

The Abe manoeuvre

Prime Minister [Shinz Abe's Liberal Democratic Party has secured a resounding victory](#) for a third term in the poll to the Lower House of Japan's Diet. The development bucks the recent trend in advanced economies of incumbents being returned with much-reduced margins. A vindication of his decision to call elections a year ahead of schedule, the outcome increases Mr. Abe's prospects of winning a third term next year as leader of his conservative party and becoming Japan's longest-serving premier. The deeper import of the verdict, however, lies in the requisite two-thirds mandate to press ahead with plans to revise the country's U.S.-backed post-War pacifist constitution to reflect current geopolitical realities. The prospect of securing such a large majority had seemed in doubt given the public scepticism over amending the charter, coupled with a drop in Mr. Abe's personal ratings. Now, having cleared that hurdle, he would hope to garner support to accord legal status to the Japan Self-Defence Forces, leaving intact the no-war provisions in the 1947 constitution. In this, he would count on the backdrop of escalating tensions over North Korea's nuclear belligerence and China's growing military influence in the region. But public approval of the proposal in a plebiscite will be the all-important challenge. Sunday's verdict was otherwise largely a foregone conclusion, as the charismatic Governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, did not even contest the race from the new platform she had launched, the Party of Hope. In any case, her fundamentally conservative orientation, even on the constitution, left voters with no real alternative. The opposition Democratic Party, facing months of internal turmoil, initially considered fielding candidates under the banner of Ms. Koike's party. But the latter's insistence on a loyalty test for nominees led to a split within the opposition.

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With a firm mandate, the government should be able to focus more on the Abenomics strategy to further stimulate growth and demand. A June assessment of the International Monetary Fund points to the country's sustained growth and record unemployment as evidence of the success of the model. Also significant is the Fund's support for the Bank of Japan's continued loose monetary policy in the face of weak demand. Mr. Abe's poll promise to further boost the fiscal stimulus should please critics who say that concerns over public debt were being overplayed. Whereas Mr. Abe is weighing a sharp increase in the controversial consumption tax up to 10% by 2019, the Fund has proposed a more calibrated approach. Such an alternative may be the right course in a country with a declining working-age population, and faced with persistently low consumer spending. Mr. Abe has his eyes set on seeing the country through the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Japan will by then be a very different country from what it was in 1964, when it first hosted the Summer Games.

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