

Japan's election

Shinzo Abe's sumo-sized win

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A FORMER prime minister, who resigned in 2007 after a shambolic first year in office, and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which two years later was hounded out of the governing role that it had taken as its birthright, are both headed for a remarkable return to power. In the hours after midnight it became clear that an LDP-led coalition was going to secure a two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament. Shinzo Abe will be back at the head of government.

In a crushing defeat for the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), NHK, the national broadcaster, reported results showing the LDP had easily secured a majority in the lower-house election, a position it had held for more than half a century until 2009. With its coalition partner, New Komeito, it will control a two-thirds super-majority in the 480-seat house. This will give it the ability to override the upper house, in which the DPJ remains the largest party. Sunday night results showed that the LDP had won at least 293 seats, and New Komeito at least 30 seats.

An NHK exit poll said the DPJ was expected to win no more than 77 seats, which would represent a collapse in support, compared with the 308-seat landslide it won in 2009. Its leader, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, announced that he would step down as head of the party as a result of the defeat.

The first post-midnight count showed that the DPJ, with at least 53 seats, was only doing marginally better than a newly formed party, the conservative Japan

Restoration Party (JRP) founded by Osaka's mayor, Toru Hashimoto. It had won at least 50 seats, NHK said. That makes it the biggest of the so-called "third-pole" parties that have arisen to challenge the two main parties in this election. But it will not be as powerful a force as some had expected when Mr Hashimoto launched it this year.

The victory for Mr Abe's coalition represents yet another hard-to-fathom swing in Japan's weathervane-like politics. Three years ago many heralded what looked like the end of an era when the LDP, which had held power almost constantly from 1955-2009, suffered a huge loss that left it with just 113 seats.

Its fall from grace had started in 2006 when it picked the conservative Mr Abe as prime minister. He spent a disastrous year in office, first winning over and then alienating prickly neighbours China and South Korea, and turning off voters with his obsessive patriotism at home and hawkishness abroad. When he left office in 2007, he was hospitalised with a stress-related illness.

To the surprise of even members of his own party, he was brought back from relative obscurity this autumn to head the LDP. Analysts say the resurrection of his party's electoral fortunes can hardly be credited to him: it stems more from a backlash against the DPJ, which has shown itself to be weak and divided in office, running through three prime ministers, numerous defections and repeated reversals of its promises and policies.

In fact the LDP appears to have changed little during its time in opposition. Under Mr Abe, it may be even more dependent on its old guard than it was in 2009. But voters were so disenchanted with the DPJ, they held their noses and voted for the LDP anyway.

Mr Abe appeals to the party's most conservative wing, who value his assertive stance towards China over a cluster of disputed islets called the Senkaku islands in Japan and the Diaoyu in China. He has spoken of reviving the massive public-works projects which were a hallmark of the old LDP. But in his first comments after his victory, Mr Abe said his priority would be beating deflation, and he also vowed to continue with a plan to raise the consumption tax. Stockmarkets have responded well to his promise to put pressure on the Bank of Japan to do more to end deflation, perhaps by setting a fixed inflation target.

One of the LDP's campaign goals is to revise parts of the country's war-renouncing constitution, which could enrage China and South Korea who still (as part of their own nationalism narratives) consider Japan an aggressor as a result of its wartime past. However, until upper-house elections in July, some analysts expect Mr Abe to tread gently and keep international provocations to a minimum—in the hope that voters will give the LDP a majority there, too. If it does plan to revise the constitution, said some LDP officials speaking shortly after the vote, the party may reach out to the JRP, which shares a similar goal and is led by Shintaro Ishihara, ex-governor of Tokyo and an arch-hawk and China-baiter.

As for Mr Noda, the outgoing prime minister, his party must be ruing his unexpected decision in mid-November to dissolve parliament. When he did so, Mr Noda had hoped the DPJ, if it didn't win the lower-house election, would remain a credible force in the upper house and might be in position to benefit from another voter swing next summer. To judge by today's projected results however, Mr Abe will have to perform remarkably badly indeed for that to happen.

