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Japan's Koizumi Breaks the Mold

In a Nation Geared to Consensus, Premier Banks on Personal Charisma to Win New Mandate

By Anthony Faiola
Washington Post Foreign Service
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TOKYO -- Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi hopped down from a campaign platform in a Tokyo square this week, his trademark gray mane rippling in the wind as he pumped his fists through an evening drizzle. Scores of teenagers, grandfathers and young mothers gasped, casting aside umbrellas and whipping out cell phone cameras. Electronic clicks and flashes filled the damp air along with a booming chant from a bullhorn:

"KOIZUMI! KOIZUMI! KOIZUMI!"

"That's our prime minister!" exclaimed a drenched 16-year old boy in a white tank top and jeans who had waited over an hour in the rain to catch a glimpse of the Japanese leader. "Hang in there!" called out a seventy-ish woman, wiggling with star-struck joy and dropping all pretense of Japanese reserve.

"Koizumi's secret is no secret at all," said Isao Iijima, the prime minister's top aide for 34 years. "Some people call him a samurai, but the truth is that he has done what no other Japanese politician has. He has become a man of the people."

As Japanese voters go to the polls Sunday in what is considered the most important election in decades, the charismatic Koizumi -- who came to power four years ago with a pop-star style and looks to match -- is again wooing Japan.

The scion of a political family who started his career serving tea to his *sempai*, or mentor, Koizumi, 63, has broken many of the unspoken rules of Japanese politics. Engaging in publicity stunts such as dancing with the actor Richard Gere and making highly individual decisions in a country long governed by consensus politics, Koizumi has shocked, bewildered, angered and delighted people here.



A police officer stands guard outside the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's Tokyo headquarters, where Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's election posters exhort: "Do not stop reforms." (Associated Press)

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worth of bad loans from the 1990s while presiding over the nascent recovery of the world's second-largest economy. After his purge last month of hardliners in his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a victory on Sunday would leave him free to enact other reforms, such as privatizing the postal system, his current focus. He could then move on to longer-term goals of reducing the public debt and overhauling social security.

Many economists say those two objectives are essential to the recovery of the Japanese economy, which has been stagnant for nearly a decade and a half.

If the LDP and its allied party, New Komeito, fail to muster a majority, the LDP may be forced to surrender power for just the second time in 50 years. The country would then be run by the opposition Democratic Party, which says it will withdraw Japanese troops from Iraq and has demanded that U.S. Marines leave the island of Okinawa.

"Koizumi is breaking the mold for a Japanese prime minister," said Robert Feldman, chief economist for the investment bank Morgan Stanley in Tokyo. "He has decided he wants to change this country and is willing to do anything it takes, including sacrificing his own job and political party to do it."

The major policy issue in Sunday's election focuses on Japan's postal service. A decade ago, when Koizumi was head of the postal services agency, he advocated privatization of the system as the key to major reform. As prime minister, he made that goal the catchall policy of his tenure, arguing that it would rescue the nearly bankrupt pension system in the world's most rapidly aging nation and help shrink a bloated public sector.

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