

The Good Son Falters: Japan's Abe Regime in Decline

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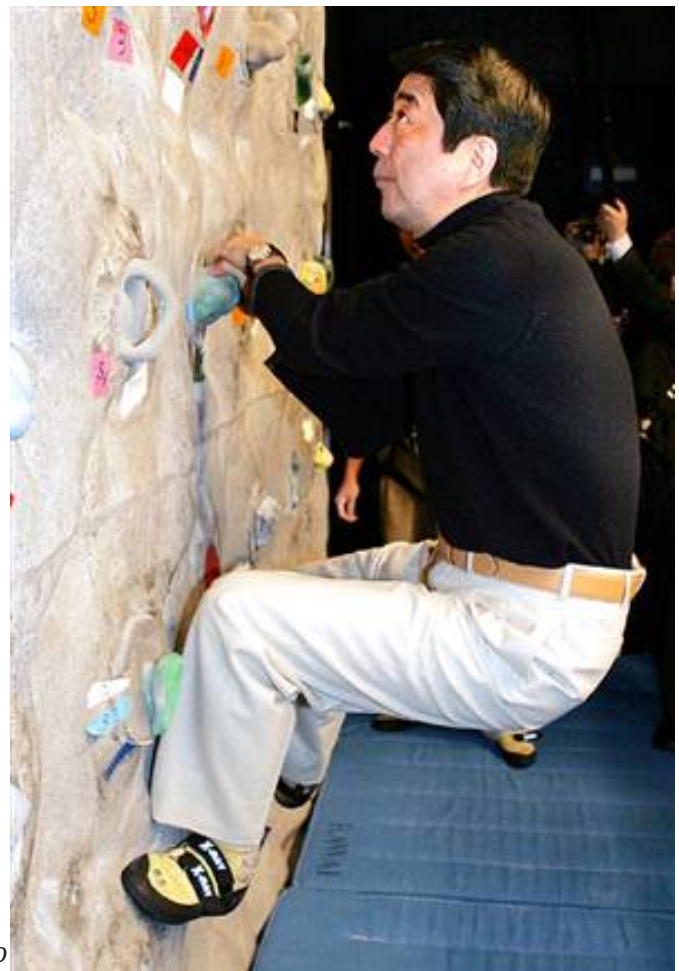
The Good Son Falters: Japan's Abe Regime in Decline

By Christian Caryl and Akiko KASHIWAGI

[Abe Shinzo, Japan's nationalist prime minister, surprised many observers with a strong start abroad. Now he's in trouble at home. Caryl and Kashiwage show how distant the Abe Junzo regime's ideologically-driven obsessions with constitutional revision and patriotic education are from the pocketbook issues that concern most Japanese voters. Their findings were backed up recently with empirical proof. A Yomiuri newspaper opinion poll released on February 20th shows that Abe's pet issue, constitutional revision, is listed as a priority by only 6.2% of respondents. This marginal level of support contrasts sharply with the 61.7% ranking for reforms to social security, 52% for economic and employment initiatives, and 34% for child-care and other policies dealing with the dwindling birthrate, issues on which the Abe administration has been virtually silent. Even the "North Korea problem" - which poll respondents presumably associated with the abductee issue - only weighs in at 32.8% after years of pounding by the media under both Koizumi and Abe regimes. The poll results, in Japanese, can be viewed [here](#).

In the same issue of Newsweek, commentator Yoichi Funabashi points to Japan's international isolation in the wake of the recent Beijing agreement projecting North Korea nuclear rollback in exchange for energy assistance and an end to international isolation. Contrasting the deal with the 1994 arrangement when Japan was among the largest financial contributors to provide light water reactors, he notes that the Abe regime's insistence

on prioritizing the abduction issue above strategic concerns has relegated it to the sidelines. The result is to weaken Japan's influence in East Asia as well as its relations with the United States. (Andrew DeWit)]



Heading down? Abe has seen his poll numbers drop dramatically in the five months since he took office.

The man who runs Japan's ruling party has seen his share of intrigues and scandals. But on Feb. 18, Hidenao Nakagawa, chief of the Liberal Democratic Party, found himself in an

unprecedented situation: scolding colleagues for failing to respect the boss. "Those politicians who do not stand up when the prime minister enters the cabinet room and stop talking among themselves are not suitable for this administration," he thundered. "Absolute loyalty and self-sacrifice are called for from members of the cabinet and the bureaucracy."

