

## **Asia Rising Podcast - Fukushima**

### **Matt Smith**

Hello and welcome to an Asia Rising Podcast. The interview you are about to hear is between LaTrobe Asia's Professor Nick Bisley and Assistant Professor Christopher Hobson from the school of Political Sciences and Economics at Waseda University in Tokyo. The topic of discussion is the recent Japanese election the victory of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the fallout: no pun intended, of the Fukushima of the reactor disasters. Here's Nick Bisley.

### **Nick Bisley**

Glad I could be here in Tokyo with you Chris.

### **Chris Hobson**

Thank you for having me.

### **Nick Bisley**

Why don't we start with the election in December, this was something that even close Japan watchers were a little bit surprised when this sudden snap election was called and which Abe-san has won fairly convincingly so, why did he call the snap election?

### **Chris Hobson**

Well I think he was really in a position where he had an opportunity to strengthen his position within his own LDP Party and I think he was really reaching a stage where so much of his premiership has been about building this kind of energy and momentum and that was really I think, starting to drop off and the cracks in Abenomics were starting to appear. Scepticism towards economics was increasing, and he saw this as the best chance of being able to secure his position long enough to be able to push through some of the policies that I think he's trying to get through before his term is done.

### **Nick Bisley**

Is it sort of building up political capital or is it an attempt to buy himself some more time?

### **Chris Hobson**

I think buy himself some more time, I mean, the strange thing about Abe in a way is, he's had a huge amount of political capital and I think, especially compared to a lot of other recent Japanese premiers, he's really been in a remarkably strong position and he's got very grand visions in terms of restoring Japanese prestige, making it a powerful country again and these type of things. So he's got a very big program, it's really been about trying to make sure that he can be in power long enough to be able to see through the types of changes which he really envisages, especially in terms of I think, remaking the Japanese Constitution and restoring Japan's image I think as a great power.

### **Nick Bisley**

Yes, there is also a sense of opportunism wasn't there?

### **Chris Hobson**

Yeah, definitely.

### **Nick Bisley**

The opposition seemed to be in complete disarray, and kind of, let's strike now.

**Chris Hobson**

I think it was a combination of that with the simple fact that Abe's popularity was starting to decline, people are getting more sceptical of Abenomics and to really kind of ensure his position, I think, especially within his own party, this was the best time to do it.

**Nick Bisley**

So he won handsomely, at first glance, he's got a lot of seats, it looks like he's got four more years, which certainly as far as I can tell means that; presuming he gets to the end, that he will be easily the longest serving prime minister in a long, long time, if not possibly the longest since the post war period, although I'm not one hundred percent certain on that. There's a bit of, you know, if you dig into it it's a little bit more shakey. How do you read the outcome of the election?

**Chris Hobson**

Well, I mean, it's a pretty weak mandate, it's the lowest voter turnout post WW2, I mean it is also worth remembering, that the previous election, this was previously one of the lowest as well. You know while Abe is claiming that he has a big mandate, I really don't think that is the case and if you look at a lot of what the Japanese public were saying, it was more to do with the lack of alternatives, and the DPJ is really failed to present any type of opposition and there is really quite a lot of frustration with some of those policies, especially in terms of the secrecy bill, the way he's been trying to reinterpret the constitution. So there was space there for a genuine opposition, but the DPJ hasn't really managed to capitalise on that and I actually think one of the lesser focused on consequences of the Fukushima nuclear accident was really the impact it had on the two party system in Japan. When you look at the nuclear disaster, essentially the DPJ got stuck in the chair when it all went wrong, but basically all the policies and the regulations which created the conditions for that nuclear accident to happen, took place under ALDP rule and unfortunately the DPJ were in power and they were already kind of in a weak position and I think that really discredited them as a kind of alternative to rule and they haven't really found a way yet of recovering from that.

**Nick Bisley**

Yeah, we might come back to Fukushima in a few minutes because I think that is one of the big longer term puzzles, but the DPJ, I mean, I think you're absolutely right, the DPJ does seem to continue to have this systemic or structural problem of, there's such a broad church, they're so everything from disaffected communist to disaffected LDP people and everything in between, that kind of coherent discipline, purpose and function that you get out of parties, they haven't not quite been able to crack. So in some respects you've got a kind of reverse of normal electoral outcome. In this case it was we're not prepared to vote the opposition in, and of course Abe is a nothing if not confident man and of course, his spin doctors and the like will be presenting this as a thumping win, so what are the priorities in the next year / eighteen months?

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah, it seems like they're placing a strong priority on collective self-defence, finding ways to reinterpret the constitution. While Abe keeps talking about structural economic reform and there are some kind of bills which are being introduced, it seems like the focus is definitely more on the security policy.

