incumbent LDP legislator Kohei Tamura criticized Abe's slogan in a campaign speech and called the slogan irresponsible and said that it felt like voters were being ridiculed. In an apparent retaliation against the critical remark, Abe did not visit Tamura's constituency.<sup>20</sup> This perhaps was what Tamura was fishing for, since it might increase his own chances of being re-elected.

But while unpopular, Abe's main rival, the opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa of the Democratic Party, is equally detested and even less liked by the important group that unaffiliated voters constitute. Both Abe and Ozawa have fallen so far out of touch with voters that they are now more unpopular than the parties they lead.<sup>21</sup> If Abe falls from grace, Ozawa is not the man to replace him if voters are consulted, despite that he is seen as a stronger leader than Abe.<sup>22</sup> Ozawa has staked his political career on a successful outcome for his party: 'My biggest goal is to change political trends after the opposition parties jointly obtain a majority in the upper house. If this goal can't be achieved, it's meaningless for me to remain as DPJ head.'<sup>23</sup> Also other DPJ top leaders have made similar statements.

The lack of support for the Abe government, as revealed by the polls, does not seem to hold out much hope for success for the LDP in the upcoming Upper House election. Considering the low support rates and high non-support rates garnered by the ruling LDP in the polls, another fact must be said to be surprising. On June 13, data were published by the *Asahi shimbun* that added

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<sup>20</sup> 'Abe sidesteps Kochi Prefecture during Shikoku campaign trip', *Mainichi shimbun*, July 20, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> 'Voters dislike Abe and Ozawa equally, poll finds', *Asahi shimbun* [English online ed.], July 14, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> 'Survey: 50% say Ozawa a better leader than Abe', *Asahi shimbun* [English online ed.], July 23, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> 'Ozawa: I'll quit if opposition fails in election', *Daily Yomiuri Online*, July 6, 2007.

information about voters' views based on the weekly polls from the middle of May to the first week of June. When respondents were asked which party they thought would win, it was not the opposition DPJ that was seen to have the upper hand. No less than 54 per cent thought that the LDP would emerge victorious, despite the fact that the party was trailing below the 20 per cent level in the poll. It was a slight dip from earlier weeks but, still, support for the opposition party, the DPJ, had been above 50 per cent in each weekly poll taken by the newspaper. Quite astonishingly, few supported the Abe government but a majority of respondents believed that the election would be business as usual with the LDP ultimately securing victory. This prospected outcome was explained by voters as resulting from presumed low interest in the election and a low voting propensity among voters.<sup>24</sup>

### **Abe's Mission Impossible?**

The fledgling support for the government is a problem both for the LDP and Prime Minister Abe. The stakes for the premier are much higher than for his party, however. Discounting an unusually lousy performance at the ballot box, the party will in all likelihood be able to continue in the government. For Abe, the situation is different. The room for mistake or poor performance is narrower for him than for his party. In order to retain his position as prime minister, the coalition government and especially his own party, have to perform sufficiently well. A number of Abe's predecessors have been dumped after the LDP had performed less credibly in elections. If the LDP returns to the next Diet session with too few seats in the Upper House, voices will immediately be heard that Abe has 'to take the responsibility' for the election outcome and resign. That Abe is quite aware of the implications for himself is revealed by the way he acted in 2004, when the LDP performed less well than expected at the ballot box and Abe retired as LDP secretary-general, referring to the responsibility he had for the abysmal outcome of the election for his party.<sup>25</sup> This time he has tried to avoid this apparent pitfall but to no avail.

Abe is well aware that his party picked him because of his alleged ability to attract voters in the upcoming Upper House election and, as prime minister, he

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<sup>24</sup> '20-30 dai "Abebanare" susumu, saninsen wa "Jimin katsu"', *Asahi shimbun*, June 13, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Shinzo Abe, 'Hoshu saisei no tame kanjicho o jisu', *Bungei shunju* (September 2004), pp. 156-62.

has striven to muddle through in order to survive politically. Whether he will survive the election is an open question. With his forte – his alleged ability to lure voters – in shambles, and his personal political agenda too right wing and therefore seriously at variance with the average voter, his sales point as a politician may not be strong enough for the bigwigs in the LDP used to running the show.

One of the recurrent debates in postwar Japan has been reintroduced on the coat-tail of its young prime minister. But the debate has a new twist compared with earlier occasions. The debate deals with an issue that has been aired on and off since the mid-1950s—whether the ‘postwar’ is over or not. The new twist of this debate seen with Japan’s new premier is Abe’s pledge to end ‘the postwar regime’. This pledge was included in the political platform on which he was elected premier last year but revealed nothing new since it was a theme that he had expounded upon for years. According to Abe, Japan is still living in the shadow of the Second World War that ended over six decades ago. He dislikes ‘the postwar regime’ that was born in the aftermath of the war since he finds it grossly unjust. Abe detests that his country has to trail in the doldrums and longs for the day when the injustices brought upon Japan will be eradicated. To bring about such a change is his stated mission as a politician.

To see his dream of a reborn Japan come true, Abe has to survive the election on July 29. Too heavy a loss for the LDP might make the party replace its present prime minister. It has happened repeatedly in the past; it can happen again. Consequently, such a scenario would be the end of Abe’s vision. That’s why Abe fights on against bad odds and will do so until the last day of the election campaign. Maybe it will be to ‘the bitter end’ of Abe’s political career. But if he has to leave office because of a poor performance of the LDP in the election, he will have at least shown that he is the ‘fighting politician’ that he aspires to be.

## About the Author

Bert Edström has a Ph.D. in Japanese Studies from Stockholm University (1988), and a M.S.Sc (1974) and B.A. (1971) from the same university. Before joining the Asia Program at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, he was working as a consultant and independent researcher. His publications include *Japan's Evolving Foreign Policy Doctrine: From Yoshida to Miyazawa* (1999) and *Japan's Quest for a Role in the World: Roles Ascribed to Japan Nationally and Internationally, 1969-1982* (1988). He has edited and contributed to several books and collections, among others *Turning Points in Japanese History* (Japan Library 2002), *Distant but Close: Swedish-Japanese Relations through Ages* (2001), *Interdependence in the Asia Pacific* (Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2001), and *The Japanese and Europe: Images and Perceptions* (Japan Library 2000).