

30th August Japanese elections that LDP could lose

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Tokyo so significant.

JAPANESE Prime Minister Taro Aso's tenuous tenure seems set to end as he was forced to declare elections for the Lower House following his party's disastrous performance at the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections, winning only 38 seats against the Opposition Democratic Party of Japan's 54 seats. After Koizumi left in 2006 completing a record five years in office, Aso became the third Prime Minister in September 2008 and has ever since been under the threat of losing his job. According to most predictions, he may have set the LDP on course to yield to the DPJ the chance to form the next government in the elections scheduled to be held on August 30th.

Aso, in any case, could hold on to power only till October this year when the tenure of the current Lower House would end mandatorily. He took the chance to dissolve the Lower House following the LDP's disastrous performance in Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly to lead the LDP in the next elections. If he had not dissolved the Lower House to call the elections, he would have surely been forced to quit. Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections should not usually play a role in national politics for it never has. Since April, the LDP lost four regional elections on the trot before the Tokyo elections, which made the defeat in

Japanese voters were becoming increasingly disappointed with the performance of the LDP since the departure of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Their disappointment has been enhanced during Taro Aso's less than a year's tenure by a series of gaffes, a lot of which were contributed by the Prime Minister himself, and economic problems that have led to frequent calls for his resignation. In a highly publicized incident, one of his ministers came to a press interview, while abroad, drunk. Taro Aso has been well known for his gaffes and controversial statements ever since he entered politics, which he continued even as Prime Minister. Some of these gaffes have also offended the voters, for example his remarks criticizing the elderly for racking up medical expenses and being a tax burden that created uproar. He often appeared in front pages of leading Japanese newspapers for his frequent gaffes and controversial statements.

In Japan's conservative politics the LDP has held office since 1955, losing power only briefly in 1993. Nevertheless, there has been constant discussion and criticism in Japan about LDP's style of politics. There are many who feel that it is necessary to change either that style of politics or to give power to some other party other than the LDP. During Koizumi's tenure, many had expected that LDP would change permanently.



popularity was down to 20% when the Prime Minister decided to call the elections. If the LDP had not lost so disastrously in Tokyo or the end of the term of the Lower House was so imminent, Aso would have gone the same way as his two predecessors Shinzo Abe and Yasuo Fukuda.

The LDP is suffering from leadership crisis at this moment. There is no one in the party with the charisma or the leadership qualities required to get the LDP out of the present slump. In a way, Koizumi's five years dominance of LDP and his style of running the party did not allow leaders to grow, who would have the vision to carry forward the directions that Koizumi had set for the LDP. Even within the LDP, there is little optimism today that the party under Taro Aso would be able to turn this election around. In fact, some of the senior members of the party are hoping that the DPJ would win and then make a mess of governance due to its inexperience so that the voters would soon give their support to the LDP to form government once again. These perceptions notwithstanding, there has to be a dramatic change in voters' preference to send the DPJ to power. The LDP has 303 seats and its ally, the New Komeito has 31 against the DPJ's 112 in a Lower House of 483.

The DPJ's best bet in winning would rest primarily on the voters' disen-

chantment with the LDP's style of politics and the need for a change. The disenchantment of the voters has been reinforced by all three successors of Koizumi with Aso making the best effort in this regard. His challenger is DPJ's President Kunio Hatoyama, who has a PhD degree from Stanford and a political lineage to match if not better than that of Aso. Kunio Hatoyama is the grandson of former Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama and his father was a former Foreign Minister of Japan. Kunio Hatoyama has called for a new era of politics in Japan that should be inspired by Barack Obama's election as the President of USA. He has also made promises that should be attractive for the Japanese voters yearning to replace Aso. The DPJ has promised to improve welfare measures, lower cost of education, reduce bureaucracy, and strengthen the agriculture sector. The voters could very well back the DPJ for these promises in the coming elections.

The next Japanese elections will be interesting as it will be one where the LDP will have to do something extraordinary to win or the DPJ something disastrous to lose. In case of a DPJ victory, Japanese politics could witness the beginning of a new era with the end of more than six decades of LDP's stranglehold on power.

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Koizumi changed the old style of politics within the faction ridden LDP. Before, faction bosses determined the fate of the party and the country issues behind the scene where even the Prime Minister had little influence in the choice of the Cabinet.

In five years, Koizumi turned LDP's politics upside down. He all but destroyed the factions and the role of their bosses. In 2005, he did something unique in Japan's politics. On losing a bill of

privatization of the postal services in the Upper House where some members of his own party voted against the LDP, he dissolved the Lower House and called for elections that most analysts thought LDP would lose badly. In that election, he not only took on the opposition but also his own party members who voted against the party on the issue of the postal service privatization bill. He also did something even more dramatic: he

nominated nearly 100 candidates who were fresh in politics, fondly called "Koizumi's kids". He fielded them against veteran opposition candidates and his own party renegades and succeeded in winning the elections with a 2/3rd majority.

