
Latter-day samurai could transform politics

**Simon Tisdall**The Guardian, Monday 12 September 2005

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 yesterday's landslide election victory puts him in line to become one of Japan's longest-serving post-war 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, called after privatisation plans were thwarted by ruling Liberal Democratic party rebels, has won him an unprecedented reformist mandate. In British terms, it is his Clause IV moment. 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 and shutting down pork barrel politics.

"He's serious enough about it to risk sacrificing his political life. A bit of a samurai, perhaps, but more like tokkotia - literally meaning 'special attack force', ready to go down in flames. That makes him a very unusual politician," he said.

Mr Koizumi is now expected to accelerate plans to reduce "big government", expand free-market policies and improve pension and healthcare provision for an ageing, increasingly urbanised population. Potentially deeply divisive in terms of Japan's post-war social compact, that could split the LDP ideologically and bring a realignment of political forces.

But by steadily accumulating executive power, Mr Koizumi has the tools for the job, said Machidori Satoshi of Kyoto University in the journal Japan Echo. Like Tony Blair, he is known as the "presidential prime minister".

Mr Koizumi's 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. "He's not

interested in being anti-Chinese. But I think he will probably visit the Yasukuni shrine again." Previous visits to the shrine to Japanese war dead provoked furious protests from Beijing.

But Washington, which wants Japan to play a wider regional security role, will be pleased by the result. Mr Koizumi publicly supported George Bush's re-election bid last year and sent non-combat troops to Iraq.

"Koizumi supports both a constitutional revision that would turn Japan into a 'normal' military power and a new law allowing for collective self-defence, meaning Japan can help others like the US or Taiwan," Dr Hughes said. That is potentially explosive, at home and abroad.

Yet paradoxical to the last, Mr Koizumi may be out of office next year, when his LDP presidency expires. He could change the rules but has so far insisted he will not - another among the innumerable puzzles in the Koizumi conundrum.



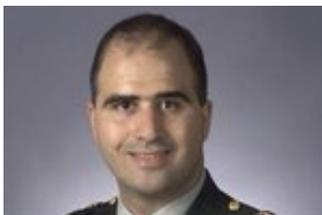
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