**Nick Bisley**

Yes it certainly seems to be where his energy is and where his interest lies, and I guess they've got to turn that interpretation that was released 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013, they've got to turn that into action, you know, I was talking to some guy from the National Defence Academy the other day, saying he thinks there's probably at least a dozen, possibly 14 pieces of legislation they're going to need to

go through to make that happen. I was a bit surprised by the scale, it's going to be hard work

**Chris Hobson**

Yes I think, they're planning on putting most of them through this session.

**Nick Bisley**

But it does seem that Abe's popularity in many respects is fairly typical, or lack of popularity is fairly common in most democracies which is when economies are performing poorly, his approval rate is down, his success is really going to turn on whether he can get the economic growth back.

**Chris Hobson**

I think, in the case of Japan, I think it is a bit different perhaps from some other democracies, precisely because there is such a weak opposition party, I mean I think we don't really have a functioning multi-party system in Japan. I think the reason why people are sticking with Abe and why the LDP was able to be so successful at the election is because through Abenomics, they are offering some type of economic plan and they are trying to do something to push Japan out of this economic stagnation they've been in, but so far the Abenomics hasn't really been working and I don't think that's going to change any time soon because he's not addressing structural reform. But at the same stage, until somebody else offers a credible alternative plan of, well if not Abenomics then what, I actually think he has a lot of space. The kind of key issue is basically I think the Japanese public have ultimately elected Abe and the LDP to fix the economy and he is instead using that political capital to then go and focus on security issues which is not the reason why he was voted in.

**Nick Bisley**

Yes, because I think, looking back at those polls last year, it seemed that a real corner was turned when the constitutional interpretation happened, a quite polarising effect. Is that a fair interpretation or is it?

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah, and I actually think that Abe kind of shot himself in the foot with that one, because when you look at Japan's defence policy, you know, over the last couple of decades, especially post-cold war, it's been moving towards kind of a normal posture, especially with concerns about the rise of China and concerns about instability in the Asian region, I think there are legitimate reasons for considering changing Japan's approach to collective self-defence. But Abe didn't really set these out or explain them in a convincing way to the public. He basically used his position of power to force it through and it kind of looks like a dodgy right-wing nationalist thing, so I actually think he really has done a poor job of explaining something which is probably more justifiable than it appears.

**Nick Bisley**

And I guess when you marry that to some of the less savoury right wing views of history that he associates himself with, it is a difficult thing for a lot of people to swallow when the objective facts of Constitutional Reinterpretation and Collective Self-defence, if you go through them rationally, make a certain kind of logic. Just one last thing on Abe, later this year of course the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the second world war, it's very clear that Abe's going to make some kind of statement, what are you anticipating that he's going to say in this statement and what should he say?

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah you know, one must hope he will perhaps pick up on some of the negative push back against the approach towards the interpretation of the war that him and his right wing colleagues have

been advancing but, most of the signs seem to suggest that he is going to continue on this path of trying to reframe or renegotiate how Japan's war guilt is kind of understood and presumably move further away from the apology and from that kind of popular statement, and the kind of sad thing in a way, you know Abe really misunderstands what gives Japan legitimacy in standing in the world today. Japan having now been a peaceful power for seventy years and for being a relatively benevolent country has really restored its reputation as a peaceful good citizen, by continuing to return to this history issue, I think if anything is really trashing Japan's international reputation and undermining its international standing rather than strengthening it, which is what he thinks he's trying to do.

**Nick Bisley**

I mean it's a remarkably good story to tell, I think about Japan and the transformation, the post war period from a fairly unsavoury set of experiences with its imperial adventures to the world's only pacifist power, a democracy that may not be a perfect two party system, but you know there's rule of law, there's free expression, there's peaceful transition to power, there's all of the standard things you look for and there's a remarkable transformation in a lot of respects and yet what are we focusing in on, this sort of raking over a difficult past and trying to second guess, comfort women survivors tales and all that sort of stuff.

**Chris Hobson**

I mean they're pretty, and if you look at Japan, I mean this country has changed, they can change the constitution, Japan is not suddenly going to become a warmonger, this is not that kind of country any more, but by Abe continuing to kind of poke at these history issues, it allows that interpretation, I really think it misrepresents what this country has become and the achievements of this country and I think he's really undermining...

**Nick Bisley**

And it's grist in the mill of the communists in China, of the nationalists in South Korea and the like. Let's now turn back to something you mentioned earlier which is Fukushima and its legacies, it's very interesting to hear you talk about how one of the really unexpected consequences has been the damage on the political system. It's nearly four years on since the disaster and you've written quite a bit about it. First, I guess, there's the basic issue around power and energy, then looking at going back to some kind of nuclear power, having some contribution into the mix. Where is this do you think likely to go and what's the mood in Japan as it were, about nuclear power?

