

Ruling Coalition Keeps Majority in General Election

The Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partners suffered a major setback in the June 25 general election, but secured a majority in the House of Representatives and managed to stay in power.

The LDP won 233 of the 480 seats of the Lower House, losing 38 seats from 271 out of 500 in the last parliament. The New Komeito and the New Conservative Party also fared badly, losing a large number of seats. The three parties lost 60 seats altogether but held 271 seats, two more than the 269 needed to control all of the committees of the house, thus enabling Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro to keep his post.

The No. 1 opposition Democratic Party of Japan made strong inroads, increasing its seats from 95 to 127, though it failed to oust the LDP-led coalition from power. But its substantial gains strengthened its position in parliament and paved the way for a two-party system in Japan.

Two other opposition parties – the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party – also fared well, while the Communist Party suffered a setback.

The election pitted the tripartite ruling bloc against various opposition parties calling for a change in the government.

During the election campaign, the LDP and its coalition partners emphasized the importance of a business recovery and appealed to voters that only the LDP-led coalition could achieve this goal.

On the other hand, the Democratic Party and other opposition parties campaigned on a platform of fiscal reform and further deregulation. They criticized the LDP for trying to sacrifice the nation's fiscal health in favor of a business recovery led by public spending. They also blamed Mori for making a series of unconstitutional remarks such as one describing Japan as a "divine" nation centered

around the Emperor and questioned Mori's credibility.

Though the LDP managed to stay in power through its coalition with the New Komeito and the New Conservatives, the election results showed that a large segment of voters were critical of Mori's administration.

The LDP remained popular among rural voters, particularly those in the northern Kanto district, the Chugoku district and Shikoku Island, dominating single-seat constituencies in Gunma, Toyama, Gifu and Shimane prefectures. On the other hand, it fought hard battles in urban districts in Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama and Aichi prefectures where there are a large number of uncommitted voters. Veteran LDP candidates lost seats in proportional representation constituencies in Tokyo, Saitama, Osaka and Hyogo prefectures. The LDP won only 56 seats in proportional representation constituencies, compared with 70 in the 1996 general election.

The Democratic Party made a strong showing in urban districts. In five constituencies in Nagoya city, for example, the party won all the seats at the expense of the LDP and its coalition partners. The party gained votes in proportional representation constituencies throughout the country. Just as in the 1996 House of Councillors election, the party drew voters critical of the LDP-led coalition.

The New Komeito fought uphill battles in both single-seat and proportional representation districts despite its solid nationwide support base. The party lost 16 seats altogether, from 47 to 31. The New Conservatives also suffered a setback, losing 11 seats, from 18 to seven, mainly due to competition with its coalition partners. It only shone in Aichi prefecture, the home district of former Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki.

On the opposition side, the Liberal Party gained four seats, from 18 to 22, mainly on the back of the strong leadership and name value of its leader Ozawa Ichiro. The party was particularly successful in Iwate

Prefecture, Ozawa's home base, and in proportional representation constituencies.

The Socialist Democratic Party gained five seats, from 14 to 19, including four in single-seat constituencies.

The Communist Party failed to attract uncommitted voters with its appeal against a higher consumption tax, and saw its strength erode to 20 from 26. Not a single Communist candidate was elected from single-seat constituencies.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the voter turnout was a sluggish 62.49%, up from the 59.65% in the October 1996 election, which was the lowest ever, but still the second lowest in history.

The turnout was high in Tottori, Shimane and other provincial prefectures but low in Saitama, Osaka and other prefectures which have large urban populations.

From the 1998 House of Councillors election onward, voting hours were extended two hours until 8 p.m. and absentee voting regulations were eased, making it easier for voters to go to polling stations. Japanese nationals residing overseas were qualified to vote for the first time in the latest general election. But many voters, mostly uncommitted voters in urban districts, remained apathetic about politics and showed little interest in the election.

Mori Inaugurates His New Cabinet

Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro has launched his second cabinet, maintaining a coalition with the New Komeito and the New Conservative Party and retaining key ministers.

