

Farewell to Beautiful Japan: The Demise of Shinzo Abe

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Heading for Showdown

On September 12, 2007, shortly after lunchtime, the online news services of Japanese newspapers and news agencies started to reverberate with the news that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe intended to resign. Soon afterwards, another newsflash appeared on the screens: Abe had told Secretary-General Taro Aso and other ruling party officials that he was going to step down. Every minute the new developments were reported. At 13.49 the conservative *Sankei shimbun* dispatched a lengthy comment on Abe's forthcoming resignation and expressed its disappointment. At two o'clock a press conference was hastily convened, and Abe sealed his fate as Japanese premier by announcing his resignation. Shortly after two o'clock, the large liberal *Asahi shimbun* filed an extended comment on Abe's resignation. Other mass circulation media joined in the choir of stunned voices. Newspapers and commentators were taken aback by the prime minister's announcement. Even opposition party politicians who had time and time again in previous weeks demanded that Abe resign seemed to have difficulties in grasping the fact that he was actually resigning. "Not even one year in office!" complained the *Tokyo shimbun* in displeasure at Abe's lack of stamina.

Abe cited the difficulty of extending the crucial anti-terrorism special measures law—which expires on November 1—and the better chance his successor would have in obtaining parliamentary approval as the reasons why he chose to resign. Whether or not there are other reasons behind his resignation will come out into the open in due course. Rumors spread of Abe having health problems, and this was confirmed shortly afterwards.¹ On the other hand, there may also have been moves behind the scenes in the Nagatacho political quarters in Tokyo that were the real reason for him

¹ 'Abe shusho ga nyuin rinjidairi okazu', *Asahi shimbun*, September 14, 2007.

leaving. It is still too early to tell. What is clear, however, is that political developments before and after Abe became prime minister provide ample reasons as to why a relatively young and inexperienced politician may have found it better to resign. Being political “blue blood” and having become the prime political voice from the tradition-tinged Yamaguchi prefecture with its prominent place in the annals of Japan’s modern history, perhaps Abe reached a point where he decided that *enough* was *enough*. Abe may have seen no reason to offer himself as a spittoon, especially since the prospects that he would be able to take steps toward realizing his political agenda and his vision of creating *Utsukushii Nippon*, Beautiful Japan, had largely faded. Maybe, as the liberal *Asahi shimbun* speculated in a leader, Abe reached a point where he could no longer put up with the pressure of the responsibility that came with the job.²

Recent months have indeed been difficult for Abe. On July 29, voters went to the polls to cast their votes in the Upper House election. *Post festum*, the election result was described as “historic” by the Japanese media. Whether this assessment is fitting remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the ruling coalition formed by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the New Komeito suffered a considerable blow. For the LDP, the election result was seen as a disaster not least because its young party leader, Shinzo Abe, failed in what was seen to be a crucial test of his leadership and his attempt to initiate a shift toward realizing his vision of a “Beautiful Japan.” This lofty promise was the rallying slogan that Abe launched when he was a candidate for the post of LDP chairman, and it carried him all the way to the Prime Minister’s Office. Now, after almost a year as premier, Abe took stock of his party’s ranks in the Upper House after the election and found it in shambles. The number of LDP candidates elected or re-elected fell well short of even the modest hopes that the prime minister and other representatives of the LDP had floated before the election. The LDP and its coalition partner, the New Komeito, could only look at the grim fact that not only had they lost many MPs but that they had lost to such an extent that they had relinquished their majority in the Upper House. Abe’s party had pinned its hopes on their leader’s ability to lure voters, but, with a mere 37 seats won, down from 57, the result was the worst within living memory; and losing

² ‘Tsugi wa konna shishitsu no hito o’, *Asahi shimbun*, September 14, 2007 (editorial).

three seats also spelt serious problems for the LDP's junior coalition partner in the cabinet. The number of LDP candidates that failed to be elected was disturbing for Abe. Of even greater dismay to his party and its leadership was that veterans and party heavyweights, used to just showing up and getting elected, failed in their ambition to regain a seat in the Diet.

That the election result would spell bad news for Abe and his party was a foregone conclusion. The polls presented regularly by large newspapers and other media before the election conveyed a message that could not be misunderstood: the prospects of the LDP matching the electoral success it was accustomed to were slim.³ On the day of the election, voters sealed what pre-election polls forewarned. Voters wanted change and voted massively for politicians seen to be willing and capable of clearing up the mess caused by those in power, whether in politics or in the bureaucracy. The key reason why LDP picked Abe for the post as premier had been his assumed vote-luring ability.⁴ That this assessment of the young and inexperienced politician was a gross miscalculation had been clear months before the election, and the election result confirmed this.

The Upper House took a toll that hurt the LDP. Securing only 37 seats, a number of well-known and senior LDP politicians, among them former ministers and vice ministers, had to face the fact that voters had rejected them. One high-ranking party official who "took the responsibility" for the LDP's defeat in the election was Mikio Aoki, the powerful head of the LDP Upper House caucus, who announced his resignation on September 1 at a meeting of the caucus. "It was a large defeat that must be admitted. I have the greatest responsibility," he claimed. Other members of the caucus did not agree but saw others as bearing a greater responsibility.⁵ Aoki's resignation was ironic. Before the election he was involved in a row with the prime minister and criticized him for postponing the election from June 22 to June 29. Aoki did not bother to mince his words: "Prime Minister Abe is responsible. The line between victory and defeat is keeping a majority. This

³ Bert Edström, 'Japan's Upper House Election, July 29: Down or Dawn for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe?' *Policy Paper*, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, July 2007.

⁴ Bert Edström, 'The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy', *Silk Road Paper*, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, May 2007.

⁵ 'Aoki shi ga saningiinkaicho o jinin', *asahi.com*, August 1, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0801/TKY200708010430.html>

Upper House election will be fought after demonstrating where responsibility lies.”⁶

The election result brought also some unexpected names into the limelight. Indicative of the reversed power positions in the Upper House of the ruling and the opposition camps was the choice of the leftist-leaning former environment minister of the DPJ, Satsuki Eda, as speaker of the Upper House. Equally disturbing to the prime minister must have been that no sooner had Eda been appointed, than he chose to clash head on with Abe in an appearance at the Japan Press Club. According to the newly appointed speaker, the result of the Upper House election meant that the Japanese had chosen to support a development of “the postwar regime,” that which Abe is determined to get rid of. Eda told his audience and Japanese at large that movement in the direction advocated by Abe was something that had to be stopped.⁷

Post-election Politics

After the election debacle of the LDP and its coalition partner, criticism of Prime Minister Abe spread both in and out the LDP. Voices were heard that he should take responsibility for his party’s defeat by stepping down. On the day of the election itself already, three of the most influential LDP heavyweights met to work out a plan on what should be done. A key person taking part in the meeting was Yoshiro Mori, the former prime minister and former leader of the LDP faction that Abe belongs to. The two others were LDP Secretary-General Hidenao Nakagawa and Mikio Aoki, the head of the LDP’s Upper House caucus. The three political leaders concluded that polls indicated that the LDP would receive a blow from voters and agreed that it would be “very difficult to protect Abe and retain him as prime minister if the LDP won less than 40 seats.” The two officials declared that they would step down if the LDP got less than 40 seats. Later in the day, Nakagawa met Abe to convey the message from the meeting of the three senior politicians. With the LDP “heading for disastrous defeat,” the three senior politicians told Abe that the best course for him would be to announce his resignation.

