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Japan Holds Extraordinary Parliamentary Elections

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As expected, the extraordinary elections to the Lower House of Parliament, held in Japan on October 22, culminated in the victory of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

As of October 23, of the total number of 465 parliamentary seats, the fate of two still remained unclear. Nevertheless, this is no longer relevant to the main outcome of the election, which is to keep the LDP together with its “junior partner” Komeito Party of the qualified majority in the lower house of the Japanese Parliament.

In turn, relying on the numerical figures for the distribution of seats in the new parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (initiator of the extraordinary elections) now has reason to speak of the strong confidence that the Japanese people have expressed, both personally to him and to the foreign and domestic policy course pursued by his government.

One important consequence of the main outcome of the elections is the sharp decline in the significance of both the various kinds of scandals that have multiplied around the Cabinet of Ministers headed by Mr. Abe and the related attacks of the opposition.

During a press conference on the immediate plans, which was held the day after the elections, Mr. Abe made it clear that he did not intend to “take the time” of the current extraordinary session of the parliament to examine the substance of the accusations leveled by the opposition, but that, instead, the matter would be deferred to the next regular session, which will begin early in next January. And within three month, he is not going to “spend too much time” bickering with opposition parliamentarians.

With some important caveats, the Prime Minister is receiving carte blanche for the implementation of certain long-established measures in the spheres of economy, security and constitutional changes. However, judging by the mentioned post-election speech that he made, Mr. Abe does not intend to bypass the procedure of discussing these constitutional changes with the opposition. This is despite the existence of the necessary majority in the parliament.

The scale of success of the Prime Minister and the LDP he led surpassed the most optimistic predictions made by experts on the eve of the elections. This success is particularly significant in the context of the participation in the elections of persons who had just turned 18 years old, who were admitted into the electoral ballot for the first time. The current premier is particularly popular among young people.

However, some experts agree that the victory of the LDP is significantly associated with the peculiarities of the current electoral system, and generally casts doubt on the interpretation of the results of the past elections as an expression by the population of their unconditional support of the ruling coalition.

As for the defeat of the opposition, it was due to the state of complete chaos in which the latter turned out to be on the eve of the elections.

The particularly optimistic Party of Hope, formed one month prior to the election by Governor of Tokyo Yuriko Koike, received only 50 seats and ranked third among the parliamentary parties. In hindsight, it could be argued that this should have been expected, bearing in mind the program-ideological “secondary nature” of the Party of Hope with respect to the LDP. For example, Yuriko Koike attempted to hurl the term “jurisprudence” into the space of the memorable political memes. This meme, however, directly refers to the original “abconomics,” whose very appearance in 2013 (after the return of the LDP to power in late 2012) was nothing more than a journalistic synthesis of the new economic course proclaimed by Mr. Abe.

Against her personally and the party she led was also the refusal of Yuriko Koike to leave the post of Governor of Tokyo to fully concentrate on politics. On the eve of the election, she left (citing some dignified occasion) for Paris. Judging by the results of the elections, the voter negatively assessed her “foresight.”

Yuriko Koike, the “star” that sharply rose last year (in the local parliamentary and Governor of Tokyo elections), has just a year later stopped the process of further ascent. This is evidenced by her “disappointment” with the performance of her own party in the national elections.

Even less optimistic is the future fate of the other hopeful politician, Seiji Maehara. Rising up at a very young age at the origins of the formation of the main opposition Democratic Party, on September 1, he became its leader, having thus received a unique opportunity for self-realization at the highest level of the political field of the country. However, as early as the end of September, apparently, under the influence (still existing at that time) of the “Yuriko Koike phenomenon,” he invited the members of the DP to join the Party of Hope in the forthcoming elections. However, Mrs. Koike, located on the political grid of Japan perhaps even more right-wing than Mr. Abe, suited only the right wing of the Democratic Party.

As a result, the main opposition party was split, and it was unlikely that the recent leader would be able to get out of this wreckage. However, such a bad situation may well turn out to be a phoenix bird. This is a question of the center-left fragment of the former DP, which, being designated by the Constitutional Democratic Party, won the second place with 55 seats in the elections.

This was another significant outcome of the last elections. The centre of attraction of the opposition camp will now be the CDP, and its leader, 53-year-old Yukio Edano (who held several ministerial posts in the central government in 2010-2012), will become the new “rising star” – one that may remain on the Japanese political sky much longer than the other “star,” Yuriko Koike. Everything will be determined by the prospects of the “right wind,” which is still dominant in Japanese foreign policy. Its strength and duration are significantly (and today, perhaps simply decisively) dependent on the state of the Japanese-Chinese relations. If the relationship between the two leading Asian powers is improved, the “star” Yukio Edano will inevitably continue rising.

Finally, it should be noted that the strengthening of the domestic positions of the current Prime Minister has taken place during a period of the preparation for several important foreign policy events. The most important of these include the visit of the United States President, Donald Trump, to Tokyo scheduled for November 5, and the subsequent participation of Mr. Abe in a series of ASEAN-based forums. The main political themes of the forthcoming American-Japanese talks and the work of the ASEAN forums will include the problems on the Korean Peninsula and in the South China Sea, as well as relations with China.

On the whole, the assessment by Japanese experts of the current prime minister as the country’s most successful politician of recent decades should be acknowledged as sound.

This is confirmed by the complete success of the next samurai attack undertaken by Mr. Abe on the field of the domestic political struggle. The attack was carried out under the conditions of very high uncertainties and risks that accompanied the decision-making process of the extraordinary parliamentary elections.