



Consolidation of power in Japan: The LDP and Shinzo Abe

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Introduction

At the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics, dressed in the iconic outfit of Nintendo's fictional plumber, Mario, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo emerged from a green pipe to a standing ovation from the crowd and to millions watching at home. This moment reinforced Abe's significance as a political figure in the eyes of the international community. The comment of his colleague, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, to convince him to participate in the spectacle could not have been more convincing: "You are the only one who can do this, since you have been serving as Prime Minister for so long and are recognized internationally".¹ Following Abe's shocking assassination on 9 July 2022, leaders and people all around the world paid tribute to him.

In recent memory, there have been few Japanese political figures with Abe's level of recognition and influence. At the same time, few Japanese politicians have been as successful or as divisive as Abe. This brief assesses the post-war domestic political climate in Japan under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to understand how the party claimed such a firm grip on power and created a system that set the stage for Abe's political career and rise to worldwide recognition.

The Liberal Democratic Party and the post-war system

The LDP has been the dominant political party in Japanese politics for the past seven decades, losing power only twice since its incorporation in 1955. Indeed, the "1955 system" refers to the circumstances that have effectively enabled governance under one-party rule.² The post-war period in Japanese politics was unstable and mired in internal conflict but when the major socialist parties decided to join forces, the Liberal Party and the Japan Democratic Party were pressured to merge as well in order to counter them. Financial incentives from the Japanese business community also encouraged the merger. Many corporations were concerned about the growing labour movement and that the socialists' labour-friendly position would increase costs and reduce the competitiveness of Japanese businesses abroad.³ The result was the LDP.

Maintaining the 1955 system

Many factors help to explain the consolidation of power under the LDP, and some of these are key to understanding the political status quo that eventually enabled Abe's rise to power. The LDP was formed at a time when electoral conditions were optimal for it to take power and retain it. There were various ways in which the LDP benefited and managed to maintain this advantage.

¹ Hirayama, Ren. Misu, Kazuki. Kondo, Yumiko, "安倍前首相に独占インタビュー マリオ振り返る／中". *Nikkan Sports*, 2020.

² Kabashima, Ikuo. Steel, Gill. *Changing Politics in Japan*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010, 40.

³ Lee, Yong Wook, "The Origin of One Party Domination: America's Reverse Course and the Emergence of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 18(2): 2004, 372-374.



Electoral system

Before 1994, Japan used the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system. This meant that multiple seats in each constituency were occupied by the individual candidates who garnered the most votes. Votes were not necessarily cast for political parties, but for individual candidates. This constellation worked incredibly well for the LDP, which had become the largest party after the merger, and one with both an unmatched voter base and access to funding from corporate interests. Since SNTV does not allocate seats proportionally, the LDP often won multiple seats in many constituencies.⁴

Moreover, during LDP rule, particular election laws put the opposition at a disadvantage. This was yet another way to help the LDP to stay in power long term. For instance, Japanese campaigning laws are strict and problematic for political newcomers and opposition parties that do not have the same recognition as the LDP. Media advertisements are forbidden apart from just a few public service announcements, door-to-door campaigning is illegal, and the official campaign period

lasts for just 12 days. Any prior election activity by candidates is prohibited. Kōenkai are a key loophole in early campaigning, which the LDP uses efficiently.⁵ Political education has also been discouraged by the LDP under the guise of protecting neutrality. As a result, a large proportion of new voters lack any civic education.⁶ These are just a handful of examples of the restrictions examined by scholars that are believed to benefit the LDP in elections.⁷

Kōenkai

Kōenkai are local support groups that most political figures use to garner votes and support in elections. The LDP is able to funnel its unrivalled level of political donations to candidates' kōenkai, which are a crucial way to establish personal relationships with voters. The relationship between voter and legislator is maintained by providing services and activities to the members of the kōenkai. For instance, a kōenkai arranges social events such as outings or resort vacations to develop these relationships. Meanwhile, in the National Diet,⁸ the legislator provides for kōenkai members and political donors by representing their interests and drawing investment from the government. In other

⁴ Smith, Daniel M, *Dynasties and Democracy: The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018; Cox, Gary W. Rosenbluth, Frances McCall. Thies, Michael F, "Electoral Reform and the Fate of Factions: The Case of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party", *British Journal of Political Science* 29(1): 1999, 34-35.

