



THE PENINSULA

Japan's Upper House Election Results and Implications for South Korea

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On July 20, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan was dealt a significant blow in the election for seats in the House of Councillors. Ahead of the election, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba said that his goal was to maintain the LDP coalition's majority in the chamber by winning a combined fifty seats. Instead, the coalition lost seats, especially to smaller opposition parties, including the far-right Sanseito. This means that for the first time since 1994, the ruling coalition controls neither chamber of the Japanese legislature.

Those concerned about the Sanseito party's ideas about foreign policy should keep in mind that their appeal is driven mostly by domestic factors. South Korea and other neighbors should instead focus on the likelihood that Prime Minister Ishiba resigns, which is all the more possible after the election.

Rejecting the Status Quo

The recent upper house election was a strong rebuke of the ruling LDP-Komeito government. "We must humbly and sincerely accept this difficult situation," Prime Minister Ishiba said on national broadcaster NHK. Leaders of opposition parties like the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the Democratic Party For the People, and the Japan Innovation Party have all said they would not join a coalition with the LDP and junior party Komeito. Citing this, the conservative Yomiuri Shimbun urged the prime minister to

step down to encourage a coalition government. Prime Minister Ishiba has resisted calls for his resignation, citing the need to prevent political instability and implement the recent trade agreement with the United States. "It's my intention to fulfill my responsibility for the people and the country by never creating a political vacuum," he said ahead of a meeting at LDP headquarters. It remains to be seen if or when the party will officially call for his resignation as prime minister. August may be an appropriate time for Prime Minister Ishiba to leave office, as it would allow him to end his tenure after overseeing the Tokyo International Conference on African Development and the eightieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Although preparations for a formal leadership election have yet to be made, Sanae Takaichi and Shinjiro Koizumi are top contenders.

One factor that contributed to the LDP's losses was the rise of smaller parties able to capitalize on public dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition. Sanseito, for example, will now be able to introduce bills in the chamber after winning fourteen seats. It has promoted seemingly xenophobic positions with the slogan "Japanese First," and some of the party's proposals include using "counter propaganda" to push back against things like "criticism of Japan not based on reality." Party leader Sohei Kamiya recently came under fire for using an anti-Korean slur in a public speech. The Korea NGO Center, a nonprofit dedicated to multiculturalism and preventing discrimination against foreigners, has demanding an apology from Kamiya and accused his party of "inciting public opinion that discriminates against and excludes foreigners as a consequence." Nevertheless, Sanseito remains a minor party and will likely have limited influence over the Japanese government's policies despite its recent election success and the tumult in the upper house.

Meanwhile, the South Korean government has not commented on the election results. The Lee Jae Myung administration is still establishing itself and is preoccupied with managing domestic policy issues. Newly confirmed Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Hyun reiterated that South Korea wants to pursue mutual understanding with Japan to resolve longstanding historical disagreements. "We must ensure that these issues do not become major obstacles to building a future-oriented relationship between Korea and Japan and instead work to create a virtuous cycle in the relationship," he told reporters. The liberal Hankyoreh newspaper was more worried, calling the election a defeat of Japanese liberals who pushed for better relations with South Korea. "Lee and Ishiba must maintain their commitment to deepen cooperation by resuming shuttle diplomacy. Now, more than ever, South Korea and Japan must join forces," the paper argued.

All Politics Is Local

Notwithstanding a new prime minister likely on the horizon and a discombobulated ruling coalition, the election was not a repudiation of the broader trends in Japan's foreign policy. In a Kyodo News survey, the top three issues shaping voter sentiment were all in the domestic sphere. This included rising prices (32.2 percent), social security and pensions (18.7 percent), and the economy and employment (11.4 percent). In another poll by the Yomiuri Shimbun, survey participants were asked what policy issue should be the main focus of the next prime minister—78 percent of respondents said social security and pensions. Diplomacy and security issues tied with education and child-rearing at 73 percent, while "immigration and foreigners" was 54 percent.

In other words, the old adage that "all politics are local" is still true. Experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) write that there remains a consensus on the broad contours of Japanese foreign policy on issues like defense spending and the threat

posed by China, North Korea, and Russia. "In short, Japan's strategic trajectory will likely stay on course, but domestic political constraints may adversely affect the pace at which Japan implements key foreign policy objectives," they write. The fact that domestic politics will take up bandwidth in Tokyo is unfortunate at a time when shuttle diplomacy with Seoul has yielded fairly positive results. It also does not bode well for expectations of a significant summit (bilateral or trilateral with the United States) on the sidelines of the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit later this year in Gyeongju, South Korea. But while Japanese voters may be tired of the domestic status quo, they are not necessarily looking to change Japan's external relations and foreign policy.

Conclusion

In the short term, fallout from the upper house election will mostly remain in Japan. While the ruling coalition tries to figure out its next steps, the opposition parties will try to capitalize on the dysfunction. This will mean most of Tokyo's attention will be directed domestically, leaving less time and energy available for foreign policy. But in the long term, the likely ouster of Prime Minister Ishiba may have more important implications for partners like South Korea and the United States.

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Photo from the Japanese Prime Minister's Office.

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