Mori was reelected prime minister at the outset of an extraordinary Diet session convened on July 4 and organized a new cabinet based on a partnership between his Liberal Democratic Party, the New Komeito and the New Conservative Party.

As a reflection of his focus on economic policies and the Group of Eight summit and other high-profile G-8 meetings scheduled for July, Mori retained Foreign Minister Kono Yohei, Finance Minister Miyazawa Kiichi and Economic Planning Agency chief Sakaiya Taiichi. He also reappointed

Kawaguchi is one of the two ministers without parliamentary seats, the other being EPA chief Sakaiya.

Ogi became the first woman to hold the post of construction minister. Mori appointed her to the post after the sudden arrest of former Construction Minister Nakao Eiichi, who failed in his reelection in the June 25 election, for his alleged involvement in a bribery scandal. Nakao's arrest convinced Mori that a LDP member should not assume the construction minister portfolio this time and instead appointed a fresh face to the post. Ogi, who wished to assume the post of education minister, was reluctant to accept Mori's offer but was finally persuaded to do so. As a result, Oshima



Photo: Kyodo News

Ministers of the second Mori Cabinet

Management and Coordination Agency chief Tsuzuki Kunihiro of the New Komeito to ensure the smooth regrouping of government ministries and agencies scheduled for January next year.

In his first press conference after forming his new Cabinet, Prime Minister Mori stressed his determination to create a "reborn Japan" with priority on a business recovery and the development of information technology (IT).

Among other key appointments were Ogi Chikage, leader of the New Conservative Party, as construction minister; Kawaguchi Yoriko, executive director of Suntory Ltd. and a former official of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, as chief of the Environment Agency; Yasuoka Okiharu (Yamazaki Taku's faction) as justice minister; Yoshikawa Yoshio (Kato Koichi's faction) as labor minister; and Kuze Kimitaka (Kato's faction) as chairman of the Financial Reconstruction Commission.

Ogi and Kawaguchi are the only female ministers of the Cabinet, and

Tadamori, tipped as construction minister, was transferred to the post of education minister and concurrently director general of the Science and Technology Agency. Oshima belongs to the faction formerly led by Komoto Toshio, one-time minister of International Trade and Industry.

Mori picked Nakagawa Hidenao, one of his closest aides, as Chief Cabinet Secretary, the government spokesman. Two deputy chief cabinet secretaries were also chosen from among his aides – Abe Shinzo and Ueno Kiminari.

The composition of the cabinet reflected the current power balance among LDP factions, with Mori appointing portfolios mainly on the basis of factional requests. The factional breakup is as follows: three from the late former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo's faction; two each from Mori's own faction, former LDP Secretary General Kato Koichi's faction, and chief policymaker Kamei Shizuka's faction; also two each from the private sector and the House of Councillors; one each from three

other LDP groups; and also one each from the New Komeito and the New Conservative Party.

In running the new administration, Prime Minister Mori is likely to face rough sailing, with opposition parties poised to step up their accusations of the LDP's "money politics" in the wake of the unfolding of a scandal that led to the arrest of former Construction Minister Nakao.

With the public approval rating for Mori remaining low and discontent over Mori's leadership mounting even in his own party following its dismal showing in the general election, the political scene will be fraught with unstable factors.

In his first cabinet, which he organized after succeeding Obuchi, Mori retained all the ministers of the Obuchi Cabinet. The new cabinet was thus his first cabinet in a real sense and reflected Mori's own volition. But the new cabinet is expected to be short-lived, because administrative reforms scheduled for January next year will cut the number of government ministries and another Cabinet reshuffle will be inevitable by the end of the year.

Scientists Complete Draft of Human Genetic Code

Two competing teams of scientists have completed the first rough map of the human genetic code. The historic feat was independently achieved by the publicly funded international Human Genome Project and the U.S. gene-sequencing company Celera Genomics Co. The Human Genome Project is an international consortium of researchers from the U.S., Europe and Japan.

The accomplishment was simultaneously announced in Washington, London and Tokyo on June 26.