⁵ Christensen, Ray, "The rules of the election game in Japan". In *Party Politics in Japan: Political Chaos and Stalemate in the 21st Century*, edited by Hrebenar, Ronald and Nakamura, Akira, London: Routledge, 2014, 38; Jain, "Electoral Reform in Japan: Its Process and

Implications For Party Politics", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 9(2): 1995, 404-411.

⁶ Arai, Yusuke, "Modern Democratic Theories and Political Education in Japan", *Educational Studies in Japan* 13: 2019, 69-70.

⁷ Various studies have shown that the lack of political education, political mistrust and strict campaigning laws negatively influence voter turnout and civic knowledge, particularly among youth in Japan. Low voter turnout has primarily benefited the LDP, as its core supporters often turn out in larger numbers. See (Watanabe 2020; Tsukada 2015; Yoshida 2016; Matsumoto 2020; Bergman Engman 2022).

⁸ The National Diet is the Japanese Parliament.



words, this is a form of clientelism to secure votes.⁹ Costly pork-barrel infrastructure projects in the form of highways, high-speed rail or public buildings can be found in many rural areas of Japan, primarily due to the LDP's efforts to secure valuable rural votes.

Strong *kōenkai* also foster incumbency advantage whereby established politicians face no serious competition. It is common for retiring politicians to pass on political positions within the family with their *kōenkai*, institutionalizing system of political dynasties.¹⁰ In Japan, familiar politicians are considered more trustworthy and therefore preferred over inexperienced newcomers. Approximately 40% of the LDP's Diet lawmakers are second-generation family members who have inherited their seat or pursued the career of their family member.¹¹ In the past year, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has appointed his son as his secretary, possibly to prepare him for the day when he will inherit his father's Diet seat.¹²

The effects of urbanization

The movement of people from rural constituencies to urban areas contributed to

maintaining the status quo under the LDP. During Japan's rapid economic expansion in the decades leading up to the 1990s financial bubble, urbanization accelerated as people sought better-paid jobs and opportunities in the cities. To put this in a wider perspective, UN statistics show that between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of people living in Japan's urban areas rose from 63% to 77%.¹³ In the political arena, despite this clear movement from the countryside, attempts by the LDP leadership to account for this in electoral terms were almost entirely absent. There was only minimal redistricting, or reallocation of seats in constituencies based on new census data, leading to issues of gerrymandering. People living in rural parts of Japan, often conservative and the largest benefactors of *kōenkai*, saw the value of their votes increase while the urban vote weakened. Thus, people in the countryside played a crucial role in maintaining LDP rule for decades.¹⁴ From the LDP's point of view, they had a lot to lose politically by addressing regional voter disparities.¹⁵

⁹ Krauss & Pekkanen, "The Rise and Fall of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69(1): 2010, 7-9; Smith, *Dynasties and Democracy: The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan*.

¹⁰ Fukui, Haruhiro. Fukai, Shigeko N, "Pork Barrel Politics, Networks, and Local Economic Development in Contemporary Japan". *Asian Survey* 36(3): 1996.

¹¹ Scartozzi, Cesare M, "Hereditary Politics in Japan: A Family Business", *The Diplomat*, 2017.

¹² Takahashi, Anri, "身内登用の批判はあるけれど 秘書官になった首相の息子はどんな人?", *Asahi Shimbun*, 2022.

¹³ United Nations, "World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision", 2019.

¹⁴ Crespo, "The Liberal Democratic Party in Japan: Conservative Domination", *International Political Science Review* 16(2): 1995, 200-201; Horiuchi, Yusaku. Saito, Jun, "Reapportionment and Redistribution: Consequences of Electoral Reform in Japan", *American Journal of Political Science* 47(4): 2003, 671-672.

¹⁵ Voter disparity is still a major problem. Waves of lawsuits claiming violation of the constitution are filed practically after every election, usually with little success. See

<https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/vote-value-disparity-japans-upper-house-triggers-debate-pits>.



Electoral reform

The political arena changed in 1993 when the LDP was ousted from power for the first time. The financial bubble had devastated the economy and consequently eroded faith in the party. Furthermore, people were weary of the scandals that kept being revealed, which had become a distinct characteristic of many LDP politicians. Meanwhile, mass defections of lawmakers weakened the party substantially.¹⁶ The handover of power did not last long, however, because the new fragile multi-party coalition under Hosokawa Morihiro's Japan New Party (JNP) quickly crumbled following a bribery scandal. The successor Japan Renewal Party (JRP) led by Hata Tsutomu then failed to keep the coalition together when the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) left to form an unprecedented coalition with its rival, the LDP – this time under the leadership of the JSP.¹⁷

It did not take long for this government to fall apart too. The JSP, which had been the main opposition party for decades, imploded and voters felt betrayed by the unholy alliance between them and the LDP.¹⁸ However, the short period of opposition rule was fruitful in that it meant that Japan would get its first major electoral reform.