Time was Tokyo's politicians didn't need tips on how to treat the top man. But respect for the chief is one of many things has slipped under Shinzo Abe, five months into his term as prime minister. After a strong start, when he deftly used trips abroad to warm Japan's icy relations with China and South Korea, Abe's administration has succumbed to inertia, scandal and backbiting. It's a surprising turnaround for a leader who was expected to run into trouble on foreign policy (due to his staunchly nationalistic views) but, as a scion of the political aristocracy, to do well on domestic affairs. Yet this supposedly tough-minded conservative is now being faulted by the public for weak leadership and a resounding failure to stay on message. While his single-minded focus on revising Japan's pacifist Constitution, restoring patriotism, and boosting defense may be red meat for his conservative base, he seems increasingly out of touch with the issues that move ordinary Japanese.

Abe's tenure has been complicated by what one could call his "conservative idealism"—a sensibility shaped both by his status as heir to a long line of conservative politicians and as the first Japanese prime minister born after the war. Abe aims to free Japan from the shackles of a postwar order dictated largely by the United States. "The framework of [Japan] has to be created by the Japanese people themselves from a blank sheet," Abe wrote in his manifesto, *Towards a Beautiful Country*. "Only then can [Japan] regain its true independence." It's a grandiose dream that, so far at least, seems to be trumping mundane bread-and-butter issues. Critics charge Abe is

more concerned with constitutional change and building patriotism than Japan's pressing economic problems. Making matters worse, he's also failed to ride herd over his government and present the public with a compelling narrative about where he intends to take Japan. "There's no pretense any longer that he's got things under control," says Richard Samuels, a Japan expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "The public knows it and ... they're running away in large numbers."

The polls show a politician in free-fall. In just four months, Abe's popularity has plummeted by 30 points. That's left him with a 37 percent approval rating, but "the problem is that the drop has been so fast," says political commentator Kichiya Kobayashi. "There are no signs of how it might be reversed." Columbia University's Gerald Curtis, a leading U.S. expert on Japanese politics, argues that it's "hard to see [Abe] turning [things] around and becoming popular with the public again."

The speed of Abe's collapse may be surprising, but one cause is clear: surrounded by young and inexperienced advisers, he can't stay focused on the problems that worry voters. Abe talks with dogged persistence about that goal of a "beautiful country" that can be unashamedly proud of itself. But indications are that ordinary Japanese are more concerned with their pensions and health-care system. The prime minister has pushed for a grand educational reform to boost patriotism, but his constituents think more about large class sizes and plummeting test scores. Abe's conservative agenda may resonate with his right-wing base, but it won't get him through two electoral tests he faces in the months ahead. "[Local party members] don't talk about the Constitution," concedes LDP spokeswoman Satsuki Katayama. They are focused instead on bringing money and jobs to their constituencies, she says.

Not only has Abe failed to respond; he can't

even control his government. This is perhaps his surprising failure so far. Abe hails from one of Japan's most famous political dynasties: his father and grandfather both held top jobs. Abe spent most of the Junichiro Koizumi years as the prime minister's right-hand man. This should have prepared him to run a tight ship. "Known as he was as a hawk, I thought he'd exert more leadership," says Kobayashi, "but he turned out to be just another well-bred son."

The result has been chaos: two top officials have been forced to resign over the mishandling of public funds. Abe's come under fire not censuring his Health minister, who on January 27 referred to Japan's women as "baby-making machines." Still other members of his cabinet have made waves by openly criticizing Washington's policies in Iraq. "[Abe's government] is just like an unruly class in one of today's schools," says Kobayashi.

Defenders of the prime minister point out that Japan's relations with its neighbors—one area where Koizumi caused serious damage and Abe was expected to struggle—are better than they've been in years. And the country's economy is recovering. The GDP is growing at a healthy annual rate of 4.8 percent and corporate profits have hit record highs. But ordinary voters have yet to taste the gains. According to the economist Akio Mikuni, Japan's recovery has been primarily fueled by a boom in exports to expanding markets in China and the United States. Yet due to pressure from lower wage countries, Japan's corporations have been reluctant to pass their profits on to employees. "During the postwar period of growth everyone participated," notes Noriko Hama of Kyoto's Doshisha University. "Today that's not happening. Workers also face rising taxes and a fraying social security system. Abe has pledged to help those left behind, stimulate growth through innovation and increase productivity, but has yet to propose a convincing plan for doing so."

