

## Politics in Japan

# What's in a name?

### A lacklustre opposition shows signs of life

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WHAT meagre challenges Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has faced in office have come not from the opposition but from his own side. So it is a triumph of hope over experience that the biggest opposition grouping, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), thinks that will change. The party that underwhelmed in office from 2009 to 2012 has announced a merger with the third-biggest



opposition party, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP). The move is part of the DPJ's attempts to remake itself after its recent utter defeats and to be better prepared not only for scheduled elections for the upper house of the Diet (parliament) in July but even for a snap general election for the lower house that Mr Abe may call at the same time (or sooner).

The last time Mr Abe called a snap election, for December 2014, the DPJ failed so much as to get a real campaign going. Fool me twice: this time it has chosen a slate of candidates for the lower house and hammered out co-operation agreements with other opposition parties, including the Japan Communist Party. But it will be an uphill task, given that in opinion polls only a tenth of the public supports the DPJ. A full two-fifths support the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. And even after the JIP's two-dozen lawmakers are absorbed, the combined group will hold a mere fifth of the seats in the lower house and less than a quarter in the upper.

The question is what the JIP brings to the party. It had the stuffing knocked out of it when its charismatic right-wing founder, Toru Hashimoto, split away to form an Osaka-based party last year. To many inside the DPJ, it seems too much that their leader, Katsuya Okada, has given in to the JIP's demand to rename the merged party. A new name could hurt prospects at the polls: in both houses (though differently) a proportion of seats is allocated via party lists, and voters might forget a new name—not that one has yet been agreed. Still, says Akihisa Nagashima, a DPJ heavyweight, much more important to remember is that voters punished the party last time not because they could not remember its name but because of its unconvincing message and lousy campaigning.

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