The 1994 electoral reform implemented a mixed electoral system. Districts would now elect just one candidate and a party list system was adopted to elect a proportion of the seats in the Diet using a system of proportional representation.¹⁹ The Hosokawa government pioneered this reform to achieve a multi-party system that placed emphasis on party politics rather than individual candidates. Critics of the previous system were hopeful that this would help tackle the structural corruption and money politics that plagued the system while also ending one-party rule.²⁰

The electoral reform did make some changes to the political status quo that had defined the country for decades. The LDP was no longer always guaranteed to rule alone and was forced to seek alliances within the Diet.²¹ However, strict election laws, electoral disparities, corruption and clientelism are still rampant in the system. The culture of privileging individual politicians over political parties remains strong and *kōenkai* continues to be a critical pillar in garnering support, especially in rural constituencies. Meanwhile, the old political elite continues to exert considerable influence on the political system.²²

At first, it seemed as if the shift away from one-party rule under the new electoral

¹⁶ Kabashima & Steel, *Changing Politics in Japan*, 2010, 5.

¹⁷ Shinoda, Tomohito, "Japan's Decision Making under the Coalition Governments", *Asian Survey* 38(7): 1996, 704-714.

¹⁸ Shinoda, "Japan's Decision Making under the Coalition Governments", 1996, 716.

¹⁹ The proportional system uses PR blocks that are divided up into regions, with the amount of seats dependent on the population. Lawmakers are then elected based on the regional results.

²⁰ Klein, Axel, "The Puzzle of Ineffective Election Campaigning in Japan", *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12(1): 2011, 57-59.

²¹ While the LDP currently has own-majority, it is in a coalition government with Komeito. The alliance was created because of the increased difficulty of obtaining a majority in the Diet.

²² Mishima, Ko, "The Failure of Japan's Political Reform", *World Policy Journal* 22(4): 2005, 47-50; Smith, *Dynasties and Democracy: The Inherited Incumbency Advantage in Japan*, 2018.



system would work in the favour of the opposition. In the early 2000s, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) became the clear opposition leader. In 2009 it formed a government when further scandals and an inability to reverse the economic slump drastically reduced support for the LDP.²³ However, the new climate established by the DPJ quickly collapsed. Inexperience, flawed policymaking and mishandling of major crises, such as the 2011 triple disaster,²⁴ eroded much of the faith in the DPJ and the political system.²⁵ High voter turnout, which had primarily benefited the DPJ, also drastically fell as a result. In 2012, the LDP once again took power with Abe as its strong man, using the momentum of the weakened DPJ government. Abe presented ambitious plans to tackle the ailing economy, improve social security systems and bring Japan back to the international arena after years of instability and stagnation.²⁶

The opposition never quite recovered from the collapse after the devastating victory by the LDP under Abe. The DPJ dissolved and multiple new opposition parties came and went. Today, the opposition has 103 of the 248 seats in the upper house of the Diet and 170 of the 465 in the lower house, thereby posing no threat to the LDP government.

The LDP and Abe

To understand Abe's success, more context is needed surrounding the LDP as a party, since he is a product of the political elite that established the 1955 system. The LDP is a big tent party consisting of conservative moderates and right-wing nationalists. Its members are therefore less than unified on a variety of issues. The party comprises multiple factions with their own goals and agendas, which challenge each other for the senior positions in government. However, there are a handful of key issues on which the factions strongly agree. From the beginning, export-led growth, an active agricultural policy and close alignment with the US have been shared interests across the factions. Even today, these ideas are very much reflected in the LDP's politics. There is, however, one unaccomplished goal that defined the LDP even before Abe: constitutional revision.²⁷

The discourse surrounding the Japanese constitution is controversial in Japanese politics and was reignited under Abe. The LDP is especially critical of article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which states that Japan renounces war and the use of force to settle disputes by relinquishing armed forces with war potential and maintaining non-

²³ Maeda, Ko, "Factors behind the Historic Defeat of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party in 2009", *Asian Survey* 50(5): 2010, 888-890.

