On October 31, lower house election was held in Japan, the primary outcome of which can be summed up as the preservation of the domestic political status quo. With some noteworthy caveats, as discussed below.

The final data published on the distribution of the parliamentary seats received by the opponents show that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party maintains a comfortable majority, 261 of the total 465 seats in the lower house, having lost only 15 seats, that is, less than 5%, compared to the previous results.

This result is not bad at all, given the seriousness of all sorts of internal problems stemming from public doubts about the adequacy of actions on the part of recent Cabinets of Ministers of Liberal Democratic Party in the ongoing Covid-19 epidemic. It is safe to say that current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who became leader of the Liberal Democratic Party in late September, passed his first significant test quite successfully. Apparently, the voters preferred to leave all the various burdens of accumulated costs on the shoulders of the party’s former leadership, allowing the new leader to prove himself positively.

The Komeito Party, the Liberal Democratic Party’s minority partner, which stands, as Buddhists should, for everything good and against everything bad, has added three seats to its previous 29. Together they have 293
mandates, which means they are now 12 seats short of the two-thirds in the lower house needed to start the tough procedure for amendments to the Constitution that has been in force since 1947.

For the Liberal Democratic Party, the main target of such amendments has for decades been the anti-war Article 9. Mind you, it cannot be said to have proved an insurmountable obstacle to Japan’s military buildup. The current armed forces of the country, which, incidentally, are still referred to with a euphemism “Japan’s Self-Defense Forces,” are a clear evidence of this. The Self-Defense Forces will assume internationally common features if the statement made last fall by the current Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi regarding the need to acquire the potential for delivering “preventive” strikes against targets in the territories of neighbors, which are considered a source of specific threats, is implemented.

It bears stressing once again that the presence of Article 9 in Japan’s current Constitution does not hinder the creeping process of “normalization” in Japan. But it will be easier, of course, once some constitutional constraint is kept out of the way. Fumio Kishida has repeatedly stated his intention to continue the efforts of his predecessors to introduce amendments to Article 9 that would at least legalize the existence of Japan’s armed forces. However, it should be noted that the Liberal Democratic Party’s partner, the Komeito Party, is being very cautious in this matter.

Nor does the bloc of five center-left opposition forces led by the Constitutional Democratic Party support such intentions by Liberal Democratic Party. The bloc began taking shape a year ago to organize opposition to the Liberal Democratic Party in the run-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections. The bloc participants managed to agree on nominating a single, most promising candidate in 70% of the total number (289) of majoritarian districts. The winners of these are the ones who fill the lower house of Japan’s parliament by two-thirds. The remaining third are representatives of the parties that received the highest number of votes in the inter-party contest.

The opposition coalition could only be considered a success if it defeated the ruling Liberal Democratic Party-Komeito tandem, depriving the latter of the right to form the country’s government. This would mean that the new government, which Fumio Kishida presented only on October 4 for approval by the previous parliament, would have to resign already at the first meeting of the new parliament to be held on November 10.

But no miracle happened. Moreover, the opposition also suffered losses in the relatively few possessions it had before the election. The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the leader of the opposition coalition, sustained the most significant losses. By gaining 96 seats instead of the previous 110, the CDP reduced the size of its faction by almost 13%. The defeat of the party is already regarded as “humiliating” and fraught with the change of its leadership.

The main reason for the coalition’s failure was the initial artificiality of its composition as the parties with sharply divergent basic ideological and political positions tried to establish cooperation between each other. Attention is drawn to the fact that over 80% of disciplined communists followed the recommendations of their leadership and voted in majoritarian districts for - ideologically alien to them - candidates from the CDP, while the members of this latter reciprocated less than 50% of the time.

Leaders of the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), which refused to join the coalition, pointed out the corrupt nature of the latter’s participants. This is interesting, to say the least, given that in its present form, the JIP is also a conglomeration of several political, mainly right-wing parties. The political “fodder” of the Japan Innovation Party is mainly in a field long mastered by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. As the results of the last election show, the JIP managed to “feed” on this field only partially. It found the other half of its votes in the opposition field.

Overall, the quadrupling of the JIP’s faction in Japan’s lower house represents the biggest upset of the past elections. In the author’s view, it is unlikely to be repeated in subsequent acts of the electoral process. Apparently, voters wished to add variety to the political party menu on offer with something fresh and spicy. But within reasonable limits. If this new “political dish” doesn’t appeal, we’ll indulge in something else tomorrow.

Turnout in the last general election, at 56%, was not high by Japanese standards, which is quite typical of the previous decade. In the 2000s, it exceeded 65%, reaching 70%, as was the case, for example, in 2009, when the Democratic Party, the predecessor of the current CDP, won. The third lowest level of voter turnout in the entire postwar period in 2021 can be explained by two factors: the fear of contracting the coronavirus and the noticeable erosion of fundamental differences in the key positions of the participants in the political process on the central issues of domestic and foreign policy.

The Prime Minister’s first statement since the last election was that he will draw up a stimulus package by mid-
November to prop up the coronavirus-hit economy. During the election campaign, Fumio Kishida repeatedly spoke of the need to ease the conditions for private businesses and help the neediest. To this end, he is going to request in next year’s budget additional spending on projects estimated to cost “tens of trillions of yen” (that is, hundreds of billions of dollars).

Foreign policy was not a priority topic during Japan’s general lower house elections. Nothing fundamentally new is expected from the same Liberal Democratic Party government that has ruled the country almost continuously since the mid-1950s.

As early as next summer, Kishida will have to lead his party through another electoral cycle, which will be the re-election of half of the upper house of parliament.

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