⁶ ‘Kakushitsu shinkoku’, *Asahi shimbun*, June 21, 2007.

⁷ “Kokumin wa sengo rejiimu no hatten eranda” Eda gicho’, *asahi.com*, August 30, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/o830/TKY20070830o361.html>].

Confronted with this demand, Abe asserted that he would not resign, regardless of what happened, and announced publicly that he intended to remain in office and fulfill his promise to build a new nation.⁸

It was a matter of course that the opposition leader Ichiro Ozawa of the DPJ singled out Abe for criticism. In his first appearance after the election, having been away a couple of days because of fatigue after weeks of intensive campaigning, Ozawa blasted Abe for his decision to remain in office. In light of the LDP's humiliating loss, Abe's decision was "preposterous," Ozawa said. "Such selfishness will never win the understanding of the general public."⁹

One effect of the election was that Abe's performance in front of the cameras changed. Abe seems to have been aided by stylists. What had made him the leading figure of the otherwise staid and aging Liberal Democratic Party were his good looks and nice manner more than his nationalist and rightist political agenda. He had been picked as party president as the nice guy who would look good on TV and lure the voters.¹⁰ Yet, to the surprise of those who supported him at the time of the election of the LDP party president, Abe did not prove to have the telegenic persona that he was supposed to have and instead appeared stiff and uninspiring on TV. In an age when TV is important for politicians and politics, and an ability to produce catchy one-liners is an essential quality of a politician, Abe's lack of rhetorical skill was suddenly only too apparent. The contrast to his predecessor, Koizumi, with his unsurpassed ability to handle the media and appeal to voters, was particularly striking. Before the election, Abe had tried to make himself appealing to voters by staring at the TV camera while interacting with reporters. Although he has denied it, the heavy election defeat of his ruling party appears to have forced a change in style. The prime minister now focuses his gaze on the reporter who is talking to him, before addressing his

⁸ 'LDP troika pushed Abe to step down on election day', *asahi.com*, August 3, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708020387.html>]

⁹ 'Ozawa ups ante to force out LDP', *asahi.com*, August 1, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200707310509.html>]

¹⁰ Edström, 'The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy', p. 71.

answer to the camera. He has also stopped aggressively challenging reporters by answering their questions with ones of his own.¹¹

The results of polls after the Upper House election taken by various election media were strikingly similar and bad news for Abe. Considering that he had started his career as premier with a backing of over 70 percent of the Japanese public, according to polls taken shortly after he had been appointed, the downturn was remarkable. It was no better considering the fact that Abe had been one of Japan's most popular politicians before he became prime minister, selected by his party as party chairman and thus prime minister because of his image. "In the end," wrote a knowledgeable observer of Japanese politics in his assessment of Abe's elevation to the political top spot, "the most critical factors in Abe's successful bid for the LDP presidency appear to have been the support of his predecessor, Koizumi, and the hope within the party that his popularity and telegenic persona would give the party its best chance for victory in next year's Upper House parliamentary elections."¹² This was not to be the case, however. Furthermore, developments after Abe came to power had been close to catastrophic for his plans to redress Japanese politics in accordance with his political beliefs and the political platform on which he had been elected.

Post-election Issues

The political landscape shifted as a result of the outcome of the Upper House election. One issue that has largely faded away is the issue of the Yasukuni Shrine. It had been in focus during the Koizumi era but had ceased to be a focal point of political strife and had turned largely into a non-issue. Abe could be credited for dismantling this issue that had caused strains in Japan's relations with neighboring countries, above all China and the two Koreas, when he made his blitz visit to Beijing and Seoul a few short days after he had assumed office. The strategy of ambiguity that he launched during his campaign for chairman of the LDP and the post of prime minister—toning down outspoken nationalist stance and excelling in vague statements—paid

¹¹ Koji Sonoda, 'New-look Abe tries a change of style to appease his critics', *asahi.com*, August 16, 2007, www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708150301.html]

¹² Quoted in Edström, 'The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japans Foreign Policy', p.46

off handsomely and was a key reason why he succeeded in his bid to become party leader.¹³ Soon after the Upper House election, this issue became front-page matter again when August 15—the day of pilgrimage to Yasukuni—neared. Abe cut the story short, however. While declaring—as he had done ever since his campaign for the post of party president—that he himself would not make any statement whether he was going to go or not, or had gone or not, his ministers appeared in front of the TV cameras and declared that they would not visit the shrine. To soothe his nationalist supporters, information was floated that the prime minister did not see August 15 as particularly important but rather the spring and autumn festivals.¹⁴ In the end, only one incumbent minister went to Yasukuni on August 15, the least in several years.

Another of Abe's top priorities was far down on the list of what voters saw as important: constitutional revision. One of the most noticeable results of the election outcome was the decrease in support for it among MPs. Under Article 96 of the constitution, both the Lower and the Upper House of the Diet must have at least two-thirds support to hold a national referendum on amending the constitution. Abe was more distant than ever from fulfilling his vow to hold a national referendum in 2010 on the issue of constitutional revision. With only 53 percent of the members of the Upper House supporting constitutional revision, Abe fell short of reaching the two-thirds majority required to initiate an amendment of the constitution. The fall in support was revealed by a survey made by Tokyo University political scientists and the *Asahi shimbun*. It was the first time the figure had fallen below the mandatory two-thirds mark since the 2003 Lower House election. Only 48 percent of the newly elected members of the Upper House favor constitutional amendment. On a related issue, the result was even more depressing for Abe, when the survey revealed that 54 percent of newly elected Upper House lawmakers were against revising the famous war-renouncing Article 9 of the constitution while only 26 percent would be in favor.¹⁵

¹³ Edström, 'The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy.'