²⁴ The 2011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster.

²⁵ Krauss, Ellis. Nemoto, Kuniaki. Pekkanen, Robert J. Tanaka, Aiji, "Party Politics, Elections and (Mis-)Trust in Japan". *Japan Forum* 29(1): 2007, 20-22.

²⁶ Pekkanen, Robert J. Pekkanen, Saadia M, "Japan in 2014: All about Abe". *Asian Survey* 55(1): 2005, 104-110.

²⁷ Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society*, London: Routledge, 2003, 220; Sasada, Hironori, "The Electoral Origin of Japan's Nationalistic Leadership: Primaries in the LDP Presidential Election and the "Pull Effect", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10(1): 2010, 1-6.



belligerency.²⁸ The implications have played a significant role in politics ever since the constitution was written and adopted under supervision of the US-led occupation of Japan. Article 9 is seen as humiliating by many conservatives, since a military could not be maintained in the normal sense. Thus, revising article 9 has been a crucial LDP goal ever since the party was formed, but this requires a supermajority in both chambers of the Diet as well as a majority in a national referendum. The LDP has been unable to reach this threshold. Attempts have been made, but they have been unsuccessful.²⁹ In the early post-war era, people were overwhelmingly against any notion of constitutional revision. It was simply not a popular issue with the early post-war economy in tatters and following decades of militaristic rule and hard-fought wars. Conflicts in Japan's proximity throughout the post-war era, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War, further fuelled resistance among the public, fearing that Japan could become directly involved in such conflicts by the US if it revised its constitution and rearmed.³⁰ Now, decades later, there is a new environment for discussing constitutional revision, in no small part

thanks to Abe's efforts to reinterpret article 9 and raise various issues of self-defence.³¹

Abe Shinzo

Abe's record-long premiership was significant for various reasons. He became a widely recognized figure internationally and tried to put Japan back in the spotlight by building closer relations with many countries and world leaders. He visited more than 80 countries during his tenure and initiated various initiatives to improve Japan's international involvement and how the nation was viewed abroad.³²

Looking back, he was no stranger to politics. Abe was a part of Japan's political elite with a political lineage that spanned nearly a century. On his paternal side, both his father, Abe Shintaro, and grandfather, Abe Kan, were prominent lawmakers. Abe Shintaro was especially influential and held multiple ministerial posts under various LDP governments. On Abe's maternal side, his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, and his great uncle, Sato Eisaku, were prominent LDP politicians and prime ministers in their lifetimes.³³

²⁸ See

(https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html) for more on the constitution and article 9.

²⁹ There are parties in the Diet that are pro-revision, but differences in motives and political goals have made collaboration on revision difficult. However, most of the opposition parties defend the pacifist stance of article 9, while the LDP is a staunch critic. See

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/08/14/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-constitution-reform-disagreement/>) for more.

³⁰ Creighton, Millie, "Civil Society Volunteers Supporting Japan's Constitution, Article 9 and Associated Peace, Diversity, and Post-3.11

Environmental Issues", *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 26(1): 2015, 124-126; Envall, HDP. "Japan: From Passive Partner to Active Ally". In *Global Allies Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century*, Edited by Michael Wesley, Canberra: ANU Press, 2017, 17-19.

³¹ Togo, Kazuhiko, "Carrying the torch of Abe's legacy", *East Asia Forum*, 2022.

³² Sasaki, Rena, "The Mixed Legacy of Abe Shinzo's 'Panoramic' Foreign Policy", *The Diplomat*, 2022.

³³ Sakurai, Yukio. "Shinzo Abe's Politics in Japan: Characteristics and Implications". *Political Reflection Magazine*. 2022



Abe's first foray into politics began when his father appointed him as his secretary, starting another generation of politicians in the family. However, Abe's debut as a lawmaker would take another decade. When his father died unexpectedly, Abe was the one who inherited his seat.³⁴ From there, Abe's political career accelerated and within a decade he was appointed Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary under former Prime Minister Mori and later Chief Cabinet Secretary under Koizumi. In 2006, he took the reins of the LDP and the country. However, health issues meant that his first time in office lasted just one year.³⁵

Abe's comeback

The 2012 election was a success for Abe who managed to take advantage of the struggles of the DPJ government. Abe's nationalist agenda was popular among many party colleagues, who had given him a second chance at the leadership, and he led the LDP to a comfortable victory. Nonetheless, he was elected not because he was a popular politician, but because he happened to reappear at the best possible moment and had major connections within the party. He also made promises that were more appealing than continuing chaos under the DPJ. Abe pledged to provide strong leadership and promised the people that he would "take back Japan". There are several

ways to look at this statement. First, through the lens of a struggling economy that had been unable to get back on track for almost two decades. This he addressed through his ambitious economic plan under the ingenious slogan of "Abenomics".³⁶ However, the statement can also be viewed through Abe's background in conservative nationalism.

