



The Prime Minister's Challenges During His Three Golden Years

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As expected, the Liberal Democratic Party won a landslide victory in the House of Councillors election in July, putting an end to the “twisted Diet.” Since the ruling parties have an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives, unless there is an extraordinary reason, there will be no national elections until the next House of Councillors election, planned to be held in the summer of 2016. So the ruling Liberal Democratic Party can enjoy three golden years. If Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is re-elected in the LDP's next presidential election in 2015, he will also be able to enjoy three golden years as prime minister.



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That said, the LDP government headed by Prime Minister Abe is not without its weaknesses. Let me point out five challenges the administration faces.

First, Abenomics has yet to be put to the test. Will the administration be able to raise the consumption tax rate? The success of Abenomics so far has been backed by last-minute demand in anticipation of a consumption tax hike, which is planned for April of next year. Will the administration be able to avoid the risk of the economy falling into deflation again? The Abenomics plan is about to find out. The administration's growth strategy, the most important part of the “three arrows” of Abenomics, involves potential tensions between the bold structural reforms necessary for the strategy and Prime Minister Abe's image of Japan as a “beautiful nation.” It's not easy, for example, to maintain family ties while promoting the social advancement of women. Reconciling Japan's structural reforms with its being a

“beautiful nation” will be a significant challenge.

The second challenge is how Prime Minister Abe can balance his unique position as a “fighting statesman” against the price of being a conservative. Will Mr. Abe visit the Yasukuni Shrine in April? The possibility is very low, but if he does visit the shrine, he will face far stronger opposition from China and South Korea than Vice Prime Minister Aso Taro, who also visited the shrine. Concern over Japan's conservative shift is expected to increase significantly in Europe and the United States. Will the prime minister stand by the statements of former Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei and former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi? Will making the Self-Defense Forces a



full-fledged armed forces through an amendment to the Constitution remain a long-term challenge? Will public officials be stationed on the Senkaku Islands?

If Prime Minister Abe presses ahead with policies based on his beliefs regarding these historical, constitutional, and territorial issues, Japan may end up becoming internationally isolated. If he maintains the status quo to avoid international isolation, the conservatives that have placed their hopes in him and supported him as a “fighting statesman” may be disappointed and turn against him. It is no easy task for the prime minister to adjust his policies.

The third challenge is the power struggles within the Liberal Democratic Party, which may intensify. Since the “twisted Diet” ended, Prime Minister Abe’s chief opponent is not the Democratic Party of Japan or the Japan Restoration Party. Yet there may be major challengers within his party who are considering running for the LDP presidential election in 2015. To cultivate the major rivals who want to become prime minister after him and control them at the same time, Mr. Abe needs to develop skills similar to those of former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, who pitted Mr. Abe Shintaro, the prime minister’s father, Mr. Takeshita Noboru, and Mr. Miyazawa Kiichi against each other.

Individual power struggles may be linked to policy conflicts, such as the debate over the pros and cons of a consumption tax hike. In fact, power struggles within the LDP intensified when stable administrations were established after overwhelming victories.

Fourth, what kind of leadership will Prime Minister Abe be able to establish? The prime minister enthusiastically uses Twitter, which shows that he is forward-thinking. Yet social networking services often make people aggressive and intolerant. He should not reject media interviews out of hand.

Prime Minister Abe’s previous cabinet was ridiculed as a “cabinet of friends.” Has he gotten rid of this propensity? Does he tend to exclude people who are politically and personally removed from him and include people who are close to him? We cannot expect strong leadership from such a tendency. It is important for a leader to include people who are far from him both politically and personally and to be exacting with those close to him.

Lastly, has Mr. Abe recovered his health sufficiently to be able to continue to assume his heavy responsibilities for a long term in office as prime minister? He needs to disclose sufficient information in order to reassure people and achieve political stability.

It was often said that Japan-U.S. relations entered a “golden age” under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and U.S. president George W. Bush. Now both Prime Minister Koizumi and President Bush have left office. Meanwhile, there remains the challenge of dealing with China, the North Korean nuclear development issue, and the issue of U.S. military bases on Okinawa. Although Prime Minister Abe has said that he plans to restore the Japan-U.S. alliance, it cannot be said that this alliance is in a golden age. A “golden age” is ephemeral. There is no doubt that the LDP and the Abe Cabinet must be sufficiently prepared and determined to enjoy three golden years.

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