¹⁴ 'Zenkakuryo, shusen kinembi Yasukuni sampai sezu', *asahi.com*, August 10, 2007

¹⁵ 'Support dwindles on issue of revision', *asahi.com*, August 8, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708080137.html>]

One aspect of the Upper House election was the upsurge in the number of MPs, both in the LDP and the DPJ, favoring reform. This meant that the prime minister would have even less support than before the election from MPs in favor of Abe's main goals: revision of "the postwar regime", constitutional revision, and the promotion of patriotism and nationalism. The election outcome was a clear expression of the Clintonesque "it's the economy, stupid" that also compelled voters in Japan. Voters saw more reason to support candidates in the election standing for economic reform than lofty pies in the sky like Abe's amorphous and vague vision of creating a "Beautiful Japan." His political platform was clearly not seen as representing the key issues according to voters. In the election, the top slogan of the DPJ dealt with the economy and this appealed to voters. This meant that the top priorities on Abe's political agenda did not attract voters. A senior LDP member was quoted as saying about Abe after the election: "He's got his priorities wrong."¹⁶

Democratic Party Moves

The victory for the DPJ in the Upper House election strengthened the resolve of its leadership to intensify the attack on the LDP. Headed by its chairman, Ichiro Ozawa, the party continued to hammer in its opposition to the policies of the ruling party and its coalition partner. Confrontation with the LDP was its main priority for its political activities inside and outside of the Diet. Ozawa vowed that his party would block key pieces of legislation that the coalition government planned to submit to the Diet in the upcoming parliamentary session.

After the Upper House election, the DPJ acted quickly in the Diet. On August 7, the party submitted two bills aimed at challenging law proposals of the ruling coalition. The proposals indicated where the No.1 party in the Upper House was going to attack the coalition government and try to wring power from the LDP. The first bill dealt with what had become the top concern of voters: the sloppy handling of the pension system that had been exposed before the election and had become politically damaging for the government. The DPJ proposal would limit pension insurance premiums so that they could be used only for pension payments. A law that the

¹⁶ Ibid.

government had rammed through the Diet on June 28 permits the money to be used for other purposes, including pension-related publicity. The second bill proposed by the DPJ would result in a postponing of the privatization of the postal service, revising the privatization plan set to start on October 1. This bill was submitted together with two other opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party, and showed that the opposition parties were joining forces against the LDP. (The People's New Party was established in August 2005 by LDP MPs revolting against Prime Minister Koizumi's plans for postal privatization.)¹⁷

It seems that what Ozawa had in mind when the DPJ continued its pressure on the coalition government was to bring about the dissolution of the Lower House, thus resulting in a snap election. Using the DPJ's new power position as the largest party in the Upper House, Ozawa was set to engineer a Diet confrontation with the ruling LDP to bring about a change in government. Defeating the LDP in the Upper House was the first step toward unseating the party which has ruled almost single-handedly since its foundation in 1955. "We have accomplished our initial goal of driving the ruling coalition into a minority force in the Upper House," Ozawa said. "But the real battle has yet to be waged. We hope to achieve our ultimate goal [of taking power] by turning the Upper House into the theatre for the battle in Diet deliberations that will resume in autumn."¹⁸

Extension of the Anti-Terrorism Law

Before the election Ozawa had clarified that the DPJ's strategy was to force a confrontation between the ruling coalition and the opposition camp in the Upper House by blocking the extension of the special measures law to keep Self-Defense Forces deployed in the Indian Ocean supporting the US-led war on terror. The law was introduced in 2001, and has already been extended three times in the past despite opposition from the DPJ. But the result of the Upper House election gave the DPJ and other opposition parties power in the Upper House to block the ruling coalition's plan to extend the law.

¹⁷ Ito Masami, 'DPJ goes on offensive with two new bills', *The Japan Times*, August 10, 2007.

¹⁸ 'Ozawa ups ante to force out LDP', *asahi.com*, August 1, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200707310509.html>

DPJ leaders, especially Ichiro Ozawa, saw their new power position as a mandate handed to them by voters, to be used in such a way so as to wreck the LDP's seemingly constant grip on power. Ozawa chose to play the card of the anti-terrorism law extension as an issue that could damage the coalition government by wreaking havoc with their policies. Before the election, Ozawa clarified his determination by staking his political career on a successful outcome for his party in the election: "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."¹⁹ He succeeded, however, and has subsequently gone all out to attain his goal of unseating the government.

The election outcome was disquieting to the American Embassy in Tokyo. The US Ambassador to Japan, Thomas Schieffer, had assumed his post in April 2005 but had so far not deigned to request a meeting with DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa. Obviously worried that there was a great likelihood that the bill to extend the anti-terrorism special measures law would not pass through the Upper House, Schieffer requested a meeting. Ozawa was not impressed with the sudden invitation. "We expressed our opposition before, and we are not going to endorse it this time around either," he said and turned down the proposal.²⁰ Ozawa's snub came on August 3. Developments were quick, however, and already the day after, it was announced that the meeting was going to take place the following week. The volte-face came after Ozawa had been told that the meeting would be about the bilateral relationship in general.²¹

The day before Ozawa was to meet Ambassador Schieffer on August 8, he reiterated his unwillingness to modify his stand. "The war in Afghanistan has nothing to do with the United Nations or international society," he said, and clarified that only if the United Nations made a request, Japan would participate based on its own judgment and if measures taken were under democratic control.²² Ozawa reiterated to Schieffer what he had stated the

¹⁹ 'Ozawa: I'll quit if opposition fails in election', *Daily Yomiuri Online*, July 6, 2007; quoted in Edström, 'The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan's Foreign Policy', p. 18

²⁰ 'Ozawa snubs Schieffer on talks', *Asahi shimbun*, August 3, 2007, www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200705210051.html

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² 'Tero tokubuyoho kaisei, Ozawa daihyo wa kyogi ni ojinai iko', *Asahi shimbun*, September 7, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0807/TKY200708070401.html>

previous day and confirmed that his party had no intention of assisting the ruling coalition in extending an anti-terrorism special measures law when it expires on November 1, and that he would use the DPJ's new-found strength in the Upper House to try to block the legislation. Again he declared the basis for the strong stand he and his party had taken: "The war in Afghanistan is one that U.S. President George W. Bush started without the consensus of the international community. [...] We cannot send [Self-Defense Force] troops to an area that does not directly affect the peace and security of Japan to participate in joint operations with the United States and others," Ozawa told Schieffer. The US envoy rejoined that "we look upon this as not only vital to the security of the international community but vital to the security of Japan as well." In a pointed snub, the DPJ leader reminded the Ambassador that peacekeeping activities undertaken by Japan should always be in the context of UN-led activities.²³

