



Prime Minister Abe Shinzo Heads into Third Consecutive Term as President of the Liberal Democratic Party (Part 2) – Placing Importance on a Strong Base of Support, and Obstacles to Creating a Legacy

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Key Points:

- Koizumi's priority was to escape from factionalism, while Abe's is intraparty appeasement
- Even in implementing reforms, there is awareness of avoiding impact to the existing LDP organization
- Constitutional amendment is a barrier to national referendum for creating a lasting legacy

President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Prime Minister of Japan Abe Shinzo has successfully won his third leadership election. Although LDP Secretary General Ishiba Shigeru received attention for putting up a good fight, looking at things in perspective it was a major victory for Prime Minister Abe, who gained almost 70% of the votes. The important point is that this victory has increased the possibility of Prime Minister Abe achieving the longest period in office as Prime Minister in the history of Japanese constitutional politics.

The background to Prime Minister Abe's strength—as demonstrated by the determination of policies led by the Office of the Prime Minister, and his five consecutive victories in national elections—undoubtedly includes the string of political reforms that have been implemented since 1994. The Prime Minister's authority has been systematically strengthened, through reforms such as the introduction of the mixed-member majoritarian electoral system (combining the single-member constituency system with proportional representation) and the party subsidies system, and strengthening of the functionality of the Office of the Prime Minister going as far as the establishment of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs.

Like the Abe administration, the Koizumi Junichiro administration also became a stable long-term government, and the reasons behind this have also been explained in terms of systematic reforms. However, since a string of short-lived unstable governments continued after that, it is the common consensus amongst political scientists that the kind of leadership employed by the Prime Minister himself cannot be ignored.



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Comparison Between Prime Ministers Koizumi Junichiro and Abe Shinzo		
	Koizumi Junichiro	Abe Shinzo
Political starting point	Factional infighting within the LDP	The LDP's loss of power
Main enemies	Tanaka faction and its succeeding faction (Keiseikai and Heisei Kenkyukai)	Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and other democratic parties formed after its dissolution
Slogan	Privatization of the postal service	Escape from the postwar regime
National elections	Valued independent voters with no particular party affiliation	Values LDP's supporting base
Personnel (factions)	Exclusive	Inclusive (intraparty appeasement)
Policymaking process	Destroyed the preliminary review system	Utilizes the preliminary review system
Policies	Neoliberal reform	Balance between neoliberal reform and political patronage

In this article, I would like to clarify the distinctive features of Prime Minister Abe's political leadership while drawing comparisons with the Koizumi administration, and to take a look at the future outlook. (See figure.)



In the case of Prime Minister Koizumi, who won his first election in 1972, the year in which the so-called Kaku-Fuku War (Tanaka-Fukuda factional conflict) began, his major enemy was the Tanaka faction of the LDP. Koizumi's administration forced through neoliberal reforms such as the privatization of the postal service, which was a stronghold of the Heisei Kenkyukai (a scion of the Tanaka faction). The administration used populist political methods in order to secure the support of independent voters without any particular party affiliation, by attacking together with opposing forces vested interests in factions and Diet members linked to certain political lobbies.

Prime Minister Abe, on the other hand, won his first election in 1993, when the LDP had been removed from power for the first time. His issue, upon winning the election, was to show how long the LDP administration could continue to maintain its newly reclaimed grasp on power. The ones who emerged as rivals were the DPJ, which included former members of the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ), and which advocated protection of the current constitution. Because of this, the Abe administration sought to achieved solidarity amongst members of the LDP under the slogan of "escaping from the postwar regime," which focused primarily on constitutional amendment.

These differences are apparent in the election campaign strategies of these two administrations. Prime Minister Koizumi emphasized appealing to unaffiliated voters, and achieved major success in

the 2005 election (fought over the privatization of the postal service). However, this support from unaffiliated voters lacked stability, and the administration was in fact defeated in the Upper House election the previous year. In Prime Minister Abe's case, he places value in the LDP's supporting base and its coalition partner, Komeito.

The reason why the LDP is able to win elections by relying on solid votes in recent years is that since the DPJ government ended in failure, the support of unaffiliated voters has not leaned towards the opposition parties. While the voting rate in the 2005 election (fought over the privatization of the postal service) was over 67%, voting rates for the two most recent Lower House elections were in the 50–55% range. Unlike the Koizumi administration, the current Abe administration is winning elections consistently by valuing a stable base of support under low voting-rate conditions.

There are also major differences in party governance. While Prime Minister Koizumi engaged in internal power struggles and selected key personnel exclusively to avert factional maneuvering, Prime Minister Abe—whose main enemies are the opposition parties—is endeavoring to ensure harmony within his own party. Most recently, too, faction leaders have been appointed across the board as key cabinet ministers and members of senior party leadership; including Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro, LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro, LDP General Council Chairman Takeshita Wataru, and LDP Policy Research Council Chairman Kishida Fumio.

It was precisely because of this approach that the overwhelming majority of factional support in the recent party leadership election also concentrated around Prime Minister Abe. The reason why his rival Ishiba Shigeru became isolated is connected to the fact that, despite being asked to remain as a member of the cabinet, he refused and lost his active role within the government. Words or actions disagreeing with Prime Minister Abe have a tendency to be criticized as “shooting from behind,” or helping the opposition parties.

