

## **Koizumi rewrote the rulers' rule book**

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The most important election in East Asia this year will take place tomorrow in Japan. Junichiro Koizumi will step down as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and, consequently, as Prime Minister of Japan, ending his reign as postwar Japan's most powerful, controversial and successful political leader.

If, as everyone expects, his anointed successor, Shinzo Abe, replaces him, Koizumi will not only have broken the mould of Japanese politics, but forged a new one.

At first glance, one may think I have got it all wrong. Isn't September 20 simply politics as usual in Japan? The decisive vote is not between parties but within the party that has ruled Japan for 99 per cent of the last half-century. And the winner was known over a month before the vote after being favoured by the incumbent Prime Minister.

This is why second and third glances are so worthwhile. In his heart, Koizumi is neither an international statesman nor an economic technocrat: he is a political warrior. Koizumi's main political battle has been to reshape the Liberal Democratic Party from a hidebound, faction-riven party producing forgettable leaders and tied to a dwindling but needy rural constituency. He has won his battle by encapsulating many of modern, urban Japan's deepest political frustrations into a cohesive, coherent and very popular political message that Abe has inherited. Abe is now the most popular politician in Japan.

Koizumi's message fuses charismatic, iconoclastic leadership, commitment to economic liberalisation and fiscal stabilisation, assertive nationalism, solid support for the United States globally and a willingness to annoy neighbours. For his final trip to the Yasukuni shrine as leader, he pointedly chose for the first time to visit on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II. All these elements are united by a call for radical change from within and greater national pride and confidence. Each of these elements is contrary to the Japanese political status quo. Together they represent a complete overhaul.

The leadership race started months ago as a battle between Koizumi's new politics and a return to pre-Koizumi days. Abe offered himself as Koizumi's heir and to push some of his message even further. Yasuo Fukuda presented himself as the anti-Koizumi candidate, criticising his economic reforms as too painful and his international policy as too nationalistic and insensitive to regional opinion. He opposes trips to the Yasukuni shrine; Abe visits the shrine regularly. Fukuda promised to seek reconciliation with China; Abe networks with America's dragon-slayers.

The campaign became Japan's most platform-based and policy-driven in living memory, where party members were offered a clear choice on some of the most profound national questions. With help from North Korea's latest missile tests, Abe has won the competition hands down already, and Fukuda has withdrawn from the race. The LDP does not want to rewind history to the pre-Koizumi status quo and neither do the Japanese.

Ironically, Koizumi's legacy may be strongest in its impact on Japan's only significant opposition party, the Democratic Party. Before the 2005 national elections, many people expected it to challenge for power. Yet the party, with its call for economic reform with a more

human face, pension reform and better relations with China, was decimated. It lost 64 of 179 seats and any realistic hope of replacing the LDP soon.

Since that disaster, the Democratic Party has opted for opposition through imitation. It replaced Katsuya Okada, the dull standard-bearer of the pacifist, social democratic traditions of the Japanese opposition, with Seiji Maehara, a young, charismatic right-winger willing to discuss removing the war-renouncing clause in Japan's constitution.

Today, the Democratic Party is led by Ichiro Ozawa, Koizumi's intellectual predecessor, who 15 years ago attempted as a young conservative maverick in the LDP to achieve what Koizumi has now done. In Australian terms, this would be like a desperate Labor Party electing an ambitious but thwarted dry Liberal as their leader. Ozawa has just been re-elected, unopposed, as head of the Democratic Party. The left-wing right-wing split that has defined the Japanese postwar party system has collapsed.

Koizumi has reoriented the LDP into a modern, assertive controversial political voice and shifted the political system significantly to the right. This has set the necessary, but not sufficient, preconditions for more aggressive economic reform and assertive, power-wielding international policy. Koizumi's new politics are here to stay.

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