One of Abe's key ministers, Japan's new defence minister Yuriko Koike, tried to repair the damage that could have been caused to Japan's relations with the US government by Ozawa's stern attitude in his meeting with Ambassador Schieffer. In a meeting on August 8 with Defense Minister Robert Gates of the United States, Koike vowed to work to ensure the extension of the law allowing the Maritime SDF to provide logistic support in the Indian Ocean to warships involved in the NATO-led antiterrorism drive in Afghanistan. She reacted icily to Ozawa's comments and said he was repeating the same remarks he had made around the time of the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s. "His calendar seems to have stopped," Koike told reporters.²⁴ She repeated her assurances the next day in a meeting with Vice President Dick Cheney that she would strive toward reaching an understanding with the opposition parties so that Japan would play the role expected of it, by which US interests are seen as analogous to the interests of international society and the world at large. (This is the view which she and many mainstream Japanese politicians adhere to.)²⁵

Jockeying in the aftermath of the Upper House election continued. Confronted with Ozawa's resistance to the idea of extending the anti-

²³ 'Ozawa tells U.S. envoy he won't budge', *Asahi shimbun*, August 9, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708080383.html>

²⁴ 'Gates gets Koike's vow to extend antiterror law', *The Japan Times*, August 10, 2007.

²⁵ 'Koike boeisho, Bei fukudaitoryo tomo kaidan', *Asahi shimbun*, August 9, 2007.

terrorism law, the government decided to shelve a bill that would allow the Self-Defense Forces to be sent on overseas missions at any time.²⁶ This law would have enabled the government to dispatch missions with no special legislation in each case. Shelving this proposal demonstrated that the Abe government realized its post-election predicament, and signaled its willingness to compromise with the political opposition.

Cabinet Reshuffle

Polls showed that public opinion of the prime minister and the ruling LDP–New Komeito coalition government did not change after the Upper House election. Disapproval rates continued to be high. For the prime minister, a reshuffle of his government was deemed necessary to avoid adding momentum to moves within the LDP to force him to step down. On August 1, he had a one-hour meeting with LDP Secretary-General Hidenao Nakagawa over the political calendar. Before the election, Abe had announced his intention of visiting Indonesia, India, and Malaysia from August 19 to August 25, and attending a memorial service for the late Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa on August 28. Abe also announced that the new cabinet would be presented on August 27. His schedule was tight. Maybe this was in his mind when he had told reporters that he did not intend to procrastinate in making his decisions.²⁷ It was perhaps planned, therefore, to demonstrate decisiveness and leadership, but it also created problems for Abe. Whatever his intention, events were such that he became embroiled in a mess caused by a number of his cabinet members.

The election outcome resulted in a reshuffle and the replacement of ministers and officials, not least because a number of key figures had not been returned to the Diet by voters. A number of ministers recruited by Abe to his first cabinet had shown themselves to be unfit to hold high office and had caused the prime minister great problems. Three ministers had had to be replaced and even one of the replacements had shown that he was unsuitable to be a minister. The scandals involving members of the cabinet and high-ranking government officials continued to haunt Abe. A week after the election, he

²⁶ 'Bill to make SDF dispatches easier shelved', *The Japan Times*, August 20, 2007.

²⁷ 'Abe set to reshuffle Cabinet by Aug. 27', *Asahi shimbun*, August 6, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708060072.html>

took action and sacked his scandal-ridden farm minister, Norihiko Akagi. The scandal involving him had surfaced already before the election but Abe had tried to downplay Akagi's wrongdoing. Reporters dogged him and his predecessor, Toshikatsu Matsuoka, who was involved in a similar scandal and subsequently committed suicide. In his comments regarding the dismissal, Akagi told reporters: "There were news reports involving me before the Upper House election. It is undeniable that this affected the election campaign and was one cause for the ruling party's defeat."²⁸ This was the understatement of the week. When his alleged financial irregularities were brought to light, he had refused to disclose the facts. Akagi's stubbornness added to the severe criticism that the government and the LDP, and not least the prime minister, were confronted with before the election. Polls before the election indicated that the seemingly endemic scandals linked to the ruling LDP and the Abe cabinet did not sit well with voters and damaged their reputation. The seemingly endless scandals called into question Abe's will to clear up the mess. Before the election, Abe had refused to dismiss his minister, saying he did not intend to make the Akagi issue a problem. But this way of handling the Akagi affair just created the problem the prime minister wanted to avoid. Initially after the election, Abe announced that his minister was not going to retain his portfolio when he was going to be reappointed in the planned cabinet reshuffle on August 27, but when a number of LDP heavyweights criticized Akagi, Abe gave in and fired his minister on August 2.²⁹ Even this was too late as the damage to Abe's reputation as leader had already been done.

Abe did not reject that he was the one who was responsible. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki was tasked to clarify the matter as such. "Abe has repeatedly said himself that it was the prime minister who made the appointment, so the responsibility obviously lies with him," Shiozaki told a news conference.³⁰ But it was to no one's surprise that questions were raised concerning Abe's leadership ability and his lack of stamina in handling problems caused by members of his cabinet.

²⁸ 'Akagi dismissed; LDP members say "too late"', *Asahi shimbun*, August 2, 2007, www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708020086.html

²⁹ 'Akagi dismissed; LDP members say "too late"', *Asahi shimbun*, August 2, 2007, www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708020086.html

³⁰Ibid.

As with a number of other scandals, the Akagi affair revolved around the question of the role of money in politics. Both before and after the Upper House election, this issue was front page news. Scandals were one of the factors that contributed to the election defeat of the LDP. The message from the prime minister to ministerial hopefuls was clear-cut: any ministerial hopeful would have to clean up beforehand; no one could become minister without being able to explain what had to be explained.³¹ To the joy of political reporters, ruling party lawmakers, not wanting to miss out on the opportunity of becoming minister, were rushing to make last-minute adjustments to their past political funds reports for fear that even the tiniest mistake could cost them the chance to scale the political ladder.

It was not only questionable money deals by ministers that harassed Abe and forced him to appear time and again in front of the cameras to vent his displeasure. The new defense minister, Yuriko Koike, proved also to be a nuisance to her boss. She had been selected to repair the damage caused by her predecessor, whose gaffe had made his position as a member of the cabinet untenable. As a former TV news anchor, Koike had demonstrated that she was skilful at handling the media, and she succeeded in quickly covering up her predecessor's traces. After a short time in office, however, she made the blunder of forgetting that a key point of Abe's political platform was the importance of the Prime Minister's Office being seen to exert leadership. Sacking her vice minister without informing the prime minister caused her to run foul of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki. The resulting row caused serious damage to the image of Abe's leadership, and in an instant she lost her chances of retaining her portfolio. In a sense, her decision to replace the most senior bureaucrat of her ministry was fully in accordance with her prerogatives as a minister, which she was quick to point out. She also reminded her critics that she had done the same thing when she was environment minister.³²

Koike put up a stern fight and gave in only in the final days before the cabinet reshuffle. She claimed that she had not done anything wrong "in terms of protocol" and that was true. But she had forgotten that Prime

³¹ 'Setsumei fujubun nara, naikaku satte itadaku' Abe shusho ga kaiken', *asahi.com*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0827/TKY200708270345.html>].

