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International News

Koizumi wins reform mandate

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
[Guardian Weekly](#)

The Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, won a landslide election victory last Sunday, a result that gives him the popular mandate he sought to push ahead with plans to privatise the country's post office after an acrimonious struggle against opponents inside his own party. The public broadcaster NHK reported that Mr Koizumi's Liberal Democratic party had won 296 seats in the 480-seat lower house. The Democratic party, the main opposition, saw its strength in the chamber slashed from 175 seats to 113.

A smiling Mr Koizumi said after his victory: "I feel as if I have destroyed the old LDP and that a new party has emerged. I had hoped that we would win a majority with our party alone, but we did even better than that. I thank the nation for its support and understanding." But he said he still planned to step down as prime minister next September at the end of his term as president of the LDP.

The Democrats' leader, Katsuya Okada, said he would step down after a miserable night for his party. "Our policies weren't wrong, but we did not get them across to the voters," he said in a news conference.

In a typical piece of political theatre, Mr Koizumi called the election on August 8 after members of his own party voted down a series of bills that would break up Japan Post and turn over its 330 trillion yen (\$3bn) in savings and other assets to the private sector.

His decision to publicly challenge his erstwhile LDP colleagues was interpreted by some as tantamount to political suicide, and early on there was even talk of an LDP defeat after 50 years of almost uninterrupted rule. But in the weeks that followed he convinced voters of the need for post office privatisation, the centrepiece of his reform plans, while avoiding discussion of other issues such as involvement in Iraq and pension reform.

Shinzo Abe, the LDP's acting secretary general, said his party would continue to govern with its coalition partner, New Komeito, even after a landslide victory. The ruling coalition, with a total of 327 seats, now has more than two-thirds of the seats in the lower house, giving it absolute control of parliamentary committees.

Commentators said the victory, the second-biggest in the LDP's history, had sealed Mr Koizumi's reputation as a master tactician. "It all went according to Koizumi's strategy," Jiro Yamaguchi, a politics professor at Hokkaido University, told Reuters. "A big avalanche has occurred."

The result was the culmination of one of the bitterest elections in Japan's postwar history. After calling a snap election Mr Koizumi withdrew his party's backing for 37 LDP colleagues who opposed postal reform, forcing them to run as independents or form new parties. He then sent a handpicked group of new candidates, many of them young and with little political experience, to stand against the rebels. They included celebrities.

The tactic ignited interest in the campaign after years of voter apathy. The 67.5% turnout was the highest for 15 years and a big increase on the 59.9% recorded at the previous election, in 2003. the lowest turnout since 1947.

Simon Tisdall writes: Junichiro Koizumi is the sudoku puzzle of Japanese politics. Nothing seems to add up. But somehow it all works out in the end. He is portrayed as a maverick loner. But last weekend's landslide election victory puts him in line to become one of Japan's longest-serving postwar prime ministers. He is treated like a pop idol, nicknamed the Lion King. Yet his abstemious lifestyle more resembles a latter-day samurai.

After taking office in 2001 Mr Koizumi failed to deliver political reform. But the snap poll has won him an unprecedented reformist mandate. In British terms it is his Clause IV moment [the contentious rewriting of the Labour party's aims]. And it could permanently change Japanese politics.

"Koizumi is an impenetrable character," said Christopher Hughes of the University of Warwick. "But fundamentally he is a political reformer interested in attacking the vested interests within his own party."

His re-election will make waves abroad, too. China and South Korea will not welcome his success after rising tensions during his tenure. "He is not really a nationalist. But he does want Japan to be treated as a big power," Mr Hughes said.

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