To understand how this ideology came to shape Abe and his politics, we must look at the person said to be the most influential on Abe: his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke. As noted above, Kishi was a high-profile LDP politician and former prime minister. Kishi was also a key figure in developing Japan-colonized Manchuria and served in Prime Minister Tojo's totalitarian militarist regime. His powerful connections in the business world made him a central motor in maintaining the war apparatus during the Pacific War.³⁷

After Japan surrendered to Allied forces in 1945, Kishi like many others in the political elite was imprisoned and awaited trial for war crimes. However, the US leadership saw him as a potential political asset due to his pro-US and anti-communist agenda. This prompted the US to use its influence to free him, and led to his political comeback after

³⁴ Pletcher, Kenneth, "Shinzo Abe", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022.

³⁵ AP News, "A Timeline of the Career of Former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe", 2022; Pekkanen, Robert J. Pekkanen, Saadia M. "Japan in 2015: More about Abe". *Asian Survey* 56(1): 2016, 40-42.

³⁶ Nakahara, Junki. "Deconstructing Abe Shinzo's "Take Back Japan" Nationalism". *The Asia-Pacific*

Journal 19(24): 2021; Pekkanen & Pekkanen, "Japan in 2014: All about Abe", 2015, 104-107.

³⁷ Hayashi, Hirofumi, "Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" System and Its Perception in History", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617: 2008, 124; Sakurai, "Shinzo Abe's Politics in Japan: Characteristics and Implications", 2022.



the US rescinded the prohibition on former government officials to re-entering politics.³⁸

Kishi rapidly climbed the ranks and played a central role in the formation of the LDP. Kishi wanted Japan to take control of its own defence, and to rearm rather than rely on the US for support, which motivated his wish to revise article 9. Furthermore, Kishi was keen to expand Japan's role in the international community and establish close economic relations, primarily in Southeast Asia.³⁹

In 1960, Kishi hoped to ratify a controversial renegotiation of the security pact⁴⁰ with the US before a historic visit to Japan by President Eisenhower.⁴¹ Worried about the future of the treaty, he decided to ram it through the National Diet, which he did during a vote to extend the diet session. The extension faced fierce resistance from socialist lawmakers who tried to physically block the vote so that the government would be unable to keep attempting to pass it. Police were ordered to remove them from the Diet and Kishi then proceeded with the vote, suddenly presenting and voting on the new treaty without warning. This sparked nationwide protests by citizens outraged by

his undemocratic move. The controversial vote ended his time in office and made it impossible to pursue revision of the constitution.⁴²

The agenda that defined Abe's time as prime minister was very similar to that of Kishi. Both sought for Japan to take back control by revising the constitution and to pivot to a focus on foreign policy. Abe's promise to "take back" Japan therefore becomes much clearer given the history of his role model. Abe's ideas did not come out of thin air; he was inspired by the generation of LDP politicians before him and added his own characteristics. His entire political career was based on the century-long tradition of hereditary politics that allowed him to quickly rise through the ranks and compete for power. What makes Abe unique, however, is that compared to those before him, he appeared at a moment in time when it was easier to reintroduce the old agenda.

Abe becomes the face of Japan

Abe was sometimes portrayed in western media as the man who restored political stability to Japan. His major economic

³⁸ Suehiro, Akira. "The Road to Economic Re-entry: Japan's Policy toward Southeast Asian Development in the 1950s and 1960s". *Social Science Japan Journal* 2(1): 1999, 90-92.

³⁹ Hoshiro, Hiroyuki. "Co-Prosperity Sphere Again? United States Foreign Policy and Japan's "First" Regionalism in the 1950s". *Pacific Affairs* 82(3): 2009, 394-396; Suehiro, "The Road to Economic Re-entry: Japan's Policy toward Southeast Asian Development in the 1950s and 1960s", 1999, 85-97.

