Japanese politics

Mutton dressed as lamb

As the candidates fan out for a general election on December 16th, voters look as volatile as ever

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LOOKING more like members of a J-Pop band than of parliament, two 30-something candidates of the Liberal Democratic Party hit the campaign trail in Tokyo on December 4th offering voters “a new LDP”. It seemed a promising start on the first day of campaigning for the general election on December 16th: girls screamed and mothers swooned. Yet that was mostly because one of the candidates was the good-looking son of Junichiro Koizumi, prime minister from 2001 to 2006 and easily the most charismatic Japanese leader in memory. There was certainly no policy discussion. When one was asked what would be different about this new LDP, he replied with one word: “Everything.”
According to opinion polls, the LDP, which ruled Japan for most of the post-war period until its crushing defeat in 2009, is set to regain power in the lower house of the Diet, or parliament. Japan is on the brink of its third recession in five years. It has a lingering crisis over nuclear power. And to top it all, tensions over disputed islets have brought relations with China to a new low. Voters have become fed up with the prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, and his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), much as they were with the LDP three years ago, when the DPJ swept into power.

This time, however, voters appear more disenchanted with all parties. And the seventh prime minister since Mr Koizumi may be as feebly endowed to end Japan’s deflationary slump as the previous six. Shinzo Abe, the LDP’s conservative candidate for prime minister, claims to lead a different party now, the product of much “soul-searching” during three years in opposition. But polls tell conflicting stories. On December 6th Japan’s four biggest newspapers, using district-by-district assessments which they admitted may be unreliable, predicted that the LDP would easily win a majority in the 480-seat lower house and would be further boosted by its tie-up with an old ally, New Komeito. Earlier polls, however, reported support for all main parties, including the LDP, sharply lower than in 2009. The latest poll puts the DPJ in second place, down to only about 100 seats. In third place comes a staunchly nationalist new grouping, the Japan Restoration Party (JRP).

About half of voters remain undecided, however, and in the past such voters have proven wildly volatile. Floating voters clinched the two most recent elections, swinging emphatically behind Mr Koizumi’s calls in 2005 to overcome resistance inside his party to his postal-reform proposals. They swung sharply behind the DPJ, or rather against the LDP, in 2009. By the same token, this time any boost the LDP gets is most likely to be out of disenchantment with the DPJ rather than love for the LDP, which remains introspective and stuck in the past. For all that Mr Abe talks of a revitalised party, he harps on about a “beautiful Japan”, an inarticulate theme from his disastrous time as prime minister in 2006-07. Even the LDP’s campaign slogan, *Nippon o torimodosu*, can be read in two ways: retake Japan, or take Japan back (to the good old days). Mr Noda constantly seeks to portray the LDP as a throwback to the past.

The DPJ, however, is so unpopular that some of its candidates are not even putting the party’s name on their campaign posters. Still, for some voters, the
DPJ has the virtue of being just about the only centrist party. Its chief rival on this ground, though admittedly somewhat more to the left, is the newly formed Tomorrow Party of Japan. But it is led by a former DPJ heavyweight, Ichiro Ozawa, whose Tammany Hall style of patronage may turn off many moderates.

Even if the LDP wins a lower-house majority and has the help of New Komeito, it may struggle to forge alliances with smaller parties if it hopes to have the two-thirds of seats necessary to overcome opposition in the upper house, which will remain in the control of the DPJ at least until elections in July. And so policy in the Diet may grow only more scattershot. The LDP and the DPJ are at odds over Mr Abe’s threats to curtail the central bank’s independence in order to make it undertake “unlimited” monetary loosening as a way of stopping deflation. And they disagree over ending nuclear-power generation following the disaster in 2011 at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant (the LDP is the party of Japan’s “nuclear village”).

The main parties also disagree about freer trade. According to a new poll by Kyodo, a news agency, more than half of the DPJ candidates favour Japan’s participation in talks about a putative free-trade deal with America and nine other countries called the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The JRP also backs it. Yet more than four-fifths of LDP candidates oppose it.

Then comes the highly contentious issue of changing Japan’s pacifist constitution, drafted by the Americans and adopted in 1947. Many in the LDP and the JRP favour rewriting article nine, which forbids Japan to wage war or keep an army (its self-defence forces are supposed to be for protection only). They also believe in the right to “collective self-defence”, or helping out an ally—the United States, presumably—under attack.

Despite growing tensions with China, voters appear unready to go so far. Many hold the pacifist constitution to be sacred. Besides, Japanese companies in China suffered vandalism and big economic losses when the two countries argued over the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) islands in September. Businessmen and others who want improved relations with China and South Korea worry that, if Mr Abe wins and behaves insensitively over wartime issues, he could stir up more trouble. Mr Abe helped mend fences with both countries in 2006-07. But the political mood has hardened since.

Given notably short shrift in campaign manifestos are policies to respond to what voters say they want most. This includes child-care support so that
mothers can return to work; equal pay and opportunities for women; better incentives for starting new businesses; and answers to an overstretched pension system. Few concrete plans exist about how to rebuild north-eastern Japan after the tsunami and nuclear disaster in 2011. Some candidates, like Mr Koizumi’s son, have presentational flair. The rest cruise the streets in vehicles with loudspeakers, wearing sashes and white gloves, much as candidates did in the 1950s. Either way, it all seems weirdly out of touch.