While trends in the behavior of party factions received particular attention in the recent leadership race, they were far from the full-blown recovery of factions which were once referred to as “parties within parties.”

Since the political reforms of 1994, many factions have weakened and increased their level of dependence on the resources of the Prime Minister (i.e. the party president). Being in such a lowly position prevents them from maintaining the power to unite within their factions. This was one reason why Kishida Fumio was not able to run as a candidate for party president himself. Party factions have now essentially become part of a top-down command hierarchy.

This top-down hierarchy is also evident in the policymaking process. Prime Minister Koizumi blew holes in the preliminary review system, in which the approval of the leading party would be obtained prior to cabinet meeting decisions on cabinet bills and budget proposals, and attempted to strengthen the role of the Office of the Prime Minister in leading the policymaking process. In contrast with this approach, Prime Minister Abe is maintaining and making skillful use of the preliminary review system. By passing new policy proposals through the preliminary review process while leading policymaking through the Office of the Prime Minister, Abe is restricting party debate in order to make party members adhere to policy decisions in order to ensure smooth top-down policymaking.

While on one hand strong discipline utilizing the existing party organization and rules enables stable operation of the administration, it also makes it difficult for individual Diet members to speak

and act freely. In explaining his reasons for voting for Ishiba Shigeru, lower house member Koizumi Shinjiro (son of Koizumi Junichiro) expressed his view that the LDP must become a party that “changes different opinions into strengths.” The fact that Ishiba Shigeru was able to put up a strong fight with votes not only from party members but also from Diet members reflects underlying discontent at the weakening of multiplicity within the LDP.



If we turn our eyes towards policy, in contrast with Prime Minister Koizumi who pushed forward an agenda of neoliberal reform, Prime Minister Abe advocated his policy of Abenomics. While the “third arrow” of this policy (growth strategy) does include neoliberal reform, the “second arrow” (fiscal stimulus) is the essence of traditional political patronage, of building national resilience and so on. This could be said to be an expression of a stance of advancing reforms only to an extent that does not damage the existing organization of the LDP itself, in terms of maintaining harmony within the party.

In actual fact, Prime Minister Koizumi’s privatization of the postal service made an enemy of Zentoku (the national association of postmasters), which was the LDP’s largest supporting organization. By contrast, Prime Minister Abe’s agricultural cooperative reforms have been driven ahead with final agreement of the JA (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives) Group. The administration also certainly concluded negotiations and achieved the ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), but it cannot be denied that the Abe government’s reforms have been somewhat lukewarm in comparison with those implemented by the Koizumi administration.

One thing that is evident with Prime Minister Abe is his eagerness to amend the constitution. But his efforts to enable Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense by changing the interpretation of the constitution ended as only a limited measure. In his approach to resisting the opposition, his consideration for the LDP’s coalition partners—Komeito—stands out; and during the press conference after winning the recent party leadership race, too, he stated that he would make adjustments with Komeito before submitting proposals for constitutional amendment to the Diet. As long as Komeito continues to take a passive stance on constitutional amendment, it will be difficult for Prime Minister Abe to achieve his aim of adding a clearly worded provision regarding the JSDF to Article 9 of Japan’s constitution.

The formation of an agreement with the opposition is also important in order to amend the constitution. However, since Prime Minister Abe has taken a confrontational approach to the opposition parties thus far, he will also encounter difficulties in achieving constitutional amendment in this respect. Whether it be constitutional amendment or combined reforms on social security and tax aimed at remedying domestic problems affecting the Japanese public, the Abe administration can be seen stalling when it comes to policies that require the formation of agreements between the ruling and opposition parties.

When it comes to issues of foreign diplomacy, such as the North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens and territorial disputes with Russia, the government must deal with other countries, and so the stalling of negotiations cannot be attributed solely to the Abe administration. But these issues aside, the Abe administration is yet to create a lasting and symbolic legacy as a long-term

administration such as the Nakasone administration's national railway reforms, or the Koizumi administration's privatization of the postal service. While this may seem paradoxical, this may be the trade-off for the Abe government's success in building a super-long-term administration that is even stronger than that of Koizumi Junichiro was, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe, who exhibits the various characteristics that I have explained above.



If he is to leave office as president of the LDP as planned, three years from now, then there is an undeniable possibility that President Abe will be mindful of creating a lasting legacy, and head towards constitutional amendment. Circumstances such as the administration's efforts to avoid becoming a "lame duck," and the absence of any Post-Abe candidates to carry on his course also serve to reinforce this prediction.

The litmus test of this will surely be whether or not the LDP submits a proposal for constitutional amendment to the extraordinary session of the Diet this fall. But even if he is able to initiate the amendment of the constitution in the Diet, ultimately it will come down to voting by the Japanese public. This represents a major barrier for Prime Minister Abe, who lacks populist appeal to unaffiliated voters.

Looking at his choice of government personnel, too, if he does not include Ishiba Shigeru, who fought so well during the leadership race, then cracks will start to appear in his intraparty harmony. It has been almost six years since the administration won back power, and the atmosphere within the LDP of needing to band together in order to resist the opposition parties is also beginning to change subtly. Will Prime Minister Abe continue with his conventional approach to political leadership? It certainly seems that he has finally been pushed into a turning point.

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