In Washington, U.S. President Bill Clinton declared at a White House ceremony that "this is the most important, most wondrous map ever produced by humankind." He empha-

sized the importance of the virtual decoding of the human genome which would shed light on the blueprint of human life and lead to revolutionary progress of medical science and the bioindustry, helping the development of novel treatments of cancer and other intractable diseases.

Celera says it has deciphered some 90 percent of 3.1 billion subunits of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), on which some 100,000 human genes are recorded.

Celera's sequence will be made available to academic researchers via the Internet by the end of the year. Currently, only paying subscribers have access to Celera's database.

The joint research on the human genome was proposed at a series of international scientific conferences held from 1985 to 1987. In the U.S., the National Institutes of Health and the Energy Department launched joint public-funded studies, the Human Genome Project, in 1990 involving Japanese, U.S. and European scientists. The summit meetings of the Group of Seven industrialized countries had called for joint international efforts to decipher the human genome.

The 20th century, which witnessed the development of aircraft, atomic energy, nuclear fusion and rocketry, was a "century of physics," whereas the 21st century is expected to become a "century of bioscience." The completion of the first draft of the DNA blueprint that makes humans what they are is expected to shed light on the basic structure of human genes and chromosomes and make great contributions to the development of medical science. New knowledge of the genome will enable researchers to determine the cause of genetic diseases, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's Disease and various other intractable diseases, as well as precise diagnosis and treatment of these diseases. With the new tool in hand, scientists will find it easier to define the process of human evolution.

Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro issued a statement hailing the achievement of the international Human Genome Project as the first step in the full decipherment of the blueprint of the human body. "It was the result of tripartite collaboration among the U.S., Europe and Japan, and the common asset of mankind," the prime minister said.

Mori hoped the achievement will greatly contribute to the treatment and prevention of diseases and play an important role in the building of a vital society in which people can enjoy longevity. He added that he would like to take up the issue at the summit meeting of the Group of Eight.

Empress Dowager Passes Away at 97

Empress Dowager Nagako, the mother of Emperor Akihito, died of old age on June 16 at the age of 97. She was the longest living empress in Japanese history, eclipsing the record of Empress Kanshi (1036-1127), the wife of Emperor Goreizei.

The Emperor, the Empress and other members of the Imperial family were at her side when the Empress Dowager died peacefully at the Fukiage Omiya Palace within the Imperial Palace grounds at 4:46 p.m. on June 16. She had been in a critical condition since the morning of that day after her blood pressure came down alarmingly.

Her death was announced by Kamakura Sadame, the grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency. He said the Emperor and Empress were greatly grieved by the Empress Dowager's passing.

The Emperor and other members of the Imperial Palace will observe a 150-day mourning period.

The Empress Dowager's funeral was held as a function of the Imperial family at the Toshimagaoka cemetery in Tokyo's Bunkyo ward after the Group of Eight summit meeting. The Empress Dowager was then



Photo : Imperial Household Agency

entombed at the Musashino Imperial Mausoleum in Hachioji, in the western suburbs of Tokyo, where her husband Emperor Showa (Hirohito) is interred.

The Empress Dowager was born on March 6, 1903, as the eldest daughter of Prince and Princess Kuni. She married then Prince Regent Hirohito in January 1924 at the age of 20. She had two sons – Emperor Akihito and Prince Hitachi – and five daughters. But she survived three daughters, Sachiko who died in 1928, Shigeo who died in 1961 and Kazuko who died in 1989.

Empress Dowager Nagako experienced turbulent years during and after World War II with Emperor Showa. In particular, Japan's defeat in the war and the subsequent Allied occupation of the country brought tremendous changes to the Imperial system and she underwent a great ordeal.

She accompanied Emperor Showa on a tour of Europe in 1971 for her first ever overseas journey. Their Majesties also visited the United States in 1975. Her gentle "Empress smile" charmed people and greatly contributed to international friendship.

Since Emperor Showa died in January 1989 at the age of 87, she had seldom made public appearances. She was confined to a wheelchair for her last several years and was said to be senile.