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## Japan's 2021 General Election and the Second Kishida Cabinet: Why did Japan choose the LDP again?

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### 1. Analyzing the 2021 General Election: Re-confirming the LDP's insurmountable electoral position

On November 10, the second Cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was inaugurated. Following the launch of his first cabinet upon becoming prime minister on October 4, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was widely tipped to lose a large number of parliamentary seats at the 49th general election on October 31. The election was seen as Kishida's first major challenge given the LDP's lackluster pandemic response and the damage to its standing after almost a decade in power. However, the LDP won a stable victory despite the odds and was able to maintain its unrivalled position in Japanese politics. Based on its recent electoral victory, if the Kishida Cabinet also prevails in its second challenge of next summer's House of Councilors election then it will be poised to enjoy a long period in office. What explains the LDP's continued electoral success and unrivalled position in Japanese politics despite the damage and fatigue from its long hold on power?

The first reason is 'relative support' for the LDP. Despite growing public disapproval with the LDP's long period in office, voters still see it as preferable to the unviable alternative that is the opposition party. According to an Asahi Shimbun poll conducted between November 6 and 7 right after the general election, 47% of respondents thought that the LDP's comfortable majority was a good thing, compared to 34% who did not. As for why, 65% of respondents answered that "there is no hope for the opposition parties" whereas only 19% had a "high evaluation for the LDP and Komeito coalition." This suggests that rather than unconditional or enthusiastic support for the LDP, support is half-hearted and driven in relation to the opposition parties.

The second is the failure of the 'weak' opposition parties' strategy of fielding unified candidates. It is not a wrong strategy for the opposition parties to have a unified strategy to prevent the splitting of votes and prevent defection in a single-member electorate system which is favorable to the majority party. Nevertheless, the opposition parties failed to garner voter interest or support for their approach. In particular, an alliance with the Communist Party, which differed in position on basic national policy,

did not gain understanding and agreement from voters with little political preference. For example, the Communist Party insists on the unconstitutionality of the Self-Defense Force and the abolition of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which are radically different from other political parties.

The third reason is low voter turnout and the diversification of LDP supporters. The turnout for the general election was 55.93%, up 2.25% from the 2017 general election, but it was the third lowest post-war figure after 52.66% in 2014 and 53.68% in 2017. Low turnout in Japan tends to be favorable to the LDP, which has a strong capacity for campaign organizing and a large number of active lawmakers, which was no different in this election. In addition, it is also worth noting that the LDP's approval rating among the younger generation is increasing. Traditionally, the support base of the LDP has been in farming and fishing villages, the construction industry, and among the elderly. But in recent years, the support of the younger generation as well as in the cities has tended to stand out. In other words, it means that the supporters of the LDP are gradually expanding. In addition, the rise in approval ratings after the inauguration of Kishida's new cabinet stems for a range of other factors. These include its coalition with Komeito (公明党) which has a stable support base centered on the Soka Gakkai (創価学会), the single-member electorate system favorable to the majority LDP, and the various supporters based on a wide spectrum of the LDP.

Meanwhile, the next challenge facing the Kishida Cabinet is the House of Councilors election in the summer of 2022. Therefore, the Cabinet is expected to accelerate the promotion of policies and achievements that people can feel in real life, including COVID-19 measures and economic recovery. Even though Prime Minister Kishida's low approval rating still remains a factor of concern, the "situation that is neither strongly positive nor strongly negative" for Kishida rather increases the possibility of maintaining the status quo. Therefore, although public support for the Kishida Cabinet does not rise, there is a high possibility that a stable regime will continue based on a stable approval rating for the LDP. Moreover, after the Upper House election in the summer of 2022, there are no state elections for the next three years unless there are unexpected variables. This means that even with a flat approval rating, the cabinet will continue and the possibility of long-term power will increase.

## **2. The Second Kishida Cabinet's diplomatic and security policies and Korea-Japan relations**

At the general election, LDP Secretary General Akira Amari resigned after losing his electoral district and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi was appointed as the new secretary general and Yoshimasa Hayashi was appointed as the new Foreign Minister. Among the 20 ministers in the First Kishida Cabinet launched in October, only the diplomatic and security portfolios were not replaced due to continuity, but the election result led to a change. However, the change in the diplomatic line does not mean a change in diplomatic policy.

The Kishida Cabinet, like the Abe and Suga Cabinets before it, also emphasizes the promotion of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" to protect universal values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and rule of law, and strengthening solidarity with partner countries such as Australia, India, ASEAN, Europe, and Taiwan. Also, its approach toward North Korea is the same as the Abe and Suga Cabinets. Kishida also emphasizes his willingness to hold a North Korea-Japan summit without any conditions, secure the immediate return of all kidnapping victims, and seek the complete abandonment of North Korea's nuclear and missile through cooperation with the international community.

However, it is noteworthy that Kishida mentioned strengthening economic security and defense capabilities, constitutional amendment, and welcoming Taiwan's application for CPTPP membership. Also, he stated, "We say what needs to be said and demand responsible action," referring to human rights issues facing the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Hong Kong. This elevated the degree of balancing against China while maintaining the existing Abe and Suga cabinet's diplomatic policy. This is more evident in the area of strengthening economic security to protect against theft of Japan's technology, acquiring 'enemy base attack' capabilities, doubling defense spending, and revising the constitution.

Meanwhile, the appointment of Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, who has a high understanding of Korea and values relations with Korea, can serve as a positive factor in Korea-Japan relations. Since Hayashi also emphasizes state-to-state trust and promises as well as the former Japanese government's existing position, it is difficult to expect that the replacement of foreign ministers will soon lead to changes in Korea-Japan relations. Moreover, it is significantly unlikely that the Kishida Cabinet will change its position on historical issues supported by the Japanese people, considering the upcoming House of Councilors election.

Nevertheless, the reason why we might expect a change of diplomatic line as an opportunity to improve bilateral relations between Korea and Japan is that we can lay the groundwork for resolving the current estranged bilateral relationship and expect differences in approaches to improve relations. It is necessary to make good use of the possibility that such changes will serve as an opportunity to transform the current Korea-Japan relationship.

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