**Chris Hobson**

I think we've reached a position on the issue of energy in Japan where there's a real fundamental contradiction, but basically the Japanese want to have their cake and eat it too. There's a very strong anti-nuclear sentiment, it's very consistent, around sixty percent, at the same stage they've also had multiple opportunities to vote anti-nuclear candidates and they've consistently voted in pro-nuclear LDP. They're concerned about economics they're concerned about energy prices but they also want to have basically cheap consistent energy without having the perceived risk of nuclear power and there's this real kind of fundamental contradiction and the, especially anti-nuclear proponents have done a really poor job of explaining: well if nuclear power is going to stay off in this country what is the genuine alternative? Japan's carbon emissions have really gone up since 2011 and nuclear plants have gone on. The trade deficit, like the current situation is untenable, I think basically we're moving towards a position where essentially any nuclear reactor which passes the safety requirements and is not too old I think will eventually be turned back on. I think you're going to have at least eighteen of the fifty turned back on within the next, probably two years.

**Nick Bisley**

Ok, so we've got a swift switch back on as it were.

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah, I mean the thing as well right, what a lot of people don't really focus on is the economics of this, but if you've got 53/54 reactors right, you turn all of them off at once, Japanese energy companies do not have the capital in reserve to be able to decommission all of these reactors at once. You know these companies are also financed by Japanese banks and when nuclear goes off that's Japanese economy off, so this is not going to happen, its completely not going to happen. You know the real question is just how big a role nuclear power is going to play and to be provocative, I'd even go further and say; in a couple of years instead, I think we're going to be having the question of what to do about reactors which are currently being built, or whether in fact new reactors need to be built? Nuclear is definitely going to remain part of Japan's energy profile whether the public like it or not.

**Nick Bisley**

To what extent do you think the sort of, disaster lessons have been learnt from Fukushima, not just in terms of the nuclear stuff, more generally about these big natural disasters? This is an earthquake prone country, it's got hugely dense population which has all sorts of compounding effects, so when these sorts of catastrophes occur is there, are there kind of lessons learnt that are being filed away, or is it just, this is unique and gosh...?

**Chris Hobson**

Yes, well I mean I think you do have to separate the tsunami from the nuclear accident and in the case of the tsunami I think on the whole and in general towards natural disasters, Japan is much better prepared than almost any other country. On the whole I think Japan responded relatively well to the tsunami but it's really the nuclear accident which they really had trouble dealing with and they're still having a lot of trouble dealing with and I think really where lessons haven't been learned have been to do with regulation and accountability. So far no senior management at TEPCO have been held accountable considering the human economic costs, I think it's quite problematic to put it mildly. There are also problems to do with, for instance; one of the big issues with the nuclear accident were the problems with evacuation and the way evacuation was handled, there were a lot of problems there and this hasn't been fixed. So for instance; you now have the Nuclear Regulation Authority who are in charge of making sure the nuclear plants are technically up to scratch, so whether they have suitably high sea walls, the right kind of vents, these type of things, but they're not in charge of evacuation plans. So there's actually kind of a regulatory gap and local communities are in charge of evacuation plans.

**Nick Bisley**

And finally, what do you think's going to be the major legacy or legacies of the disaster?

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah, that's a tough question. You know Fukushima was already a region in decline and it's very much cemented that. Increasingly I think, what now we're seeing the rest of the country are forgetting about it and there are a couple of hundred thousand people which were directly affected by the disaster, I think they're going to be very directly affected for a long time. But I think the rest of the country is going to kind of move on, and where there is big problem is I think ultimately as a result of Fukushima and nuclear fear, we're going to have a very irrational and sub-optimal energy policy in Japan at a time when, because of climate change, we really need a much better approach to energy than I think what we're going to see.

**Nick Bisley**

And that seems to be reflected internationally, you see many countries, I mean Germany most obviously, all of a sudden just ran...

**Chris Hobson**

Yeah, if you look at Germany, non-nuclear means more coal. That's the real problem, I think we've really moved to a situation where we now cannot have a conversation about risks and there's a really big problem of all energy policy and all energy sources involve risk. There's not enough discussion about different types of risk and which type of risks as societies we're collectively willing to take and which ones we're not and I think this is a big issue in Japan.

**Nick Bisley**

Fantastic, thanks so much for your time Chris.

**Chris Hobson**

Thank You.

**Matt Smith**

That's La Trobe Asia's professor Nick Bisley interviewing Assistant Professor Christopher Hobson from Waseda University in Tokyo Japan. You can follow both of them on twitter, Nick Bisley is (@nickbisley) and Chris Hobson is (@Hobson\_c). If you like this podcast you can subscribe on iTunes and soundcloud and please leave us a review. Thanks for listening.