

Abe's Re-election as the Liberal Democratic Party President: Analysing the Process, Outcomes and Challenges Ahead

Shamshad Ahmad Khan, Ph.D.

Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

shamshadnhk@gmail.com

Post-war Japan has maintained a political convention, that is, the President of the ruling party assumes the Prime Minister's office. Because of this convention, the presidential election, especially of a ruling party assumes significance and is keenly watched, both domestically and internationally. The Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) 2018 presidential election was watched with much more enthusiasm than ever. This was due to the fact that during the last presidential election that took place in 2012, Shigeru Ishiba who unsuccessfully contested against Shinzo Abe got more votes from the rank-and-file voters of the LDP. Abe could defeat Ishiba by garnering more votes from the LDP Diet members. In LDP's presidential election, both Diet members elected on party's ticket and general LDP members cast their votes.

A similar and much better performance in general members' constituency by Ishiba against Abe, who faced lots of allegation of political favouritism recently, could have had wider implications for Japan's internal and external policies. Had the 2018 LDP Presidential election result gone in Ishiba's favour, he would have not only ousted Abe from the Party's presidency but would have also assumed Prime Minister's office. This was the second consecutive fight between Abe and Ishiba for the much coveted Party post in which Ishiba has been unlucky this time as well. Abe

won 329 votes from Diet members out of 405 votes and 224 from party members out of 405 votes and secured 553 votes in total. His sole challenger Ishiba secured 73 votes from Diet members and 181 from Party members which brought his total tally to 254 (The Asahi Shimbun 2018 a). By way of winning re-election for Party's presidency for the third and final term, Abe will remain President of the LDP till September 2021 and Prime Minister of the country. He is on the course of becoming the longest serving Prime Minister in Japan.

Prelude to Abe's Third Extension

It must be noted here that Abe got a third consecutive extension because the LDP had recently tweaked the existing rule of maximum two consecutive terms for an individual for party's presidential post. Abe was completing his second consecutive term in September 2018 and he may have demitted office after completing this term had the party not amended this rule. A discussion to amend the Party Constitution to change this particular rule was initiated within the Party in 2016. The change was apparently aimed at giving longer tenure in the Presidency and the Prime Minister's office to Shinzo Abe, even though the Party maintained that the amendment in the Party rule is not specific to an individual. Previously, an

exception to this rule was given to Nakasone Yasuhiro, whose tenure was getting over few months before the term of the lower house of the Japanese Diet.

This time, however, an amendment to the existing rule was undertaken few months after the August 2016 reshuffle of the LDP Secretariat. Interestingly, change to the existing rule was mooted by Toshihiro Nikai, the newly elected LDP's Secretary General and Masahiko Komura, LDP's Vice President. Both Nikai and Komura are considered to be close confidants of Abe. To support Abe's extension, Nikai observed that "the Abe Cabinet is stably progressing as the first long-term administration in a long time. I think it is more important to have stability in politics than to close a chapter when the term expires" (The Yomiuri Shimbun 2016 a). Similarly, Komura was of the view that "it is desirable for the party to study, for example, the idea of allowing any LDP president to serve for a maximum of three terms, rather than considering an extension only for Abe" (Yomiuri Shimbun 2016b). The amendment to the two consecutive terms' rule was swiftly achieved.

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The internal political manoeuvring in Japan which paved way for Abe's extension in office has striking resemblance with that of China and Russia, which gave extension to Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in power. It can be said that Abe's eagerness to cling to power also goes with the trends in the region. Since the LDP President has the prerogative to select LDP's secretariat and Abe is known to choose people amenable to his policies, it is difficult to believe that the new secretariat mooted the idea of three consecutive terms for LDP President without the concurrence of Abe. Abe, however, remained evasive whether he would seek extension (Mainichi Shimbun 2016). He maintained that

he will take a call "when the leaves start to bud on the tree" (Yomiuri Shimbun 2018a).

Surprisingly, the amendment in the Party Constitution was achieved without much resistance within the party even though it has eventually blocked the chance of many aspirants of top-most post in the ruling party and dashed their hopes to become Japan's Prime Minister in future. Prominent among them is former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida who once showed his desire to contest for LDP's president and chose not to join reshuffled Abe Cabinet that was undertaken in 2015 so that he could focus on his election for the party chief.

Interestingly, he was rated at par with Abe in various opinion polls among the probable candidates for 2018 Presidential election. Kishida, considered to be a liberal or a dove in the LDP, announced his decision not to contest for the presidential election in August this year. But a behind the scene deal was apparently made between Abe and Kishida during a New Year party in January this year which was reported by a section of Japanese media. Abe persuaded Kishida not to use his card this time and save it for future (Yomiuri Shimbun 2018a). However, Kishida has almost lost his chance to get into top-post as Shinjiro Koizumi, son of former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, is emerging as most favourite candidate in the public opinion surveys to assume the post after Abe.

