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Japanese Politics in 2021

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English Abstract

The most important events for Japanese politics in 2021 are the House of Representatives' general election in October 2021 and the Olympics scheduled to be held between late July and early August. There is no need to say that both are highly related to the successful response to the COVID-19 crisis. But the timing of the general election critically matters to predicting Japanese politics in 2021.

When Prime Minister Suga was inaugurated and his approval rating recorded the third highest in history of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), many lawmakers demanded the immediate dissolution of the National Diet and to hold the general election. However, Suga did not respond for three reasons. First, the polls indicated that there were many negative opinions about holding an early election and that the people more called for the government's response in tackling the COVID-19 situation and revitalizing the economy rather than elections. Second, the economic situation was never good. This was mainly due to the COVID-19 crisis, but Japan's real GDP growth rate rose 21.4 percent in the third quarter of 2020 from the previous quarter but fell short of the worst quarter's drop of -28.8 percent. Amid such poor economic conditions and prospects compared to other resilient economies, Suga would have estimated that prioritizing an election that costs a lot of expenditure would never have had an advantage. Third, in order to win the next LDP's presidential election or the

general election, maintaining a high approval rating based on his policy achievement is the key. So it is necessary for Suga to buy as much time as possible.

Considering these points, the 2021 general election is likely to take place between April and July, after the budget is passed and before the Olympics are held, or between August and September, after the Olympics are over and before the LDP's presidential election. Because of these aspects of the domestic situation, Japan's foreign and security policy under the Suga cabinet is unlikely to deviate much from the Abe administration's "diplomacy of panoramic views" and "proactive contribution to peace." During Suga's first overseas visits as a prime minister in Vietnam and Indonesia, his proposal of an initiative of free and open Indo-Pacific along with the criticism on elevating tensions in the South China Sea by going against the rule of law and the principle of openness can be a major proof. ❖

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.