

JAPAN: Abe's assassination does not portend deeper instability

- The shocking assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe on 8 July is an inflection point in modern Japanese history that will deeply shake political elites and the public alike.
- However, it is a black swan event and does not portend political or social instability.
- Sympathy votes may increase the LDP's majority in the 10 July Upper House election and Abe's passing could boost the agendas for defense build-up and constitutional revision, but it also creates a major power vacuum in the party.

Political royalty

Within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Shinzo Abe was political royalty. The Tokyo-raised grandson of a prime minister and son of a foreign minister, he inherited his father's Lower House seat in western Yamaguchi prefecture in 1993 and went on to serve as party leader and premier from 2006 to 2007 and again from 2012. After stepping down for health reasons (for the second time) in September 2020, he led the party's largest internal faction and became its *éminence grise*, a kingmaker whose blessing ensured Fumio Kishida's final-round victory in the September 2021 party leadership contest. Latterly, he used his extensive influence to push hard on key policy agendas, such as doubling defense spending and revising Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution to clarify the status of the Self Defense Forces. A third tilt at the top job did not seem out of the question.

For the public, Abe was a political colossus and a symbol of Japan's democracy. He became the country's longest-serving democratic leader and arguably the most consequential prime minister in decades. In office, he made his eponymous economic policy agenda the national orthodoxy and spearheaded controversial changes to defense policy to allow for collective self-defense. Even after leaving office, he maintained a high profile, speaking regularly in the media and in person.

Black swan event

Abe's death will shock national sentiment on several levels. While modern Japan's domestic politics has at times been more tumultuous than the country's peaceable image might suggest, there is no real analog for this event in the postwar era. A pervasive sense of safety and public order has meant that politicians could usually mingle quite freely with voters, something that is now certain to change. Moreover, the fact that the assailant used a gun (apparently homemade) is particularly shocking for a society with strict firearms regulations that registers no more than 3 or 4 gun-deaths in a typical year, usually *yakuza* gangster-related.

Even so, the murder represents a black swan event that does not portend political or social instability. Early reports remain sparse on information but suggest that the killer, who was immediately apprehended, lacked a coherent motive. There is no indication that he represents a larger grouping or that his actions will destabilize party politics in Japan.

Uncertain impacts

It remains too early to fully assess the likely impact of the assassination. In the very short term, the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition was already on course for a solid victory in the 10 July Upper House election and a wave of sympathy votes now

could boost the margin of victory. In the months ahead, the government is certain to seek to strengthen domestic security. By undermining the public's general sense of safety and order, the event could also add further momentum to those key Abe causes like defense build-up and constitutional revision.

Abe's passing will also create a major power vacuum within the LDP. Though the right wing of the party is the largest, it lacks an obvious successor with comparable skill, charisma, and determination to carry forward its agenda. Abe associates like party policy chief Sanae Takaichi, former education minister Hakubun Shimomura, and current economy minister Koichi Hagiuda will be among those seeking to inherit his mantle, but none compare in stature. Paradoxically, the more moderate Kishida, another political prince, may now be best placed to expand his influence in the party in Abe's absence.

[Client Portal >>](#)

James Brady

Vice President

+1 (646) 799-1950

james.brady@teneo.com

© 2022 Teneo. All rights reserved. This material was produced by Teneo for use solely by the recipient. This communication is intended as general background research and is not intended to constitute advice on any particular commercial investment or trade matter or issue and should not be relied upon for such purposes. The views expressed here represent opinions as of this date and are subject to change without notice. The information has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable but no guarantees can be given as to its accuracy, completeness or reliability. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the prior consent of Teneo.