Japanese Journal of Political Science 3 (2) 285–287 Printed in the United Kingdom © Cambridge University Press 2002

Support for Koizumi Administration

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One year ago the Japanese people pinned their hopes on Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. The figure shows public support ratings for the Koizumi cabinet as measured by periodic JiJi opinion surveys: He enjoyed a stellar 72.8% support rate immediately after taking office, and this climbed even higher to break the 78.4% mark the following month. Compared with the dismal 9.6% support for the cabinet of his predecessor, Mori Yoshirô (April 2000–April 2001), right before he bowed out, these sky-high numbers make it clear just how much faith the people were placing in the new administration.

Now that a year has passed, however, how are the voters grading the prime minister? And what are the prospects for the Koizumi administration? The figure clearly shows that Koizumi's support has plunged by half over the last year. It has fallen from a high of 78.4% to just 37.6%.

The support rate plunged sharply in February this year, a development many attribute to Koizumi's removal of Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka. But in truth the sacking of the foreign minister was merely the event that uncorked people's simmering dissatisfaction with Koizumi, who had made little progress on his promised agenda – bringing the economy back to health, reforming Japan's creaking structures, and doing away with the hidebound ways of the LDP. The survey by newspaper publisher Asahi Shimbun bears this out: Of the people who shifted from the pro- to the anti-Koizumi camp, 27% stated this was due to the lack of progress in structural reforms, another 27% chalked it up to the LDP's failure to change, and 23% cited the continuing economic doldrums; only 19% claimed they had withdrawn their support for Koizumi because of problems with his cabinet members.

People's opinions of the prime minister are now broadly balanced between positive and negative. The fate of the Koizumi administration rides on which direction it will take from here on out.

Koizumi's prospects are being swayed by the drop in support he is experiencing. Had he maintained his stratospheric ratings he would have been able to push bold policies through the legislature. But his falling poll figures have put fresh wind in the sails of the so-called forces of resistance, forcing the prime minister to bow to some of the demands of these politicians whose careers are founded on the traditional LDP system. Through this process Koizumi – who came on to the scene promising to do

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109902002104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

away with old-style LDP dealings – is himself becoming more LDP-like. This is pulling down the public's opinions of him further.

This dwindling support is also causing the prime minister himself to lose confidence in the policies he is championing. Comparing the Koizumi of today with the leader who launched his cabinet so full of conviction shows a man who seems to have lost his vigor of late.

As yet another effect of this shrinking support, Koizumi is seeing his chances for policy cooperation with the DPJ melt away. In the early days of his administration the prime minister was able to keep the LDP forces of resistance in check, with hints that he might bolt the party and work together with the opposition Democrats. Today, however, the DPJ shows little interest in allying itself with a premier whose star is fading, and it is opposing Koizumi more strenuously than before.

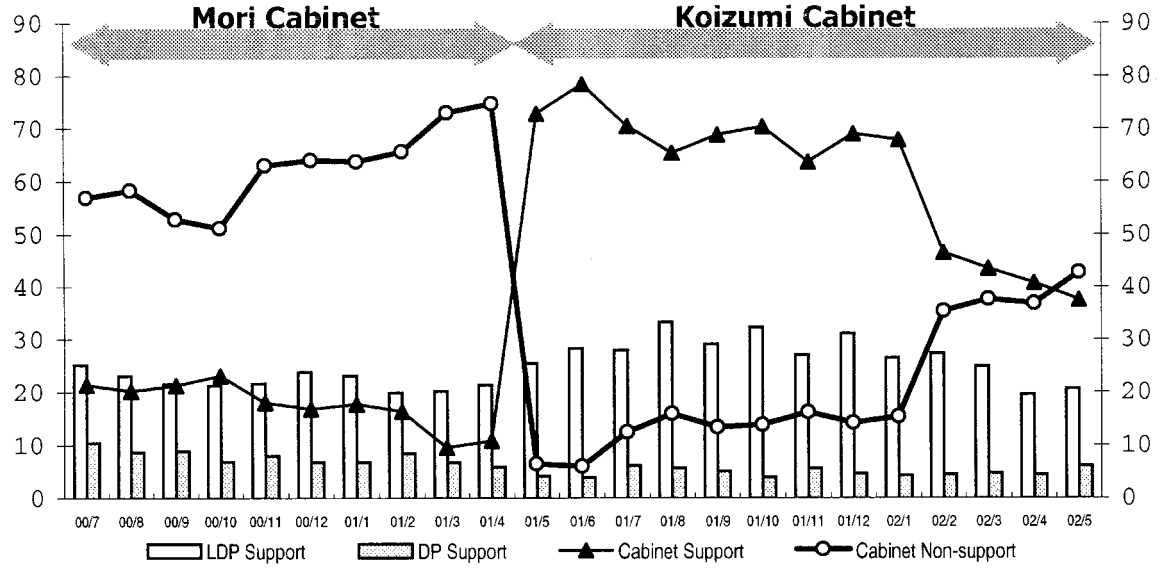
Koizumi rode to power on a wave of massive public support. Will he also be pushed out of power by popular opinion? I do not believe that this will happen this year. Support ratings in the 40%–50% range are the norm for prime ministers in modern Japan, and Koizumi's own drive is showing no signs of slowing down.

To fight effectively against these resistance forces, the prime minister needs to have the energy that comes from high public support ratings. Continuing to fight for his reforms is the only way for Koizumi to regain this source of energy. But it is proving difficult for him to focus solely on those reforms, as he is being sidetracked by the difficult task of getting some controversial legislation through the Diet. (In recent developments, Prime Minister Koizumi has taken innovative steps in Japan's foreign policy by announcing normalization talks with North Korea. This has resulted in a favorable outcome, as current public polls estimate a ten percent increase in Koizumi's approval ratings).

Aside from opposition to his reforms and legislative battles, Prime Minister Koizumi faces another serious problem: the economy itself. The real question Koizumi now faces is whether Japan will get back on the growth track even if he does overcome the forces opposing him and pushes through his reform program.

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LDP Support	25.2	23.1	21.6	21.3	21.7	23.8	23.1	19.9	20.2	21.4	25.5	28.3	27.9	33.3	29.1	32.3	27.0	31.1	28.5	27.3	24.9	19.6	20.7
DP Support	10.5	8.7	8.9	6.9	8.0	6.8	6.8	8.5	6.7	5.9	4.2	3.9	6.2	5.7	5.1	3.9	5.6	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.7	4.5	6.1
Cabinet Support	21.4	20.2	21.3	23.1	18.0	16.8	17.7	16.4	9.6	10.8	72.8	78.4	70.4	65.3	68.8	70.3	63.6	69.0	67.8	46.5	43.5	40.9	37.6
Cabinet Non-support	66.9	68.2	62.8	51.1	63.0	64.0	63.7	65.6	73.0	74.7	6.5	6.0	12.5	15.9	13.4	13.8	16.2	14.2	15.4	35.4	37.7	36.9	42.8