

**JAPAN'S 2007 UPPER HOUSE ELECTION:
TOWARDS A POLITICAL GRIDLOCK?**

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Executive Summary

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suffered a crushing electoral defeat --- obtaining only 37 out of 121 seats contested at the 2007 Upper House Election --- and lost control of the Upper House.

Two key reasons accounted for the LDP's rout at the polls: the burning anger of voters against the Abe Administration's mismanagement of the pension fiasco in which more than 50 million entries were unaccounted for, and the Prime Minister's selection of corrupt, gaffe-prone and mediocre ministers which led to two resignations and a suicide.

Abe Shinzo's rightwing ideological agenda of constitutional revision to rid Article 9 (Japan's famous no war-clause), promote patriotic education and get tougher on North Korea over its abduction of Japanese citizens have little resonance with Japanese voters who were more concerned with pressing bread and butter issues.

In contrast, the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) led by wily Ozawa Ichiro focused on livelihood issues including direct subsidies to farmers, displacing the LDP from its traditional bastion in rural Japan. Besides the farmers, many in the construction industry and post offices (hitherto the most solid organizational votes for the LDP) have abandoned the ruling party.

While Abe is resolved to stay on as Prime Minister, pressure is mounting on him to take responsibility for the poor electoral results and resign. Even if Abe was able to avoid being forced out of office for the time being, his personal credibility and prestige have been severely dented by the electoral defeat and might well end up as a lame duck Prime Minister.

With an opposition-controlled Upper House which can veto bills drafted by the LDP-dominated Lower House, Japanese domestic politics might well face a gridlock.

Constitutionally, the LDP and its junior partner, the *Komeito*, with more than a two-thirds majority in the Lower House, can override the veto of the Upper House. However, it is a political convention and societal norm in Japan for the ruling coalition not to ram through every bill but to negotiate and compromise with the opposition to ensure the smooth passage of bills.

Abe's key advantage is the lack of an obvious successor within the LDP who is able and willing to clean up the political mess. However, if the LDP fails to offer attractive and capable leaders who can tackle pension reforms and other problems, it might well end up losing its dominance of the Lower House too.