³² Koike refuses to back down, *Asahi online*, August 16, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708160083.html>

Minister Abe and Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki had decided that personnel matters of this kind were to be handled by the Prime Minister's Office. To regain the image that he was in command, Abe ordered Shiozaki to resolve the row to stop the escalation of the dispute between Koike and her vice minister—which Shiozaki did.³³ Previously, it had been announced that the appointment of the new vice minister was going to be postponed until the cabinet reshuffle on August 27. But the damage was already done.

What Koike's fight was all about was not only that a minister wanted to have the freedom to choose the top echelon of the ministry, but also that it represented the age-old struggle of politicians versus bureaucrats, ingrained in postwar Japan's political system. She would have been well advised to remember the fate of another female minister, Makiko Tanaka, Japan's short-lived foreign minister in 2001–2, who also tried to have her own way. A daughter of Japan's "Computerized Bulldozer," Kakuei Tanaka (prime minister 1972–74), she tried to bulldoze through tough changes in the foreign ministry, and clashed with the top bureaucrats in her ministry and lost, fired by Prime Minister Koizumi. Thus, sacking Koike would be taken as a sign, said Hidenao Nakagawa, secretary general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, that the government had bowed to resistance from bureaucrats.³⁴ But that was a risk Abe was willing to take.

What Koike said as her final message after she had been sacked as defence minister should be noted. In tears, she remarked to journalists in impeccable American: "I shall return."³⁵ Indeed, she was once seen as the most likely candidate to become Japan's first female prime minister. And given her large following and reputation before she stumbled, her competitors would be wise not to dismiss lightly a return to Japanese politics in the future. Many before her have had to withdraw but have staged comebacks. In the world of Japanese politics, the return of politicians seen to have been disgraced is commonplace.

³³ 'Govt ends ministry feud by naming vice minister', *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 18, 2007.

³⁴ 'LDP heavyweight supports Koike retaining defense portfolio', *The Japan Times*, August 20, 2007.

³⁵ 'Koike boeisho "ai-sharu-rit" to namida ukaberu', *Asahi shimbun*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0827/TKY200708270307.html>

Abe Demonstrates He Means Business

The cabinet reshuffle captured widespread interest and speculation. Reshuffling his cabinet would give Abe a chance of making a fresh start. The prime minister was seen as a friend's friend and had been accused of making incompetent friends ministers when he had appointed his first line up of ministers, creating 'a buddy-buddy cabinet' by giving portfolios to close associates and MPs who did much for his victory in the LDP presidential election. It was clear that when Abe formed his second cabinet, he intended to keep the upper hand in party matters in accordance with his political platform, which emphasized the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office. In a comment on the forthcoming remaking of his cabinet, Abe had said on August 8 that it would be formed without accepting recommendations from LDP factions.³⁶ On August 13 he told reporters that he had made no decisions about the reshuffle and would think seriously about it over the next two weeks. He suggested that he would not succumb to pressure from party factions: "I believe the decision rests with me."³⁷

Many calls were heard in the weeks before the reshuffle for the prime minister to strengthen unity in the LDP, and so to prevent movements within the party gaining momentum in demanding Abe's resignation.³⁸ It was seen to be important that Abe came up with a well-balanced government comprising party heavyweights and up-and-coming members of the parties forming the ruling coalition. Two key names around which much speculation revolved before the announced change of the ministerial line up were Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki. The latter is one of Abe's close friends and is said to have been appointed by the premier as a "thank you" for his past services. The case of Aso was different. Since the fall of 2005, when Abe was named chief cabinet secretary and Aso foreign minister by the then Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi, Aso and Abe had collaborated closely and Aso had proved to be a staunch supporter and defender of the prime minister, despite that he had been a competitor when Abe was selected by the LDP to become its president

³⁶ 'Abe set to reshuffle Cabinet by Aug. 27', *Asahi shimbun*, August 6, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708060072.html>

³⁷ 'Abe's big chance to clean out deadwood', *Asahi shimbun*, August 15, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708140399.html>

³⁸ Tetsuya Harada, 'Can PM weather reshuffle? Pressure on Abe growing after debacle of Upper House election', *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 15, 2007.

and consequently prime minister. Aso had become a trusted brother-in-arms to the hawkish Abe, and he worked closely with Abe on the issue of North Korea in negotiations to draft and pass a United Nations Security Council resolution criticizing North Korea's firing of ballistic missiles. Quoted by the *Asahi shimbun*, Aso was adamant: "Once the prime minister makes a decision, we have to support it in whatever way possible."³⁹

The new line up of ministers paraded old faces as well as new ones and saw two women as ministers. Appointing experienced veterans, like party faction heads, for the key posts of foreign policy, finance, and defense as well as the three top posts of the party, Abe's appointments indicated that he wanted ministers with a range of experience. By including party veterans with ministerial experience and by bringing in a reform-minded former prefectural governor to win support from rural areas, the new cabinet demonstrated that Abe wanted to dispel criticism that his first cabinet was made up of cronies.⁴⁰ This impression was further strengthened by the fact that the reshuffled cabinet included Yoichi Masuzoe, the LDP's chief policymaker of the Upper House. Masuzoe had publicly criticized Abe after the July election for remaining in office; but he readily accepted his appointment to the new cabinet, which was interpreted as a way for Abe of silencing a high-profile critic. Appointing the popular Masuzoe was also seen as a move to engage the public.

Two changes in the cabinet line up were indicative of Abe's intentions. The departure of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, the front figure and the very symbol of Abe's "cabinet of friends," signaled that Abe meant business. Shiozaki had been criticized "as long on formulating policies but short on coordinating with the ruling coalition parties and taking others feelings into consideration."⁴¹ He was replaced by Kaoru Yosano, an experienced senior member of the LDP. At a press conference Abe's new chief cabinet secretary stressed that the prime minister had chosen lawmakers as ministers, known to be able to get things done. The new

³⁹ 'Abe's big chance to clean out deadwood', *Asahi shimbun*, August 15, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708140399.html>

⁴⁰ 'Reshuffle a ploy to claw back support', *asahi online*, August 28, 2007. www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708270347.html.

