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IMPACT OF THE HOUSE OF COUNCILLORS ELECTION

Yoichi Serikawa

- Advocates of amending the constitution have achieved the two-thirds majority necessary to propose amendments, making it possible that a constitutional amendment will appear on the government's agenda.
- Political circumstances at the moment will not allow for a revision of Article 9, which renounces the right of belligerency.
- The issue of greatest priority is the economy, and the political resources garnered through the election victory should be focused on economic revitalization.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito, both members of the ruling coalition, emerged victorious in the House of Councillors elections held on July 10. Advocates of amending the constitution, including those in other political parties insisting on changes to the constitution, achieved the two-thirds majority needed to propose constitutional amendments. With the ruling coalition having already secured more than two-thirds of the seats in the House of Representatives, it is possible that the issue of constitutional amendments will specifically be on the political agenda.

It is a historical fact that Japan's present constitution was based on a draft composed by the GHQ in February 1946 following Japan's defeat in the Pacific War and subsequent occupation. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the constitution's promulgation in November 1946, since which time it has not been amended even once.

Formed in 1955 in opposition to the constitution "imposed on Japan by the GHQ," the LDP has since made amending the constitution part of its platform but had been unable to secure a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet, leaving constitutional change an unfulfilled dream.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in particular has long embraced amending the constitution as one of his political goals, and it would appear that the opportunity to do so has now arrived. In that sense, the House of Councillors election was a major turning point for Japanese politics.

A clear roadmap for amending the constitution is still not apparent, nor is the political climate yet in place for amending the war-renouncing Article 9 in the face of deep-rooted opposition. Even Komeito, a member of the ruling coalition, has advocated leaving the current constitution as is and adding the necessary provisions, but it has no intention of pushing to revise Article 9 right away.

Revising Article 9 and greatly expanding the scope of exercising the collective right of self-defense recognized only in small part with the legal revisions made last year is not feasible at the moment. These legal revisions have made it possible to exercise the collective right of self-defense, the ironic consequence of which is that, for the time being at least, a constitutional amendment is no longer needed.

It would be a serious miscalculation to think that the recent Upper House elections offered an opportune moment to amend Article 9. Whether or not revising Article 9 would require an incremental approach of multiple partial revisions, the trend of public opinion and other considerations make any changes to Article 9 infeasible at the moment.

What specific constitutional changes most people would find unobjectionable will depend on future discussions among the ruling and opposition parties, but these changes cannot be undertaken right away nor should they be rushed. It would be better to proceed with robust discussions aimed at consensus building.

As with the national referendum in the UK, public opinion on amending the Japanese constitution is divided, so circumstances must be avoided that would cleave our society.

At the moment, the highest priority should be given not to amending the constitution but rather to addressing economic concerns. Abenomics is still only half done, as the prime minister himself has acknowledged, and Japan's economy has yet to be revitalized.


The political resources gained through the victory in the House of Councilors election should be directed toward economic revitalization, and the Abe administration's dominant power should indeed be focused here.

If the government attempts to both amend the constitution and implement Abenomics, it will fall into the proverbial trap of running after two hares and catching neither.

The recent House of Councilors election, where the forces in favor of amending the constitution gained another two-thirds majority, made it apparent that a new 1955-era political order has been established. Seemingly mirroring the US-USSR Cold War structure within Japan, the Japanese Diet was divided between the LDP and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) from 1955 to 1993 in a "one and a half party system" – the LDP being the one party and the JSP the half – that allowed the LDP to maintain a prolonged one-party rule from 1955 to 1993 termed the 1955-era political order.

With the Democratic Party and the Japan Communist Party having teamed up to oppose the ruling LDP and Komeito in this last election, the LDP/Komeito as the one and the DP/JCP factions as the half now constitute a “one and a half party system.”

The Democratic Party of Japan controlled the government for three years and three months from 2009 to 2012 but, despite changing its name to Minshinto and making a new start as a moderate liberal party after having been abandoned by voters in the past three national elections, its partnership with the far-left JCP has clearly given it more of the character of an opposition party. The Democratic Party now resembles the old Japan Socialist Party as a perennial opposition party.

It seems hard to believe that the political instability arising from a change of prime ministers every year was once deemed a risk factor because, as a look around the world reveals, it is little exaggeration to say that no other country is as politically stable as Japan. That is why this chance to strive for economic revitalization must not be allowed to slip away. 

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