Key Issues in the LDP's Presidential Election

The domestic agenda dominated the LDP's presidential race and the foreign relations issues were put on a back burner. Constitutional revision remained the key issue as both Ishiba and Abe, talked about Constitutional revision, especially Article 9, during the presidential campaign. (Asahi Shimbun 2018b). While Abe was in favour of adding an additional clause in the existing Article 9 so that country's Self Defence Forces (SDF) get legal status, Ishiba was in favour of deleting the second paragraph of Article 9 which bans Japan to maintain army,

navy, air force and other “war potentials” and clearly define the SDF in the clause as war potential (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2018a). Abe also touched upon his agenda of providing free and affordable education to students. Both presented their own agenda of regional revitalization. While Abe told his audience that he would like to revitalize the local economy further, Ishiba was critical of Abe’s economic revitalization strategy also dubbed as Abenomics saying that his policy has benefited big business and the local economies have been left out. During his speeches he said that “Japan will never be better unless we shift policies to make local communities prosper to the nation’s front and center.” Touching upon the growing number of incidents of natural calamities, Ishiba emphasized the need to establish a minister of disaster prevention (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2018b).

Interpreting the Result

It was certain that Abe would be re-elected and his term in the Prime Minister’s office will get an eventual extension through this process. Various lessons could be learnt from the recently concluded presidential election process and its result. First and foremost, is that the hawkish faction of the LDP has cemented its position in the LDP leadership and they are likely to stay longer. In the past, leadership in the LDP rotated between the so called ‘dovish’ and ‘hawkish’ factions. The hawkish were more aggressive on changing the Constitution and giving more power to Japanese defence forces while the dovish faction showed indifference to these issues. The 2018 election was contested between two hawks. Both Ishiba and Abe, if measured on those policies, would be considered hawks as both talked of revising the peace Constitution, especially Article 9, during the presidential campaign giving more power to its defence forces. It is difficult to predict that whether next LDP President would be a dove or a hawk but given the pre-eminence, the hawkish factions have gained in the LDP it is difficult to assume that the next LDP president would be a dove.

The second lesson that could be drawn from recently held presidential election is that the ‘glass-ceiling’ remains too high for women in Japanese politics and especially for the top most post in the LDP though there had been lots of talks in Japan about gender equality and “womenomics” (Yuri 2014). Seiko Noda, Internal Affairs and Communication Minister in the Abe cabinet, was the only woman who wanted to challenge the leadership position of Abe. But she failed to gain endorsement of 20 parliamentarians from the LDP, a pre-requisite to file nomination for the presidential race. In fact, this is the second time that she has been effectively barred from contesting for the Party’s top post. In September 2015, she was the only candidate who wanted to challenge the leadership of Abe but failed to get required number of endorsements from the LDP parliamentarians and Abe was elected unopposed. At that time, the LDP gave justification that the Party did not want to unseat the incumbent President to maintain political stability and continuity. But she failed to get endorsements from the LDP parliamentarians once again.

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However, this time when the two candidates were already in fray, not endorsing Noda for the race suggests that ‘glass-ceiling’ remains high in the LDP for women. Moreover, by denying her a chance to contest elections for the top post, it seems the LDP incorporated the wish of Abe who once said to his aides that “the fewer horses in the running, the better” (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018a).

The third lesson can be deduced by dissecting the number of votes both the candidate gained during the presidential election and examining the opinion poll about Abe’s re-election as party chief. Among the total valid votes, Abe gained 553 while his challenger Ishiba got 254. Numerically, it is a huge difference between the votes secured by the two contestants. But this

difference was because Abe garnered support from 329 Diet members and Ishiba only 73. However, the margin was narrow between the two aspirants among LDP's rank and file voters. While Abe got 224 votes, Ishiba picked up 181 votes. Moreover, in 10 out of 47 prefectures, Ishiba won more votes from rank-and-file members of the Party than Abe (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2018c). Even though Ishiba could not repeat his 2012 performance in this constituency where he had garnered more votes than Abe, 45 percent vote against a sitting Prime Minister and sitting Party Chief is considered a good show.

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Abe's camp was eyeing for 70 percent votes to showcase his popularity both among parliamentarians and the rank-and-file LDP members but they fell short of the mark. Observers have termed it a sign of a 'revolt' against Abe by the rank-and-file Party workers (*Asahi Shimbun* 2018a). It is also believed that while the LDP members in the Diet continued to 'curry favour' with Abe, the rank and file members went with the public sentiments while exercising their votes. The public opinion survey conducted by *Yomiuri Shimbun* soon after Abe's victory also validates these claims. The opinion was divided among the respondents over the election of Abe for the third term. While 46 percent respondent said that they think Abe's victory is "good," a close to 41 percent said it is "not good" (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018b). Although Abe maintained around 50 percent approval rating, his disapproval rating stood at 41 percent, a point up from the previous survey conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in August (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2018b).

