

Posted on Wed, Sep. 20, 2006

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Japan gets an ardent conservative as its new leader

By Tim Johnson

McClatchy Newspapers

TOKYO - Japan's ruling party on Wednesday chose Shinzo Abe, an ardent conservative who's unapologetic about Japan's wartime past, as its new leader, ensuring that he'll succeed retiring Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi next week.

Abe (pronounced AH-bay) trounced two opponents in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party internal election and will begin governing on Sept. 26.

Abe, who turns 52 Thursday, pledged to "take hold of the torch of reform" lit by Koizumi, his mentor, whose term is ending. During five and a half years in office, Koizumi pulled the world's second-largest economy from deep malaise, shook off its timidity in the global arena and deepened a security alliance with the United States.

Abe is known for his nationalism. On Wednesday, he promised to reform the educational system based on patriotic values. Abe hasn't yet spelled out a full vision, and analysts say he may face difficulties in repairing frayed relations with key trading partners China and South Korea because of his refusal to cast judgment on Japan's wartime behavior.

China and South Korea criticize Japan for atrocities committed during colonization and World War II, saying past apologies have been inadequate.

Any new frictions among Japan and China and South Korea would affect the United States, Tokyo's strongest ally and military protector. Washington has urged Tokyo to mend ties with Beijing, saying it needs healthy relations with both countries.

Reserved and cautious, with a full shock of dark hair, Abe has relatively little management experience and will be the first prime minister born after World War II. He has served in the Diet, or legislature, since 1993, and he's held his present job, chief cabinet secretary, his first ministerial post, for less than a year.

Yet Abe seems groomed to lead. His maternal grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, was prime minister in the 1950s, and Abe's father, Shintaro Abe, served as foreign minister in the 1980s. Abe graduated from the political science department of the Faculty of Law at Tokyo's Seikei University in 1977, going on to study at the University of Southern California, then getting a sales job at a steel company. He quit in 1982 to work for his father.

In 2002, when Koizumi tapped Abe to negotiate with North Korea over a series of abductions of Japanese nationals, Abe impressed voters with his uncompromising stance.

While Koizumi focused largely on domestic issues, Abe is seen as having firmer foreign policy credentials, determined to make Japan stand more confidently and to revise the pacifist constitution to transform the Self-Defense Forces into a conventional military.

"People think, `Abe is good because Abe is tough,'" said political analyst Tsuneo Watanabe of the Mitsui Global Strategic Studies Institute in Tokyo.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its series of ballistic missile launches on July 5, which most Japanese viewed as menacing, solidified public support for Abe.

"North Korea's nuclear belligerence has been a great aid in pushing the Japanese political climate toward what Abe is proposing," said Malcolm Cook, an East Asia specialist at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, Australia.

One of Abe's first goals may be to repair relations with China, tattered by anti-Japanese riots last year and further frayed by Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors some 2.5 million war dead, including Class-A war criminals. One commentator, Takao Toshikawa, said he believes Abe's advisers are seeking to arrange a quick meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Abe's unwillingness to rule out a visit to Yasukuni himself and his refusal to judge Japan's wartime role, however, prompt his opponents to forecast greater frictions between Japan and its neighbors.

"As prime minister, if he says his true feelings, that would be a disaster," said Hirohisa Fujii, a former secretary general of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. "It will give an uneasy feeling to East Asian people."

Abe's closest advisers say Japan's rivalry with China, despite soaring trade, is destined to increase.

"I view the future of Asia as a confrontation between the U.S.-Japan alliance and China," said Hisahiko Okazaki, an Abe foreign policy adviser who's so close to him that he is referred to as

"Abe's brain." Speaking in an interview with McClatchy Newspapers, Okazaki said that leaves an imperative for Japan: "We have to strengthen."

A U.S. expert said Japan and China both must make concessions.

"China can't go around lecturing Abe," said Gerald Curtis, a Columbia University expert on Japan, speaking to reporters in Tokyo. But he added that Japan "cannot sweep history under the rug," nor should it do anything to imperil U.S. relations with China.

"The biggest problem for the U.S.-Japan relationship is that Japan's relations with China will deteriorate further," Curtis said. If the United States can't have good ties with China "because the Japanese have drawn a line in the sand over the history issue, that is not going to serve Japanese interests," he added.

McClatchy Newspapers special correspondent Emi Doi contributed to this report.