⁴¹ 'ANALYSIS / Abe means business with choices', *The Yomiuri shimbun*, August 28, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070828TDY02010.htm>

cabinet line up showed also that Abe had lived up to his intention of retaining ministers whose performances had inspired confidence. To appoint veteran lawmakers was a move that gave the Abe government an aura of stability after the turbulence that had reigned during the first Abe cabinet.

Before the names of the ministers of the second Abe cabinet were announced, however, serious doubts had been aired. A former minister was quoted by the *Yomiuri shimbun*: “I wonder if the Aso-Abe combination can really change the public perception. I’m worried that [Aso’s promotion] may turn a ‘Cabinet of friends’ into a ‘Cabinet of best friends.’”⁴² His worries were certainly not stilled by the ministerial appointments of politicians such as Nobutaka Machimura, Bunmei Ibuki, Masahiko Komura, and Fukushiro Nukaga, who were all leaders of LDP factions that had shown allegiance to Abe. Their appointments demonstrated that Abe’s claim before the cabinet reshuffle—that he would not take factions into consideration—was not fulfilled. Instead, their appointments showed that the consideration of factions had been a key factor when Abe decided upon his new cabinet, and that he chose ministers who would be beneficial to his chances of surviving the fierce political infighting that would inevitably evolve in the Diet with the DPJ having the upper hand in the Upper House and intent on aggressively assailing the government and ruling coalition by using its numerical strength. The only faction lacking representation was the one led by former Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki, who ran against Abe in the LDP presidential election.

The New Government in the Polls

When ministers in Abe’s second cabinet sat down after the first cabinet meeting, the first requirement they faced was the message that they had to return ten per cent of their salary as ministers. The reason given by their boss was that this measure was taken in order to promote the government’s policy of financial reform. A consolation might have been that the prime minister himself had to send back more than his ministers—thirty per cent. But the old ministers were used to the situation, and the new ones were forewarned, since ministers in the previous cabinet had faced a similar

⁴² Aso an unknown quantity in No. 2 LDP slot, *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 18, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070818TDY04002.htm>

requirement.⁴³ And part of the elation of being asked to join the new government was further tempered by the knowledge that it faced rough times. The media would predictably hound the new ministers and other high-ranking officials to find out if they had any skeletons in the wardrobe. This time there would be no exceptions, the prime minister said; if a minister could not give a good explanation it would be goodbye to him as a minister.⁴⁴ Prime Minister Abe's comment was easy to understand. Too many of the ministers in the previous cabinet had been exposed as having been involved in improper money deals, causing their downfall. One minister had even committed suicide shortly before he was to be questioned in the Diet for alleged improper activities. He, then, had been replaced by a minister whose appointment immediately turned out to be a mistake because of his involvement in the same manner of deals that had sunk his predecessor.

On a more positive note were the opinion polls that were published after the new cabinet was announced. It was great reading for Abe and his ministers. The approval rating for the new cabinet in a poll conducted by Kyodo News stood at 40.5 percent. It was a jump of no less than 11.5 percentage points from a survey that had been conducted shortly after the Upper House election, and it was the first time that the support rate had topped 40 percent in a Kyodo News poll since mid-May.⁴⁵ Other polls showed similar improvements in support for the government. The poll taken by the *Yomiuri shimbun* showed a surge of 12.5 percentage points to 44.2 percent from 31.7 percent and the disapproval rating dropped 23.8 percentage points to 36.1 percent in a poll taken shortly after the election.⁴⁶ Increased support for the government was no less spectacular in a poll taken by the *Asahi shimbun*, reporting a support rate of 33 percent, up from a record-low of 26 percent in the previous survey held just after the election, and a non-support rate down to 53 percent from 60 percent.⁴⁷

⁴³ 'Kakuryokyuyo o 10% henno shusho wa 30% gyokakusuishin de', *asahi.com*, August 28, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0828/TKY200708280212.html>

⁴⁴ 'Setsumei fujubun nara, naikaku satte itadaku' Abe shusho ga kaiken', *asahi.com*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0827/TKY200708270345.html>

⁴⁵ 'Cabinet's approval rating up to 40.5%', *The Japan Times*, August 29, 2007.

⁴⁶ 'Cabinet approval leaps after reshuffle', *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 29, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070829TDY01005.htm>

⁴⁷ 'Support rate for reshuffled Cabinet hits 33%', *Asahi shimbun*, August 30, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708300068.html>

In a comment after the result in the Kyodo poll was published, Abe told reporters: “I believe the respondents made the judgment after seeing the new Cabinet line-up and our stance.” And he had got the message from the electorate. To further stabilize the support rate, he continued: “I think it is more important than anything that we work hard and carry out policies that live up to people’s expectations.”⁴⁸

The Prime Minister in the Polls

For the prime minister, the polls were good news in the sense that his ardent wish to wipe the slate clean and get away from the tarnished image of his first cabinet seemed to have been accomplished by the cabinet shake-up. Much less reassuring was the far from favorable assessment of Abe himself that the polls revealed. In the Kyodo News poll, 9.4 percent said they supported Abe because they pinned their hopes on the cabinet’s political reforms, while a mere 2.2 percent said he was a strong leader; in the *Asahi shimbun* poll, 47 percent wanted him to quit against 41 percent who thought he should continue; in the *Mainichi shimbun* poll, 70 percent wanted him to leave office. When the *Yomiuri shimbun* asked whether the cabinet reshuffle represented a change in the prime minister’s political style, only 39 percent said they had that impression while 48 percent said they did not. Among those expressing no party preference, 57 percent said they did not have such an impression, much higher than the figure of 30 percent for those who said they did have the impression that Abe had changed his approach.⁴⁹

But while the poll results for Abe personally were a disappointment, the fact that the support for the reshuffled government jumped upwards was positive and showed that the cabinet reshuffle had improved the image of the government. Even more important for Abe’s future in his office were that the figures for his party, the ruling LDP, increased. If the ruling party has an acceptable standing among those who go to the polls, a premier might be quite unpopular and still be able to retain his office. And polls showed that the support for the LDP had increased. In the Kyodo poll, 38.8 percent said they supported the LDP, up 7.3 points from the previous survey, while the

⁴⁸ ‘Cabinet’s approval rating up to 40.5%’, *The Japan Times*, August 29, 2007.