⁴⁰ The 1960 US-Japan Security Treaty was a renegotiation of the original 1952 Treaty of San Francisco, which formally ended the US occupation of Japan. The original treaty put Japan in a subordinate position to the US and

allowed US troops to operate freely in the country. The 1960 treaty was adopted to make the US-Japan relationship more equal while also giving Japan military protection and permitting permanent US military bases around the country. See Miller, Jennifer M, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan*, Harvard: Harvard University Press. 2019.

⁴¹ The visit would have commemorated 100 years of diplomatic relations between Japan and the US. However, the ensuing unrest over the treaty led to its cancellation. Eisenhower would have been the first US president to visit Japan.

⁴² Kapur, Nick, *Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018, 22-24.



strategy may have been ineffective but he proved himself capable of bringing Japan back to relative stability and managed to achieve key political goals. On briefly being re-elected, for example, he founded Japan's first National Security Council to increase his cabinet's direct influence on foreign policy. As a result, the government took big steps to create its own national security strategy. Japan's defence was bolstered, a ban on arms exports was lifted and "proactive pacifism"⁴³ became the doctrine that defined Abe in this sphere of policy. He emphasized new partnerships and, in response to China's rapid development, tried to improve diplomatic relations between Japan and other states in Southeast Asia. He orchestrated the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and was an important architect of the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, positioning Abe as a major figure in shaping geopolitics.⁴⁴

Later, when US President Donald J. Trump shook up the US foreign policy agenda and abandoned negotiations on a Transpacific trade agreement (the TPP), Abe stepped forward and contributed to the conclusion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) without the US.⁴⁵ These achievements allowed Abe and Japan to play

a larger role in international relations.

Judging from Abe's fixation on the constitution, perhaps his most significant achievement was a reinterpretation of article 9. Since the constitution cannot be revised without the appropriate steps touched on earlier, Abe decided to go another way to inch closer to legitimizing the existence of the Japan Self-Defense Forces.⁴⁶ Article 9 was thus reinterpreted to allow Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defence and to support allies in case of attack. In the eyes of international allies, especially the US, this move was very welcome and reinforced Japan's role as an international power. Japan, which had long been unable to support allies in conflicts or completely commit to international task forces, could now start to slowly shake off the humiliating "leech" label by giving rather than only receiving.⁴⁷

Cumulatively, Abe brought change to Japan, primarily in foreign policy and defence policy, which boosted his popularity abroad and cemented his grip on power in Japan. By appearing a strong leader who often took matters into his own hands, his presence was significant in both a domestic and an international context. As a result, Abe garnered considerable support within his

⁴³ Abe's "proactive pacifism" meant that by becoming an economically wealthy and militarily strong nation, Japan would be able to play a bigger role in international affairs and promote peace and stability in the region as well as the world. See <https://thediomat.com/2015/02/japan-from-proactive-pacifism-to-proactive-diplomacy/>.

⁴⁴ Maslow, Sebastian. O'Shea, Paul, "Abe's Assassination Must Not Prevent Open Debate on His Legacy", *Nikkei Asia*, 2022; Sakurai, "Shinzo

Abe's Politics in Japan: Characteristics and Implications", 2022.

⁴⁵ Maslow & O'Shea, "Abe's Assassination Must Not Prevent Open Debate on His Legacy", 2022.

⁴⁶ The Japan Self-Defense Forces are Japan's military, labelled as such due to the restrictions of article 9.

⁴⁷ Lind, Jennifer, "Why Shinzo Abe Thought Japan Had to Change", *Foreign Affairs*, 2022; Pyle, Kenneth B, "Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration", *Asia Policy* 13(2): 2018, 79-81.



party and built it around him, allowing him to remain party leader.

