

8 July 2024

Tokyo elections deliver a warning to LDP – and CDP – leaders

Key takeaways

- Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko won a third term comfortably on Sunday, 7 July but a surprise second-place finisher points to growing public dissatisfaction with the politics as usual.
- Both the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) will have to adapt to this mood as they prepare for leadership elections in September.

Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko comfortably won a third term as the prefecture's chief executive on Sunday, 7 July, little surprise after polls showed that she enjoyed a lead over opposition lawmaker Renhō for the bulk of the campaign. Although the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), along with its coalition partner Kōmeitō, backed the incumbent governor, the Tokyo elections – which included by-elections for nine metropolitan assembly seats – were full of ominous portents for the ruling coalition, suggesting that voters could have an appetite for change that could result in surprising results in a national election. In the immediate term, Sunday's results will give a boost to politicians in the LDP calling not just for a leadership change, but for more fundamental reforms of the ruling party.

Despite the attention paid to the clash between Koike and Renhō, two of Japan's most prominent female politicians, the most significant result on Sunday was not Koike's victory but rather the second-place finish of Ishimaru Shinji. The forty-one-year-old Ishimaru was until recently the mayor of Akitakata, a town of only 26,000 people in Hiroshima prefecture (who had previously worked for MUFG as a foreign exchange analyst). He recently stepped down as mayor and decided to run in the crowded Tokyo

gubernatorial race to raise awareness of Japan's demographic crisis. Without any support from established parties, he used social media to spread videos of his stump speeches and received more than 1.5 million votes, 24.3% of the total. Exit polls suggest that Ishimaru performed particularly well among "floating" unaffiliated voters – nearly 50% of the electorate – and among the young but also received votes from the supporters of parties across the political spectrum.

Whether Ishimaru becomes a major political player in his own right remains to be seen – he has hinted at a run in Hiroshima's first district, currently represented by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, in the next general election – but the willingness of so many Tokyoites to vote for a largely unknown political outsider hints at an anti-incumbent undercurrent just below the surface of Japanese politics. Even if this mood is limited to voters in Tokyo and other metropolises, it could still have a significant impact in a general election. Tokyo, for example, has gained five seats in redistricting and will elect representatives from thirty constituencies and another nineteen representatives via proportional representation in the next general election, more than ten percent of the House of Representatives.

The LDP felt this backlash in Sunday's metropolitan assembly by-elections. The LDP fielded candidates in eight of the nine races; its representatives had previously held five of the nine seats that had been vacated. The party had hoped to win four and sent senior party leaders to campaign on behalf of its candidates. But only two of the LDP's eight candidates won, losing to candidates from the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and Koike's local Tokyoites First Party (TFP), as well as various independents. In the city of Hachioji, base of former Abe faction boss Hagiuda Kōichi, the LDP's candidate lost by nearly twenty percentage points. The party's poor performance Sunday will ensure that Kishida continues to face pressure to take responsibility for the LDP's declining popularity and clear the way for an open leadership election in September.

But the LDP is not the only party that should be concerned by the results of Tokyo's elections. Although Renhō ran as an independent and held the CDP at arm's length during the campaign, her third-place finish is a warning sign that the party cannot assume that voters disaffected with the ruling coalition will necessarily vote for the CDP instead. Renhō's disappointing gubernatorial campaign highlights two problems the CDP must overcome ahead of the next general election. First, Renhō opted for close cooperation with the Japanese Communist Party, and, as a result, led the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), a centrist opposition party, and the Tokyo chapter of the organized labor confederation Rengo to support Koike instead of Renhō. Second, Renhō first became prominent during the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) time in government, when she led hearings on administrative waste, and her campaign turned to Edano Yukio and Noda Yoshihiko, both veterans of the DPJ governments. It is possible that memories of DPJ governments remain a liability for the CDP. Exit polls show that Ishimaru surged past Renhō among independent voters, the voters the CDP

will need to attract to make inroads against the ruling coalition. In short, the CDP, like the LDP, could be vulnerable to disruption by political outsiders using social media to appeal to young and independent voters frustrated with the status quo. As the CDP prepares for its own leadership election – CDP leader Izumi Kenta's term also ends in September – party members will be considering the lessons of the Tokyo elections for their own strategy for the next general election.

Ultimately Sunday's elections are a sign that the Japanese political system is still in the early stages of what could be a more turbulent era. Voters are increasingly prepared to support disruptive change. Established parties will have to adapt to this mood or suffer at the polls, perhaps at the hands of a new third party (or parties) that may emerge in response to this opportunity.

Copyright © 2024 Japan Foresight LLC, All rights reserved.

This communication was produced by Japan Foresight LLC. The information it contains is intended as general background research and is not intended to constitute advice on any specific commercial investment or trade matter, legal matter, or other issue. You should not rely upon it for such purposes. The views expressed here represent opinions as of this date and are subject to change without notice. The information has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, but no guarantees can be given as to its accuracy, completeness, or reliability. This communication is provided for your sole use. You may not reproduce, circulate, store, or transmit this communication or any information in it, in any form or by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the prior written consent of Japan Foresight LLC. This material is protected by copyrighted law. By accessing this material, you agree to indemnify and hold harmless Japan Foresight LLC, its officers, employees, agents, and affiliates from any claims, liabilities, damages, losses, or expenses (including legal fees) arising out of or in connection with your use or reliance on the information provided herein. To the extent permitted by law, Japan Foresight LLC disclaims all liability for any direct, indirect, incidental, special, consequential, or punitive damages arising out of or in connection with the use or inability to use this material, even if advised of the possibility of such damages.

Japan Foresight LLC will make PDF versions of its research available at the Japan Foresight LLC archive.