Japanese politics relented back to age old traditions with factions and faction bosses regaining most of their historical strength and influence once Koizumi left

the scene. The Koizumi kids are forgotten and the LDP has once again become a revolving door of Prime Ministers with Taro Aso the third in 2 years. Although Aso has been forced to dissolve the Lower House in the backdrop of the disastrous Tokyo Assembly elections, the numbers that have been coming to the media on his government's performance and his own popularity rating have been equally disastrous, if not more. Aso's

US-Russia nuclear deal: A great strategic significance

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ON 6th July, President Obama arrived in Moscow for a summit with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev. Both Presidents are in their forties and seem to have a new vision for the world. This is the first US-Russia summit and Obama opened the summit with confidence "predicting extraordinary progress" out of the summit. He said: "The US and Russia have more in common than they have differences."

The Russian President in the optimistic vein replied: "We will have a full-fledged discussion of our relations between our two countries, closing some of the pages of the past and opening some of the pages of the future."

"Tomorrow I'll be having breakfast with Prime Minister Putin. I have not met him before. I'm looking forward to that meeting," Obama said.

"My interest is in dealing directly with my counterpart, the President, but also to reach out to Prime Minister Putin and all other influential sectors

2009 of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the US has now 1,198 land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-based missiles, and bombers which together are capable of delivering 5,676 warheads. The US now deploys at least 2,200 strategic nuclear warheads.

Russia has 816 delivery vehicles capable of delivering 3,909 warheads. While the number of deployed Russian strategic warheads is not known, the Arms Control Association estimates it at 2,000 to 3,000.

The United States and Russia have made a historic agreement to reduce their nuclear arsenals down to 1500 to 1675 warheads from a maximum of 2200 each now permitted, as part of a new arms control treaty that signals a dramatic improvement in relations between the two superpowers. The two nations have signed a binding agreement to negotiate the new treaty by the end of the year. They have also agreed on the more difficult issue of the number of launch systems (long range missiles and ships) that would be permitted. These will be limited to 500-1100, down from 1600.

However, the most promising aspect of the meeting was the willingness of both leaders to work together to improve the relationship, which Medvedev said had fallen to the lowest level under George Bush since the Cold War. As they stood waiting to sign the agreements the two presidents joked privately together.

The two sides signed a key agreement to allow the US military to transport military equipment and troops across Russian land and airspace to support operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, a move which Obama said would save the US millions in costs and help with the war effort. Obama also announced that the two presidents had agreed to establish a Presidential Commission, co-ordinated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Russian counterpart to foster on-going dialogue on issues ranging from the economy to health, energy and the environment, counterterrorism, science, civil society and handling emergencies.

"Too often the US and Russia only communicate on a narrow range of issues, or let old habits within our

a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, which Russia regards as a threat to its security. He publicly sought to reassure Russia that the US sees it as a priority, not to deal with Russia, but to deal with a missile coming in from Iran or North Korea or another state. "There is no scenario from our perspective in which this missile defence system would provide any protection against a mighty Russian arsenal," he said. Obama acknowledged that the planned shield in Poland and the Czech Republic was a "point of deep concern and sensitivity to the Russian Government". A review that he had ordered to check whether the system "works or not" would be ready within weeks. Obama promised to pass the assessment to Mr. Medvedev and said that it would be "the subject of extensive negotiations."

He appeared to hold out an olive branch to the Russians by saying that it was "entirely legitimate for our discussions to talk about not only offensive weapons systems but also defensive". The US has previously resisted Moscow's insistence on linking deals on nuclear weapons and missile defence. It remains unclear how both countries would address on conventional weapons or defensive weapons.

The thorniest issue between Moscow and Washington is the Nato aspirations of US allies - Georgia and Ukraine - appears to have been avoided. Former Soviet President Gorbachev said some time ago that a kind of federal union with Russia may take place in future with Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan to stabilise this part of the world.

Former US National Intelligence Council Chairman Fritz Ermath explained that "as was the case in the Cold War today, US policy-making for Russia should be informed by the deepest possible understanding of Russia as a system, as a country, as a state, as a culture."

Political observers say the focus of the summit is to try and give not only the Russian government but also the Russian society a platform to be able to see if there is the possibility of a new and different relationship with the US under the Obama administration.

