

U.S.-Japan alliance holds firm in vote

by Linda de Hoyos

Although the forces for the break-up of the Western alliance are moving with increasing speed in Western Europe and the United States, in Japan, the line for the U.S.-Japan alliance held firmly July 6 with the landslide victory of the Liberal Democratic Party in national elections. When the count was in, the LDP won 304 seats in the 512-seat lower house of the Japanese Diet.

For the LDP, the election, held for seats in both houses of the Diet, was a clear reversal of the setback it suffered in 1983, when LDP voters tended to stay home. Although it is recognized in Japan that the opposition parties had nothing to offer voters but criticism of the LDP and government of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, the elections July 6 saw a 71% vote turnout. But LDP voters came out not only to affirm their allegiance to the party, but to deliver a mandate to Nakasone.

This mandate was delivered despite the fact that the prime minister's acceding to demands to "open" Japan's market and suppress its exports has caused a near-recession in the Japanese economy. Only a week before the elections, statistics were released showing that the growth in GNP for the first quarter of the year was minus .5%, and that Japan, Inc. was for the first time registering a negative growth rate. Nevertheless, Japanese came out to the polls to vote for the LDP.

The vote itself had been called by Nakasone in a bid for an unprecedented third term, required, said the prime minister, in order to "put Japan on the road to the 21st century." Nakasone, who states in his autobiography that he wants to become "the de Gaulle of Japan," has set as a goal bringing Japan's role in international strategic and political affairs in line with its global economic power. In the political spectrum of the faction leaders and government servants of the LDP, he stands out as a strong nationalist who implies that Japan is ready to emerge from the shadows of World War II and take its place in the world with greater international contributions.

He also stands for increased defense spending, and in part based his political career while in office on maintaining a strong alliance with the United States. He has stated unequivocally that personally, he believes Japan should enter into government-to-government participation in the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative.

This image of a strong Japan, proud of its achievements of the last 40 years, a Japan strongly tied to the United States

but also able to defend itself, is what brought voters out for the LDP. The vote was produced by "the Japanese character," said one Japanese political observer. "In the bottom of their hearts, the Japanese people like Mr. Nakasone."

The biggest loser in the election was the Japanese Socialist Party, the counterpart to Western Europe's Socialist International decouplers. The JSP, the largest opposition party, lost some 25 seats while other opposition parties lost 1 or 2 seats. JSP leader Masahi Ishibashi, who has carried on his own diplomacy with the Soviet Union and North Korea, hinted July 7 that he might resign: "I feel a strong sense of crisis. Nakasone will push forward many dangerous plans, such as Japanese participation in the Strategic Defense Initiative."

A Nakasone third term?

Nakasone emerged from the elections the strongest politician in Japan, but he must win a power struggle within the party if he is to force through the two-thirds majority that would allow him to change the rule that limits the chairman's term to two. The chairman of the majority LDP automatically becomes prime minister.

Nakasone's own faction in the party now stands as the second largest, right behind that of the powerful Kakuei Tanaka, the last Japanese prime minister to gain an international reputation before he was watergated by the Kissinger-orchestrated Lockheed scandal of 1976.

Nakasone's first challenger is Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe, a member of the faction led by former prime minister Takeo Fukuda, who announced his bid for the prime ministership right before the elections. Another strong rival is Finance Minister Noboru Takeshita, a leader in the 87-member strong Tanaka faction. Either one of these two leaders is expected to continue the policies of the Nakasone government. LDP Executive Council Chairman Kiichi Miyazawa was also a contender, but his chances are dashed by the election results. Miyazawa favored resistance to the trade pressures coming from the United States and the agreement that Japan should stimulate domestic demand for consumer goods, rather than continuing its export-oriented economy. Miyazawa would only be in the running for the premiership, political sources say, if the LDP had lost the majority.

If Nakasone uses his mandate to bring down the Japanese economy, on orders from Washington, his popularity will wane fast. At the May Tokyo summit of OECD leaders, the Japanese prime minister was unable to withstand pressures from the White House and Western Europe for Japan to self-destruct. Japanese corporate and financial circles fear that Nakasone could well bring the U.S. recession to the Far Eastern side of the Pacific. However, Nakasone could also use his political strength and the strength of his nation's institutions to judo the pressure back—in forcing reorganization of the monetary system. This he will be required to do, if he is deliver on his promise to take Japan into the 21st century.