

Abe's Japan

Prime minister Shinzo Abe has much to smile about after his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) romped back to power in Japan's general election with a two-thirds majority in the Lower House of parliament.

Japanese voters gave the 60-year-old premier a renewed mandate to rule, possibly for another four years until the next general election in 2017. What's to be expected from Abe in the months ahead?

Abe had said that the snap election, which came at the half-way mark of the Lower House's term, was a referendum on his Abenomics growth policies.

That says political analyst Jiro Yamaguchi of Hosei University, sounded more like an afterthought. Abe was undoubtedly well aware of what the Japanese thought of Abenomics and every indication is that they are not impressed.

A survey by Kyodo News showed 51.8 percent of respondents thought poorly of Abenomics versus 37.1 percent who had a more favourable view. It could not have been otherwise after Abe let the economy slip back into recession with his sales tax increase.

For that reason, Abe's victory on Sunday is no indication that the Japanese people have changed their minds about him.

If anything, his electoral triumph was largely due to the weakness of the opposition.

In the past two years, two opposition parties had broken up, one right before the election. Their disarray was evident in the fact that even as 'Abenomics' is found wanting, the Democratic Party of Japan, the largest opposition group, has not been able to offer an alternative plan.

So, even though Japanese voters would again seem to have given Abe their trust, they are aware that they cannot expect much more from him.

Many worry too that the renewed mandate will embolden Abe to ignore public opinion and push ahead with measures such as the restarting of Japan's 48 idled nuclear reactors.

Even if experts pronounce the reactors safe to operate, public opinion remains deeply leery.

Public broadcaster NHK found in a survey last month that 40 percent of respondents rejected



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nuclear restarts, far above the 24 percent that favoured them.

Energy companies have already made applications for 20 reactors to be put back online. It is said that Abe even plans to allow the construction of new nuclear reactors to replace those that have exceeded their useful life spans.

Many are also watching to see if the strong mandate will embolden Abe to move in areas that he had carefully skirted during the recent election campaign.

For many Japanese, one of the most serious issues is the likely slashing of social security spending.

However, Abe has to consider such measures to bolster public finances and contain the widening deficit.

The worry that Abe may eye cuts to welfare is rising because tax increases are ruled out for now. The economy remains sluggish even nine months after the sales tax was raised three percentage points to 8 percent. Abe has been advised to postpone the next increase, which would have raised the rate to 10 percent, to April 2017.

With the second tax hike delayed by 18 months, Abe will have few options left to raise money. That could force him to embark on painful welfare cuts as Japan's population continues to age rapidly even as the workforce that supports them shrinks.

The other issue is political. Four more years will also give Abe the chance to achieve his conservative agenda, which includes the implementation of "moral education" in schools by 2018 to foster patriotism among school children.



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The sales tax hikes were thought of as part of an integrated reform package compiled in March 2012 by the then Democrat-led government to help finance Japan's increasingly expensive social security programmes.

Perhaps the most ambitious item on this agenda is the removal of the legacies of the post-war Occupation of Japan, such as the war-renouncing Peace Constitution, and the dismantling of Shinto as a state religion.

Shinto was stripped of its associations with the state as it was seen to be behind Japan's war-time nationalism. Still, Abe's actions will probably be tempered by the fact that despite yesterday's success he is not automatically guaranteed another four years at the helm.

A party presidential election looms next year and an Upper House election follows in 2016. To remain in power he will need to clear both hurdles. Abe has a busy two years ahead of him.

— KWAN WENG KIN
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