Above all, it must be acknowledged that Abe, through his economic measures, has brought the country out of recession and this has made him indispensable for Japan. Taking the advantage of his indispensability, Abe has strengthened his

grip on the Party and the administration. Does this portend well for Japanese democracy? This remains an open-ended question. In a democracy, the opposition plays an important part in keeping a check and balance on the power of the head of the state. Since opposition in Japan remained weak, the factions within the ruling party has played an important part in keeping a check on accountability of Prime Minister's authority and his exercise of power. But factions no more serve that kind of restraint. Rather, they have been too submissive and toe the line of the party chief.

During the recently held presidential election, barring Takeshita faction, which left its members to make their own decision to vote either for Abe or Ishiba, other factions made open support for Abe. Hosoda faction, to which Abe belongs, asked its member to sign a pledge to support Abe in his bid for re-election (*Asahi Shimbun* 2018c). This is a new trend in the LDP. Amid the weak opposition and submissive factions, the responsibility shifts now on the LDP's rank-and-file members to serve as a restraint against fear of growing one-upmanship within the party. The rank-and-file members have already sent their message to the party leadership by not out rightly voting for the incumbent party chief. Even though it is being interpreted as a "revolt" by them against Abe, it is yet to be seen whether Abe will reflect into the messages conveyed by them.

Agenda Before Abe and the Challenges Ahead

Since this is apparently the final term in office for Abe, he wants to realise some of his cherished agenda before demitting office including the revision of the Constitution. His speeches and statements indicate that Constitutional revision remains his top priority. Abe has set a deadline to revise the Constitution by 2020. However, it would be a difficult task to achieve as an amendment requires approval by both the Diets with two-thirds majority and a public approval through a referendum with simple majority. While it would not be that difficult to achieve a two-thirds majority in both

the houses of the Diets with the help of smaller parties who are in favour of Constitutional revision, achieving majority approval in referendum would be difficult. This is because various opinion polls suggest that public opinion remains opposed to Constitutional revision.

At the economic front, many unfulfilled tasks by Abe have to be brought to their logical conclusion. His economic revitalization strategy through Abenomics has achieved limited success. Fruits of economic revitalization are still to reach local economies and it has been pointed out that disparities between urban and rural areas are widening. Abe has to tackle this task on a priority basis. He has adopted a plan to tackle growing fiscal deficit by increasing consumption tax from five to ten per cent in two stages. While in the first stage consumption tax has been increased from five to eight per cent, the second phase differed amid the fear that 10 per cent consumption tax may lead to contraction of economy as people will cut down expenditure. Abe plans to implement the second stage by 2019 but his administration would have to prepare plans to tackle the challenges of possible after-effects. Tackling the issue of an ageing society, coupled with depopulation would be another challenge before Abe. He has to then resolve the issue of 'equal pay for equal work' and provide affordable education to students, issues that he raised with great enthusiasm recently.

At the domestic front his administration has other tasks to handle as well. Most important among them is the imperial succession and overseeing the preparations related to Tokyo Olympic in 2020.

At the foreign policy front, many challenges and tasks are on Abe's platter. In the past he had made promises to resolve the issue of abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea but no progress has been made and the abductees' families pin lots of hope on Abe. After Inter-Korea and US-North Korea talks, a talk between Japan and North Korea is also being planned. The territorial dispute with Russia and normalizing relations with China, which has deteriorated after the nationalization of Senkaku

Islands are other issues with which the Abe administration is grappling with. Abe has been successful in convincing Chinese government to hold a summit level talk and a meeting on 25 October, 2018 is scheduled in Beijing between Abe and Xi. It is yet to be seen whether bilateral relations with China gets back on track. The US-Japan trade issue has also surfaced and Abe has promised to look into the concerns raised by Trump administration during his recent meeting with President Trump. That would require lots of time and energy. Also, he has to tackle the impact of ongoing US-China trade war on its economy and industry based in China.

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Since Abe has only three years' time with him and lots of unfinished agenda on the table, he should take up less contentious and doable issues on his agenda. Taking up divisive and contentious agenda such as Constitutional revision will derail the process of economic revitalization and other pressing issues facing Japan. ■

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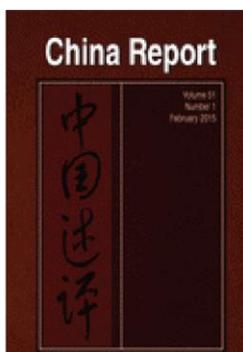


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