⁴⁹ Kohei Kobayashi and Tomohisa Tsuruta, ‘Poll shows Abe has 2nd chance / PM has small cities, towns, women to thank for rebound in support rate’, *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 30, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070830TDY03003.htm>

support rate for the LDP in the *Asahi shimbun* poll rose to 25 percent, up from 21 percent in the previous survey. In the *Yomiuri shimbun* poll the LDP's approval rating stood at 31.8 percent against 30.9 for the DPJ's. More important was that some of the polls finally indicated a break in support for the main opposition party. The Kyodo poll showed that the DPJ's rating of 25.6 percent was down 12 percent from the previous poll. The results of other polls differed, however. The *Asahi shimbun*, for example, reported that the DPJ with its 32 percent still eclipsed the LDP with its 25 percent.

No Clear Course after the Government Reshuffle

Abe's statements after having reshuffled his cabinet demonstrated that he saw the election result as carrying the clear message from voters that he had to retreat to "back to basics" policies if he would have any future as prime minister. The reason for the battering that the LDP had taken in the election lay in the gap in perception over what the public wanted and what the Abe government pursued. While voters worried about the pension scandal with millions of pension records missing, Abe kept on portraying constitutional revision as a key issue in the election.⁵⁰ Following a press conference after the cabinet reshuffle, Abe did not deny that public opinion was skeptical over his cabinet and his own performance, and admitted that his administration had lost public trust over the national pension debacle and other problems. He thus described the key task for his renewed cabinet as being to regain lost trust.⁵¹ But the problem was that his statement at the press conference, that he had put together his cabinet "in order to create a beautiful country and to proceed with reforms" did not go along with the fact that two of the 22 vice ministers appointed by the prime minister in his new cabinet had been outspoken enemies of postal privatization—the key economic reform put into effect by Abe's predecessor, Jun'ichiro Koizumi—and thrown out of the LDP by Koizumi for their protests.⁵² Their appointments signaled that Abe did not resolutely adhere to the reforms that Koizumi had initiated, and this created uncertainty as to how deep Abe's declared will to pursue reforms was. It also

⁵⁰ Hiroshi Hoshi, 'Abe plots new course without clear policies', *Asahi shimbun*, August 29, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708290099.html>

⁵¹ 'Reshuffle a ploy to claw back support', *asahi online*, August 28, 2007.

⁵² 'Abe kaizonaikaku no fukudaijin 22 kettei' *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 29, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe7900/news/20070829i203.htm>

accelerated Abe's earlier moves to allow LDP politicians who opposed Koizumi's plan for postal privatization plan to return to the LDP.

Contributing to the impression of a vacillating prime minister and a government at a loss was the obvious problem that Abe would have to get the consent of the Upper House for the legislation that the government had announced it was going to submit. Spearheaded by the DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa, the main opposition party, which commanded a majority in the Upper House, did not give any hint that it would yield to pressures. Moves by the new government to resolve this problem were immediately forthcoming. Members of Abe's new government with long political experience signaled that they were willing to reach a compromise with the DPJ. Defence Minister Masahiko Komura and Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura hastened to add that a reason why they had been appointed was to demonstrate that they were open to modifying the anti-terrorism law in order to accommodate the DPJ. According to Komura, the government was willing to listen to the DPJ in a bid to bring the opposition party on board. Komura's statement contrasted to his predecessor Yuriko Koike who had announced an all-out battle against the DPJ. Equally appeasing was the new foreign minister: "It is our basic stance to try to come up with a constructive answer [to the law] by debating the subject with opposition parties," Machimura told a news conference.⁵³

The DPJ was not impressed with the newborn willingness of the new government to negotiate. The party announced that it was going to draw up a counterproposal to the anti-terrorism special measures law that would replace the Maritime Self-Defense Force with civilian support measures to help Afghanistan. The DPJ refused to even discuss the matter with the government and the ruling LDP before deliberations on an extension bill started in the Diet. The basic stance of the DPJ was clarified by Secretary-General Yukio Hatoyama. He asserted that Japan could contribute to Afghanistan in other ways than refueling multinational warships. "Is the refueling operation really helping peace in Afghanistan? For example, can't we give support to alleviate the country's poverty? We want to make a

⁵³ Foreign, defense ministers open to modifying anti-terrorism law, *asahi online*, August 29, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY20070828o46o.html>

counterproposal based on that line,” he argued.⁵⁴ A couple of days later, the government announced that it was considering an alternative bill if the opposition parties refused to extend the anti-terrorism special measures law. By incorporating humanitarian support measures for Afghanistan, which the DPJ had indicated should constitute the core of Japan’s support, the government continued its strategy of trying to appease the opposition party. A leading LDP official was defiant: “There is a party that is saying that an extension can never be passed, so we need to consider what we can do to reach a solution.”⁵⁵

A Political Volte-face

With the Diet session opening on September 10, the political stalemate continued. Neither the ruling LDP and the New Komeito, nor the political opposition came forth with a suggestion for how a compromise solution could be found or how the political deadlock could be broken. The confrontation hardened. The LDP wanted to make the extension of the anti-terrorism law a matter of Japan’s commitment to the international community. The Ozawa camp concurred with the latter statement, but questioned the ruling coalition’s US-centric view of its obligation to the international community. Ozawa had consistently argued that Japan was quite willing to take action but on the precondition that the request comes from the United Nations. He was not willing to bend but wanted Japan to be, and be treated as, a partner on an equal footing and not a country that the US government can order around as it pleased.

In the days prior to the opening of the Diet session on September 10, Abe went to Sydney to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and held meetings with US President George W. Bush and Prime Minister John Howard of Australia. In obvious consideration of the problem that Abe faced on the home front, President Bush reassured the Japanese prime minister that he was not going to cast aside the issue of the Japanese abducted by North Korea. This issue was the top-most concern to Abe, and was the plank on which he had achieved political stardom and upon which he had banked

⁵⁴ ‘Minshuto: Use aid, not MSDF, for Afghanistan’, *Asahi shimbun*, August 31, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200708310099.html>

⁵⁵ ‘Ruling coalition considers new anti-terrorism law to win over Minshuto’, *Asahi shimbun*, September 3, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200709030150.html>

his political career. For some time rumors had circulated that the United States would strike a deal with North Korea about ceasing its nuclear program, leaving Japan out in the cold. Bush's remark was obviously meant to allay Japanese worries that the US government might remove Pyongyang from its list of terrorism-sponsoring states even if the abduction issue remains unresolved.⁵⁶ It is certain that Abe was aware that the United States could abandon him. Abe's grand uncle Eisaku Sato (prime minister 1964–72), a staunch defender of the US policy of isolating China, was mercilessly left to the wolves when President Richard Nixon made a 180 degree change of US China policy in 1971, as a result of which Sato eventually had to leave office in disgrace.

