

Despite Some Foreign Policy Success, Japan's Abe Faces Problems at Home

By Jason Miks

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TOKYO -- Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe returned to Tokyo Saturday from what he described as a "very satisfying" debut at the Group of Eight summit in Germany.

Yet despite being quick to claim some personal success in steering international discussions on subjects including climate change, he returns to another in a series of polls showing support for his cabinet has plummeted in recent weeks.

A survey by the Yomiuri Shimbun published Friday (June 8) showed Abe cabinet's approval rating had sunk to 32.9 percent -- a 17 percent drop from a poll conducted by the same newspaper less than three weeks earlier.

A Kyodo News poll taken days after the suicide late last month of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka, who was under pressure for his role in an alleged expenses scandal, showed the disapproval rate edging up toward 50 percent, while more than half of respondents expressed dissatisfaction over the government's handling of pension data, including its failure to keep track of about 50 million premium payments.

"There's been a combination of bad news, and this has created a sense of drift," says Koichi Nakano, associate professor of political science at Sophia University in Tokyo. "And once support falls to the 30s the Japanese media feels more confident criticizing."

Steven Reed, professor of modern government at Tokyo's Chuo University, says the declining support for Abe's Cabinet can be traced back to his decision last year to allow so-called postal rebels, who were ejected from the Liberal Democratic Party by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for opposing postal reforms, to rejoin the ruling LDP.

"What Koizumi did was run against the LDP. He was effectively the opposition to the party," Reed says. "Abe had the chance to build on that, but as soon as he let the rebels back in, he became a normal LDP prime minister."

He also believes the LDP's current woes mean there is a genuine chance it could lose its upper house majority to the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan in elections next month.

Abe has tried to whip up support for his government's agenda with calls to make Japan a "beautiful country," a slogan based on the title of a book he released just before assuming office. To drive home the point, the government has broken down its campaign platform into four categories -- "building a beautiful country," "working

toward a more beautiful life and society," "building more beautiful towns" and "bringing this beauty to the world."

Such talk of a beautiful country, and the changes to the country's "peace constitution" Abe says it will involve, concerned many international observers prior to his taking office. Many feared the outspokenly nationalistic Abe would be ill-equipped to mend relations with other Asian nations, the deterioration of which had begun to worry many Japanese.

But Abe's quick visits to Beijing and Seoul surprised many, and early progress on talks over North Korea's nuclear program, and his insistence on placing the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents at the center of his dealings with Pyongyang, won him praise at home.

Yet despite a small uptick in his approval ratings following Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's "ice-melting" visit to Japan in April, Abe's efforts on the international stage appear to have had little effect on his cabinet's popularity overall.

"The abductee issue has been the most important for Abe's support," Nakano says. "But at this point the usefulness of this issue is limited. With the U.S. now talking directly to North Korea, international relations are moving in a direction that is out of his control."

Reed agrees it is unlikely Abe will be able to leverage international issues for a boost in the upper house race. "International issues hardly have any impact on elections in Japan. If something happened on the abductee issue then maybe. But otherwise, no."

Nakano believes it is still too early to try to predict what will happen in July. "I think it could go either way. The election is still more than a month away, so it's impossible to know," he says. "A month ago, for example, no one would have predicted the suicide." But he believes that a poor showing could put Abe's premiership in danger. "If the DPJ wins handsomely it could lead to Abe having to resign."

Theodore McNelly, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland, echoes this view. "He hasn't been in power very long, and in many ways this election could be seen as a referendum on the new prime minister," he says.

Indeed, McNelly points to Abe's grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, as an example of what could await Abe himself. "In 1960, there was controversy over revision of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Agreement and Kishi ended up being replaced by his own party," McNelly says.

But Nakano believes the LDP may have a wild card up its sleeve in the form of the People's New Party, should the race prove tight.

"They might pick up a couple of seats," says Nakano of the small party that includes former postal rebels. "It's quite possible if the LDP did badly, Abe might want those rebels back in the party. This is something of a detached unit of the LDP and although

people might think they are voting against the LDP, they would actually be voting for a candidate who could end up being part of the party again."

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