

COMMENT

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Poll decision may be self-fulfilling

Japanese PM previously said Year of the Rooster has often marked 'major political turning points'



Cai Hong

During a New Year news conference in Ise, a city in central Japan's Mie prefecture, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he was not thinking of dissolving the House of Representatives for an election. He referred to this year being a Year of the Rooster in the Chinese zodiac, and said that such years "have frequently served as major political turning points". Indeed, the political ups and downs in several rooster years, such as 1957, 1969, 1993 and 2005, have been significant for Japan.

Nobusuke Kishi, Abe's grandfather, became Japan's prime minister and spoke to the US House and Senate in separate gatherings in 1957. A co-signer of the declaration of war against the United States in 1941, Kishi was nonetheless leader of the United States' most important Pacific ally in the early years of the Cold War.

In 1969, Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato dissolved the House of Representatives, or the lower house, after clinching a deal on the

return of Okinawa from the United States, which had occupied the island following Japan's surrender in 1945.

Abe himself was first elected to the lower house of Japan's parliament in 1993. In that year, the center-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which Abe belongs to, lost an election for the first time after World War II.

And Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called a snap election in 2005, asking for a mandate for his blueprint on postal privatization. His LDP won a sweeping victory. But his annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 Japanese Class-A war criminals are enshrined, destroyed much of Japan's standing with its neighbors. His resignation in 2006 was followed by years of a revolving-door premiership in Japan.

Abe has not been true to his word on New Year's Day: He dissolved the lower house on Sept 28, which will make this Year of the Rooster another turning point for Japan.

Following Abe's announcement, the previous largest opposition party, the Democratic Party, disbanded. Some of its conservative members have joined the new, conservative Party of Hope, led by Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, while its left-leaning members

have established a new party, the Constitutional Democratic Party; others are running in the election as independents. The rest of Japan's opposition camp is too weak and fragmented to make waves, giving the LDP an advantage.

Abe looks likely to survive his gamble on a snap election as media polls show the LDP-Komeito coalition heading for a big win on Oct 22.

In an interview with the *Yomiuri Shimbun* published on May 3 — the country's Constitution Memorial Day, which marks the promulgation of the pacifist document that has shaped Japan's domestic and international politics since 1947 — Abe described the 70th anniversary of Japan's constitution this year as a "ripe opportunity" to revise it. He wants a new constitution to come into effect in 2020.

Japan started to build up its military capacities in 1954, calling the new branch the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to avoid constitutional problems. Today, Japan has the world's eighth-largest defense budget and the SDF has more active-duty troops, at 227,000, than the French military's 203,000.

As Japan claims it faces continuing security threats from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Abe has said there should be no room for arguing that the

military "may be unconstitutional".

He has proposed adding a new clause that legitimizes the SDF while keeping intact its original text that renounces the threat or use of force in settling international disputes and vows that land, sea and air forces "will never be maintained".

A survey conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun*, from Sept 23 to Oct 13, showed that 63 percent of the candidates running in this general election favored constitutional revision — 97 percent in the LDP, 98 percent in the Japan Innovation Party, 85 percent in the Party of Hope and 64 percent in the LDP's junior coalition partner, Komeito.

Going into this election, Abe looks soon to have a lot more like-minded comrades sitting in the lower house.

The Party of Hope's campaign platform showed its enthusiasm for discussing how the constitution should "fit the times", including recognizing the existence of the SDF. The party has been criticized by the leftist Japan Communist Party as "nothing more than an appendage to LDP power" for its support for the security-related laws and constitutional revision.

The ruling coalition has a two-thirds majority in the upper house. And Japanese media were predicting that the pro-revision parties

were on track to win more than two-thirds of the seats in the lower house. Amending the constitution requires a two-thirds majority in both chambers of Japan's parliament and a majority of public support in a national referendum.

For Abe, as the *Nikkei Asian Review* put it, the issue is not the two-thirds majority in parliament but the referendum. "If the referendum to amend the constitution is rejected, he would go down in history not as a conservative hero, but as the man who lost the opportunity — maybe forever," the magazine said.

Opinion polls are revealing a growing number of people in Japan stand behind constitutional revision. An NHK survey on Oct 13-16 found that 49 percent of respondents support including the SDF in the constitution, with 43 percent opposed.

And the DPRK's provocations will push more people in Japan to Abe's side for writing a new constitution in the name of the country's security.

The election result in this Year of the Rooster could herald the beginning of a fundamental change in Japan that will worry many people in and outside the country.

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Defining priorities for the last mile

As supply-side structural reform deepens, finishing well demands that work is focused on ensuring the real economy prospers

By LIU YUANCHUN

In order to adapt to the economic new normal, deepening supply-side structural reform was an almost inevitable choice.

Now, further exploration of this new strategic task — its mode and means of implementation — is needed to achieve progress.

The Decision of the Communist Party of China Central Committee on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms in 2013 offers some guidelines for this undertaking, while the generally stable, positive and progressive trend of the Chinese economy provides both the foun-

datation and space for deepening supply-side reform.

Although the progress and experiences gained since the end of 2015 offer practical lessons for the implementation of Chinese structural reform, there are new challenges that need to be overcome.

On the one hand, a theoretical framework for supply-side reform has been established, which determines how it fits into the theory of a socialist market economy, but how to popularize its methodology and basic concepts is a problem that needs to be solved.

On the other hand, some new dilemmas and conflicts have emerged when carrying forward structural reforms — for instance,

insufficient innovation at local levels and the over reliance on administrative measures in some sectors. The market has to play a bigger role to make the supply-side reforms sustainable in the long run.

Since November 2015, President Xi Jinping has made a number of speeches that have enriched the theoretical connotations of supply-side reforms and set out practical guidelines.

First, we need to locate the key tasks of supply-side reform based on the principal contradictions in different stages. As the "steady growth" target has achieved substantial progress and the "L-shaped" growth trend of the economy has adjusted into the bot-

tom part of operation, "risk control" should be the next focus of reform and short-term macro regulation.

This requires the government to put emphasis on problems that might trigger systemic financial risks, such as the high levels of debt and too little capital flowing into the real economy.

Second, we need to ensure supply-side reform is problem-oriented, so it can gradually solve the underlying structural and institutional problems, then further expand the depth and extent of supply-side reform.

Third, we need to sort out the core perspectives and main direction of the reform. The focus of future work should be ensuring the real economy prospers.

Therefore, priority should be given to eliminating zombie companies and reducing the leverage ratio of enterprises, offering support to companies by cutting taxes and fees. The government should also respond to people's urgent needs and tackle problems that seriously restrain socioeconomic development.

Fourth, we have to motivate local authorities to come up with more innovative approaches to implement reforms and inspire them to have more enthusiasm when tackling any problems that emerge in the process, so as to smoothly finish "the last mile of reform".

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