Away from the political quarters of Nagatacho in Tokyo, and warmed by President Bush's support for Abe's concern over the issue of the abducted Japanese, the Japanese prime minister raised the stakes in the power game at home. At a press conference on September 9 after his meetings with international leaders in Sydney, Abe made a bold declaration—he had no intention of clinging to his duties if the Diet did not extend the anti-terrorism law. He stressed that the extension has become an “international commitment” that he would fulfill by “all possible” means.⁵⁷ The prime minister's statement meant a complete volte-face and was in disregard of his previous insistence and determination that he would fight for gaining approval in the Diet for the extension of the anti-terrorism law. Maybe Abe was inspired by his political opponent Ichiro Ozawa, who had put his political future at stake in the Upper House election and succeeded in capturing the victory he had worked ceaselessly for.⁵⁸

In Tokyo, disbelief was the predominant reaction over the reports of the prime minister's statement in Sydney. This was not surprising given that, so far, Abe had refused to heed demands for his resignation, demonstrating stamina in the eyes of his supporters, or a will to cling to power according to his detractors. Not least when his standing was badly tarnished at the time of

⁵⁶ ‘Abe, Bush show united front on refueling mission’, *The Japan Times*, September 9, 2007.

⁵⁷ “‘Kyuyu keizoku’ dame nara naikaku sojishoku mo, shusho ga shisa’, *Yomiuri shimbun*, September 10, 2007.

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/news/20070909it11.htm>.

⁵⁸ Edström, ‘Japan's Upper House Election: Down or Dawn for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe?’, p.17

the Upper House election, he had still not wavered in his resolve. Despite the setback in the election and in spite of the uphill battle he faced, Abe had appeared as determined as ever to work toward realizing his political agenda, true to his ideal of being “a fighting politician.”⁵⁹ A senior government official was quoted by the *Asahi shimbun* as saying that Abe was “just demonstrating that he was unwavering in his commitment to extend the law and continue the Maritime Self-Defense Force’s refueling mission for U.S.-led multinational forces fighting terrorism in Afghanistan.” The newspaper also reported that members of the New Komeito, the LDP’s junior partner in the coalition government, were puzzled over the true meaning of Abe’s words. Frantic activity broke out in ruling circles to minimize the possible damage done by Abe’s boldness. The conservative *Yomiuri shimbun* reported that Abe had “hinted” that he and his cabinet would resign if he failed to get Diet approval for the extension of the refueling mission.⁶⁰ The paper seems to have picked up the defense line launched by Chief Cabinet Secretary Taro Aso: “I took the remark to mean that Abe was showing Japan’s resolve.”⁶¹

It must have been a bitter moment for Shinzo Abe. While he wanted to demonstrate that he is true to his ideal and is a fighting politician, his bold stance was taken as a mere play with words. Back in Tokyo for the opening of the session of the Diet on September 10, Abe was striking back. Questioned by reporters about his statement in Sydney, he did not waver but asserted that his remark should be taken at face value. When reporters tried to reconfirm if he truly meant he would step down, Abe said: “I believe that’s how the respective media organizations understood it.”⁶²

Journalists were in for another surprise. Abe’s policy speech at the opening of the session of the Diet was humble and paraded apologies and acknowledgments of his government’s failures. It was in stark contrast to his self-confident policy speech when he had been appointed premier. He declared that he wanted “to deal with political matters while standing upon

⁵⁹ Edström, ‘The Success of a Successor: Abe Shinzo and Japan’s Foreign Policy.’

⁶⁰ ‘Abe puts his job on line / Pledges to extend MSDF refueling mission in Indian Ocean’, *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 11, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20070911TDY01002.htm>

⁶¹ ‘Government tries to downplay Abe’s remark about resigning’, *Asahi shimbun*, September 10, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200709100190.html>

⁶² Hiroko Nakata, ‘Abe stakes future on terror law extension’, *The Japan Times*, September 11, 2007.

deep reflection for having brought about distrust in the political and administrative sectors,” and apologized for the resignation of his farm minister. Abe reached out to the opposition and asked for cooperation to extend the anti-terrorism law. “Should we simply abandon our responsibility to the international community?” Abe asked rhetorically. But he was clear over his duties as prime minister. “I am well aware that there were some who said I should step down because of the serious expression of the public’s will,” but he went on to say that it was more important to continue the reform process and that he “had the resolve to fight for the people and will continue to push reform.” He further declared that he was going to “make every effort to implement policies that the people will find both gentle and warm.”⁶³ More was to come. On September 12, the day after he had made his declaration of his unbroken will to continue as prime minister, Abe took all by surprise when he announced that he was going to resign.

Conclusion

In Japanese modern political history it is not unknown for a prime minister to suddenly withdraw. In 1981 Zenko Suzuki ended his time in office in a move that took Japanese by complete surprise; in 1994 the popular Morihiro Hosokawa left after only eight months in office. Other premiers have been even more short-lived. In 1957 Tanzan Ishibashi left after only 71 days as premier, after having fallen ill a short time after his appointment. More undignified was when Sosuke Uno stepped down in 1989 after two months because of a scandal.

Abe’s demise was unexpected but had been long in the making and was bound to have occurred sooner rather than later. After a political honeymoon that was unusually short for a new premier, he had faced a constant uphill battle in domestic politics. Poll after poll taken by newspaper and other media had shown that he was not a popular prime minister, and that his political agenda was seriously out of tune with the preferences of many Japanese. He was seen to be too nationalistic and too right-wing even for the generally conservative Japanese people. His great asset as a politician, his

⁶³Shusho, minshu ni kyogi teian, seifu-yoto shinhuan teishutsu e’, *Asahi shimbun*, September 11, 2007; Ryota Emman, ‘Prime minister takes humble approach in policy speech’, *asahi online*, September 11, 2007, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200709110093.html>.

freshness and good looks, had begun to wear thin and did not suffice as a means to convince. Neither was he helped by the fact that he had chosen cronies as ministers. Lacking enough senior and experienced colleagues in his cabinet, he and his political henchmen were not equal to the task of surmounting the obstacles that came into their path. After a clever move making a blitz visit to China and South Korea, and so in part repairing the strained relations with these important neighbours, Abe's fortunes faltered, and he stumbled from one crisis to the next.

Abe's short saga as prime minister is over. Unlike his predecessor Koizumi who might be back one day, this is unlikely to be the case with Abe. His place in the annals of Japanese political history may turn out to be that he paved the way for the alternation of power between opposing political parties. His short period in power and his lack of skill in handling national politics have given opposition parties the chance of usurping the LDP's traditional dominance. Perhaps Abe's short tenure in office will have demonstrated to the Japanese that the LDP can no longer be relied upon indefinitely to handle national affairs competently, as has been revealed at high cost, a task with which Japanese voters have entrusted the LDP almost without interruption since the party was founded in 1955.

About the Author

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