The Obama administration's readiness to engage Russia in a meaningful way is a sign of hard-headed realism. The history of diplomacy makes amply clear that longstanding rivalries usually require engagement - often at the highest levels - to reach resolution.

After eight years of a dangerous bunker mentality in Washington, Obama's plans for engaging friends and adversaries alike offers the best hope for peace and harmony in the world.

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The ghettoisation of Gaza

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Israel's creation of a "Warsaw Ghetto" in Gaza continues apace, using control of the food supply as a primary weapon against the civilian population. Every time Gazans sit down for a meal, they face a depressing reality. The selection of foods available to them is dictated almost entirely by a harsh policy imposed by the Israeli government, which, as of late, has even refused to allow such innocuous-seeming foods as pumpkins, pasta or beans to cross the border.

The aim behind Israel's tight control of Gazans' dietary regime is definitely not improving their health. Rather, the government argues that allowing "luxury" foods into Gaza would only add to the popularity of Hamas' leaders, enabling them to better feed their constituency. But, in the eyes of many observers, Israel's policy of limiting foods that enter the Strip is almost tantamount to starvation, and comes dangerously close to collective punishment, both of which are not only illegal and immoral methods to use in pursuit of Israeli security, but also do little to improve that security.

It is, in law, in truth and in reality collective punishment, not just "dangerously close" to it. It is an all-out, astonishing brazen war crime - a clear echo of Nazi policies on provisioning the Jewish ghettos in Poland after the Germans conquered the country.

Indeed, what long-term Israeli interest is served by having pregnant women and children suffer anaemia, which causes well-documented damage to fetal and juvenile development? Limiting their access to iron does not improve Israeli security. Rather, it makes up a gross violation of our own basic human values and the morality of Israeli society.

Can the experts please explain: Why does the Israeli Health Ministry recommendation for the diet of Israeli infants and toddlers - "soft fruit such as bananas and avocado, cooked chicken and beef, and cheese cubes" - not apply to Palestinian children? These particular items are all strictly forbidden from entering Gaza, while rice and a limited selection of meat and produce are the only food items allowed to enter.

Several months ago, ministry officials approached the United Nations to consult with them about their dietary plan for the Gaza Strip. The UN officials - as one might guess - politely told them to go to hell, refusing to have anything to do with such a policy. The

Israelis then turned to a Health Ministry dietician, whose advice might have led to the present policy according to which, as Israeli officials have stated, "the minimal requirements for the sustenance of Gaza Strip residents are being observed without inflicting a humanitarian disaster."

The participation of medical experts in drawing up the menus for Palestinians in Gaza - if they knew what policy their advice would help produce - is a grave violation of medical ethics. What the Israelis are doing in Gaza is precisely what the Americans and British did for years in Iraq: not an open genocide, with machine-gun squads and extermination camps, but the deliberate degradation of people, seeking to cripple not only their political, military and economic power, but also the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development of future generations.

Every expert in child development will tell you how important proper nutrition -- not to mention a stable, secure environment -- is to develop a child's body and personality. And Nazi experts of yore could have told us how the social, emotional and psychological functioning of adults can also be degraded and destroyed by prolonged captivity in harsh, humiliating conditions of constant fear and non-stop hunger. The Nazis could tell us this because they practiced it against the Jews of Europe.

This kind of degradation is what the Anglo-American elites inflicted on Iraqis before the 2003 invasion-- and they are still inflicting on them every day of the continuing occupation of the broken land, as the Washington Post reports. Israel, having less ground to cover and fewer captives to degrade, are able to act with even greater intensity and deliberation in Gaza than their Western mentors' pre-war strangulation of Iraq.

Sadly, the United States is a partner in the ghettoisation of Gaza. The deliberate, scientific calibration of cruelty being applied there by the Israelis would not be taking place without the indispensable financial and material support and political cover the United States provides to Israel. Degradation of the people of Gaza and above all, the children of Gaza, goes on because the administration of President Barack Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress of the United States do not want to stop it.

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in Russian society so that I can get a full picture of the needs of the Russian people and the concerns of the Russian people," he said, pointing out that power was shared under the US constitution too. This signals a diplomatic way of saying that Putin exercises "real" power through President Medvedev.

According to a report in January,

The move is likely to bolster attempts to renegotiate a new non-proliferation treaty next year, and signals a willingness of the two big nuclear armed nations to work together to counter nuclear proliferation among states like Iran and North Korea by regaining the moral high ground and cutting their own arsenals.

bureaucracy stand in the way of progress," Obama said. In dealing with Mr. Medvedev he was dealing with the person who holds power in Russia, Obama said.

The agreement does not cover thousands more tactical nuclear weapons and both sides have more warheads in storage. They remained divided, however, over US plans to site