To outsiders, it might seem that Abe was a well-liked politician. However, Abe was a highly controversial and divisive figure, involved in a number of scandals and controversies. Even though the LDP remained in power under Abe's leadership, the party did not have majority support due to the intricacies of the electoral system.⁴⁸ Like many other LDP politicians, he was affiliated with the Nippon Kaigi, an ultra-conservative NGO that engages in revisionist activities that primarily involve denial of the war crimes committed by the Japanese before 1945. These actions have consistently sparked tensions with neighbouring countries, given their history under Japanese military and colonial aggression.⁴⁹

He was also a ruthless critic of the media. Under his leadership, Japan fell sharply in international rankings on press freedom due to his efforts to undermine reporting. Laws such as the State Secrecy Law⁵⁰ encroached on the freedom of the press, and he actively intimidated privately and publicly owned media outlets to get them to report

favourably on his administration.⁵¹ Under Abe's leadership, for instance, the public broadcaster NHK⁵² and independent media such as Asahi were pressured on multiple occasions to fire individuals or to retract reporting deemed "too critical" of Abe and his administration or face serious consequences.⁵³

After his shocking assassination, his extravagant tax-funded state funeral was criticized nationally since state funerals are usually only held for members of the imperial family. Abe was only the second prime minister to be given a state funeral. Abe's legacy was further tarnished when his and the LDP's ties to the "Unification church"⁵⁴ were revealed following his assassination. These ties continue to be a problem for the LDP.⁵⁵

LDP and Japan post-Abe

This brief set out to analyse the political circumstances that helped solidify post-war LDP rule and eventually propelled Abe's political rise. In my interpretation, Japan's political system and its institutions suffered from a flawed electoral system, while active

⁴⁸ The LDP's popular vote consistently stayed around 35% under Abe.

⁴⁹ Pyle, "Japan's Return to Great Power Politics: Abe's Restoration", 2018, 79-81.

⁵⁰ The State Secrecy Law passed under Abe to protect confidential state information. Critics argue that its vagueness and the possibility of long prison sentences for violations jeopardize the safety of journalists and of the government whistle-blowers who help them.

⁵¹ Laurence, Henry. "After Abe, Will Press Freedom Improve in Japan?", *The Diplomat*, 2020.

⁵² In 2013 Abe would go so far as to install a close personal ally at the top of NHK who

routinely pressured employees who were critical of the government's line.

⁵³ Fackler, Martin, "The Silencing of Japan's Free Press", *Foreign Policy*, 2016.

⁵⁴ The murderer's motive was based on Abe's seemingly close relations with the unification church, who allegedly bankrupted his family due to the vast amounts of donations they were pressured to give the group. The incident has sparked nationwide debate on political ties to religious organizations such as the unification church as well as donations to other such organizations.

⁵⁵ Cohen, Spencer. "Shinzo Abe's State Funeral is as Controversial as he was", *Foreign Policy*, 2022.



processes such as *kōenkai* and urbanization combined with a hands-off approach by the LDP government to produce the 1955 system. Even after limited improvements were made following electoral reform in the 1990s, the LDP did not change. The opposition's inability to form or conduct stable government under the DPJ again strengthened the position of the LDP while also further eroding faith in the political system among the public.⁵⁶ In 2012, an emboldened Abe and LDP found themselves in a position to resurrect a traditional LDP agenda. It is also important to emphasize that Abe as a politician did not appear out of thin air. His fundamental beliefs and goals have a long history of support among the political elite of the LDP, which solidified its power and influence under the 1955 system. However, it failed to achieve its goals due to the political turmoil that stems from the unpopularity of the ideological debates that surrounded them.

Abe's first term as prime minister was not particularly remarkable amid tanking support and instability in the party. When the opposition was at its weakest, however, he was given the best possible opportunity to resume office. Since the LDP had the longest experience in government, due to the above-mentioned political status quo, they were the only viable alternative to address the political instability and lack of capable leadership. Furthermore, external factors played a significant role in addition to the ideational debates that always exist in the LDP. Thus, re-

examining constitutional revision and security politics had become less controversial as decades had passed since the last major protests, and amid a newly constrained national security environment involving an increasingly assertive China and North Korea.

However, while it is easy to give Abe credit for his leadership and ability to give Japan a bigger role internationally, through his various initiatives and appearances, the public discourse surrounding Abe's controversial and retrograde policy was sparse. It is also crucial to view the state of Japanese politics from a critical perspective. By omitting key information from the debate, it was easily able to inflict further degradation on Japan's institutions and democratic legitimacy, and to continue the institutionalization of the LDP that began under the 1955 system. However, the death of Abe represents a turning point in Japanese politics and there are difficult and uncertain times ahead. Abe was fostered by the political elite and became an icon for the LDP and the foremost figure of the nation. One fact is for certain: there is currently no clear successor in sight who can carry quite the same weight as Abe.

⁵⁶ Japanese political institutions have long suffered from a low level of trust, partly due to their mismanagement and flawed policymaking in the decades since the 1990s financial bubble.

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