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Abe's party wins big in Upper House polls

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won big in yesterday's Upper House election, but fell just short of the numbers required to push through a revision of the pacifist Constitution.

Otherwise, there were few surprises amid the lowest voter turnout since 1995, although the LDP lost in key battlegrounds such as Akita and Okinawa where defence issues took centre stage.

Still, after yesterday's big win, LDP secretary-general Toshihiro Nikai told a radio programme that it "will not at all be strange" were Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to seek another term as party chief beyond September 2021, given the stability he has brought to Japanese politics.

Internal LDP rules have already been changed once to let Mr Abe remain party leader for a third straight three-year term, and hence premier. A fourth consecutive term will mean, barring any electoral upsets, Mr Abe could stay in power until 2024. He will rewrite the record as Japan's longest-serving prime minister in November. Mr Abe said last night he has not given any thought to the idea of another term.

A tally as of 12.55am showed the LDP and its coalition partner Komeito winning 69 of the 124 seats up for grabs. The opposition clinched 50 seats, with another five unaccounted for.

There are 245 seats in the Upper House, whose lawmakers serve six-year terms. A vote is held every three years to elect half the chamber, which cannot be dissolved for a snap election.

Attention was paid to whether the pro-constitutional revision alliance comprising LDP, Komeito,

as well as the Nippon Ishin no Kai and other independents will keep its two-thirds majority, or 164 seats, in the Upper House yesterday. It had 157 seats last night.

The top law, which Mr Abe is targeting for a revision by next year, has not been changed since its enactment in 1947. Yesterday's election, Mr Abe said, was one where voters will "either choose a party that will discuss constitutional revision, or politicians who do not fulfil their responsibilities and refuse to even hold these discussions".

He needs the support of two-thirds of lawmakers in each of the two Houses of Parliament, before constitutional revision can be put to a public referendum. The alliance already had the numbers in the Lower House.

The losses in Akita and Okinawa will also complicate the government's defence strategy. Akita residents, angered by a flawed ground survey for a plan to install the Aegis Ashore anti-missile system, ousted the LDP incumbent. Okinawa was won by an independent who opposes the relocation of a US Marine Corps air base.

Voter turnout was low due to public apathy, despite businesses like Patagonia closing its stores to allow staff to vote, and eateries such as ramen chain Ippudo offering discounts to those who prove they have cast their votes.

Another possible reason was the heavy rain that lashed the southwestern island of Kyushu yesterday, triggering widespread floods and landslide warnings.

Voter turnout is likely to be under 50 per cent for the first time since 1995. Just 30.1 per cent had voted as of 7.30pm. Another 16 per cent cast their ballots in early voting.

During the campaign hustings, Mr Abe stressed the stability of his administration after 6½ years in power, citing an improving economy and a nation regaining its international clout.

On constitutional revision, Mr Abe wants to add a clause to the war-renouncing Article 9 to enshrine the Self-Defence Forces, so as to remove any doubt of their legitimacy. But there are fears that this will lead down a slippery slope towards greater militarisation.

University of Tokyo political scientist Yu Uchiyama said Mr Abe might be forced to compromise, noting that a few other parties are open to the idea of an amendment without Article 9.

"If Mr Abe wants to go down in the record books for successfully changing the Constitution, it may be politically easier for him to do so without changing Article 9."

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