

Japan's General Election: What Happened and What It Means

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Faculty House, Columbia University

*Presented by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute and
the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB), Columbia Business School*



On November 13, 2017, Gerald L. Curtis, the Burgess Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Columbia University, and Professor Takatoshi Ito, Professor of International Affairs at the School of International and Public Affairs and Director of the Program on Public Pension and Sovereign Funds at the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB), discussed the October 22, 2017 snap election in Japan. Professor Hugh T. Patrick, Director of CJEB, introduced and moderated the talk. The event was co-sponsored by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute and CJEB.

Professor Patrick began the event with a brief summary and analysis of the snap election. He described the election as fascinating, surprising, and tumultuous given the quick rise and fall of Prime Minister Abe's main contender, Yuriko Koike, Mayor of Tokyo. He posited that though Prime Minister Abe's call for a snap election was a surprise, it was nonetheless a clever move given that



Hugh T. Patrick

Professor Curtis presented his perspective within the framework of four questions: what happened; how can the results be explained; what does it mean for policy going forward; and what happens after Prime Minister Abe leaves office?

What happened was that the LDP enjoyed a landslide victory, winning 284 seats. Together with the 29 seats won by its coalition partner the Komeito, it commands two-third of the 465 seats in the lower house. The opposition parties divided the LDP vote, allowing LDP candidates to win in single member constituencies where they did not win a majority of the popular vote. The Democratic Party dissolved shortly before the election was called. Most of its incumbents joined the Hope Party led by Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike. When she announced that she would exclude

Democratic Party members who did not agree with her policy stance, especially about defense policy and constitutional revision, several LDP members formed another new party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan. The Communist Party withdrew most of the candidates it had been planning to run in single member constituencies to support the CDPJ. The Hope Party did poorly in the election, winning only 50 seats. The CDPJ became the largest opposition party with 55 seats.



Gerald L. Curtis

he had been plagued by scandals for several months prior. Mayor Koike's party, the Party of Hope, emerged as a serious contender to Prime Minister Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but was unable to capitalize on the moment and eventually fizzled and collapsed. Following his remarks, Professor Patrick invited the two panelists, Gerald Curtis and Takatoshi Ito, to dissect the election.

The LDP won notwithstanding Prime Minister Abe's low popularity. In the last Nikkei Shimbun poll published before the election his popular support was recorded at 37 percent. Several factors account for the LDP's victory. One was public disappointment with Governor Koike and the Hope Party. Her "exclusion strategy" was widely criticized and her decision not to run in the election signaled that she didn't believe the Hope Party could win a majority since it had no candidate to put forward to be prime minister. The LDP also was helped by public fears about the threat posed by North Korea. Many voters concluded that they should stick with a prime minister who took a strong position on North Korea and had a close relationship with President Trump.

Finally, the LDP won because it called a snap election before the Hope Party could get organized and recruit candidates. The Party of Hope squandered an opportunity to bring about political change. It probably could not have won a majority under even the best of circumstances, but if it had been more skillful it could have caused the LDP to lose 50 or more seats and possibly force Prime Minister Abe to resign. As a result of the election Mr. Abe is virtually assured of a third term as LDP President, which will keep him as prime minister until 2021 and the opposition is certain to remain divided and weak for some time to come.

The election is unlikely to produce major policy initiatives. There is little reason to believe that the LDP will be able to accomplish in the next four years what it didn't accomplish in the past five when it also had two-thirds of the seats in the lower house. Continued incremental change but no bold "third error" reforms or other policy changes is likely. Prime Minister Abe will try to rally support for amending the Constitution but it is unlikely that he will be successful. He himself has recognized that there isn't public support for a substantive revision of Article Nine. He has lowered his sights to call for simply adding a clause to the current Article affirming the legality of the Self



Takatoshi Ito

Defense Forces. It is questionable whether even this modest revision, which would codify the status quo, will obtain the support of two-thirds of the members of both houses of the Diet that is required to initiate a referendum among the voters.

There is no clear successor to Prime Minister Abe. By 2021, assuming he stays in office until then, politicians not currently in a position to

challenge Mr. Abe will be entering the competition for prime minister. Names mentioned include Shinjiro Koizumi and foreign minister Taro Kono. Others are bound to appear. What seems very likely is that in the next decade Japan's political leadership will be dominated by younger Diet members, most of whom are fluent in English, have studied abroad, and have a good understanding of international affairs.

Following Professor Curtis's remarks, Professor Ito took the podium to illuminate the economic implications of the election. Japan's economy is strong and in Professor Ito's view, Prime Minister Abe had every reason to win the election. Professor Ito's perspective was driven by the question of whether Prime Minister Abe's focus on a constitutional amendment would have a positive or negative effect on Japan's economy. In Professor Ito's view, Prime Minister Abe will do more for the Japanese economy precisely because he will need the public to support his constitutional amendment initiative of adding Section 3 to Article 9 to give the legal basis for Self Defense Forces, which currently has only 44% of the public's support. With Japan's general pacifist attitude, his push for the amendment of Article 9 has been and will continue to be unpopular. Prime Minister Abe will need Abenomics to counter the unpopularity that his push for constitutional reform will generate. Professor Ito shared the sentiment that he is more hopeful that Abenomics, with a focus on labor reform and free education at its core, will be pushed to its limits in the next four years.

As for the opposition, Professor Ito stated that he believed it will rebound and will try to redefine its position within the conservative-liberal spectrum to better counter the LDP in the future. He situated the existing parties within a politically and economically conservative and liberal spectrum and expressed that the opposition parties are now clearly split along political lines with some more clearly defined as political liberals and others as political conservatives. He believes that the Party of Hope has a chance again but that it would need to define whether it is an economically liberal or economically conservative party. He argued that though Mayor Koike spoke of more liberal policies in her campaigns, the Party of Hope did not think hard enough about economic policy prior to the snap election and the lack of consideration of its economic agenda will be a problem for the party in the coming years.

In a follow-up panel, Professor Patrick, serving as moderator, asked both Professors Curtis and Ito to elaborate on where they disagreed and explain how their priorities differed. Professor Curtis disagreed with Professor Ito that Abenomics will help voters support his push for constitutional reform. He also argued that Abenomics is not popular in Japan and that some of Japan's issues are cultural and ingrained and cannot easily be changed by constitutional reform. He commented that the idea that the opposition has purified itself and has a better chance is fundamentally wrong given that no one will vote for a party that is too similar to the LDP. He concluded that, though Abe's popularity might have climbed after the election and though the cabinet is currently enjoying high ratings, 48% of those polled said they do not trust Prime Minister Abe.

Professor Ito reaffirmed that he believes that Abenomics is still popular and that, though there may be disagreements on certain aspect of Abenomics, it's a concept that still enjoys popular support. He countered Professor Curtis' remarks that the LDP is populist and claimed that though the LDP may sound populist, Prime Minister Abe needs sound economic logic and, for example, that it is highly unlikely that Japan will have free education for all.

Professor Patrick closed the panel with his own remarks that the near-term future of Japan is not so uncertain and that Prime Minister Abe will stay in power until the next general election. He concluded that talking about Abenomics is very cliché and that the focus should be on the specific economic issues that are raised, such as how the government intends on using the funds generated by the increased consumption tax. Professor Patrick believes that though Prime Minister Abe will push for education, the details of this policy are not well thought-out.