What's ironic about all of this is that Koizumi faced similar criticism from the left during his

tenure, especially in his last year in power. Yet he never suffered anything like Abe's crash. That's because Koizumi never lost control of the political process and appealed directly to voters with a clear and persuasive message about the need for reform. Koizumi famously declared that he was out to "destroy the LDP" and the traditional system of vested interests, which he assured voters would give a huge boost to Japan's efficiency and competitiveness. He cast the 2005 parliamentary election, for example, as a referendum on his campaign to privatize Japan's immense, state-run postal service (which includes the country's largest bank) in order to introduce market forces and break the power of corrupt officials. The public bought it, and Koizumi's team won a landslide, even winning over large numbers of unaffiliated voters.



Koizumi and postal reform

Other than his nationalist credo, Abe has been

unable to come up with such a direct pitch or present himself as a reformer. His popularity took its biggest hit last December, when he readmitted to the LDP 11 conservatives Koizumi had exiled for their resistance. LDP headquarters was promptly swamped by thousands of messages from angry voters protesting the decision. Admits LDP spokeswoman Satsuki Katayama: "We clearly underestimated this."

Such events point at an even thornier problem Abe must confront. In April and July, his camp faces a series of key elections they likely can't win without the help of the LDP's well-oiled machine. Yet if Abe seems to capitulate to the old guard, he risks alienating voters hungry for more reform. Faced with such choices, Koizumi could always bank on his great popular support. "[But Abe] has to build up his own power base," says Satomi Tani, a political-science professor from Okayama University.

Without it, Abe is unlikely to force the LDP into line. "Koizumi generated an air of fear," notes Kobayashi. But Abe, he says, won't crack heads or give clear marching orders to the bureaucracy or his party. As a result, says Toranosuke Katayama, a key LDP member in Parliament's upper house, "Team Abe" is struggling to keep its grip on the LDP. While the party's old-timers may have resented Koizumi's hard line, they like Abe's indecisiveness even less. As Columbia University's Curtis says, "You hear lots of complaints from people in [Abe's] government about the lack of coordination, the lack of a real political strategy. ... He needs a Karl Rove sort of person. He needs an enforcer."

In the meantime, infighting between the cabinet and civil servants is getting worse. The ministerial scandals appear to have been triggered by information leaked from once powerful civil servants who, according to MIT's Samuels, may be trying to wreak their revenge for the marginalization they suffered under

Koizumi. Rumors about a cabinet reshuffle have also been leaked by disgruntled LDP members.

All these problems could soon come to a head. The upcoming elections could prove a bellwether for Abe's government. Optimists argue that the prime minister's poll numbers aren't that bad, and that Koizumi was able to overcome a similar slump. Moreover, the opposition, led by the Democratic Party of Japan, has so far proved strikingly inept in its own right.

Yet threats are looming, even in an area where Abe's done relatively well: foreign policy. So far he's managed to avoid the unresolved historical controversies over Japan's imperialist past that still vexes relations with its neighbors. But as time goes on, Abe's fundamental conservatism could make this balancing act more difficult. This year, for example, marks the 70th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre—a killing spree committed by the Japanese Army during its war in China. If Beijing takes issue with the increasing tendency of Japan's conservatives to deny the event, it could force Abe to publicly side with his right-wing supporters. So could a pending U.S. congressional resolution asking Japan to apologize for its wartime recruitment of the "comfort women," or forced prostitutes.



Chinese students place flowers in front of a monument for victims during a gathering marking the 68th anniversary of the Nanjing

Massacre in Nanjing, Dec. 13, 2005.

Meanwhile, Japan's export-led economic recovery could stall if growth slows in the United States or China. The weakness of the yen has helped exporters but also fed a risky "carry trade," as investors borrow cheap currency at low Japanese interest rates and reinvest it abroad in more lucrative markets. If those investors are suddenly forced to abandon their positions by fear of a sudden increase in the yen's value, the effect could be profoundly destabilizing. All of which would mean big trouble for Abe. "It's almost time [for the Abe cabinet] to wake up," scolded former prime minister Yoshiro Mori earlier this month. "It has to get its house in order." That's ironic advice, coming from one of the least successful Japanese leaders in recent memory. All the more galling, then, that he's probably right.

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