

AMBASSADOR MAKOTO ITO EXCLUSIVELY FOR ALBANIAN DAILY NEWS

Good Governance, Reforms Will Bring Results

"I don't think our foreign policy will drastically change after the elections. However, relations with our neighbors and the situation regarding world trade are currently changing. For this reason, our government will have to adjust our foreign policy according to these changes," said Japanese Ambassador to Tirana

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Japanese Ambassador Makoto Ito has recently spoken with Albanian Daily News on the results of the vote for the upper house election which indicated a victory of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Party on July 21, 2019. The Ambassador noted that many of the policies launched by Prime Minister Shinzo such as "Abenomics" aimed at revitalizing the economy through a monetary policy and flexible fiscal policy or "Womenomics" aimed at women empowerment have received the support of the majority of the Japanese citizens. "These policies, launched back in 2013, were accompanied by structural reforms that have transformed the Japanese society bringing positive effects," he said.

Asked on any eventual government reshuffle after the last vote, Mr. Ito said he could not make any comment, but stressed that from time to time the PM makes some changes to the government, inviting new allies in order to tackle various issues the government is facing in the fields of domestic or international policy.

In addition the Ambassador said that there will not be drastically changes in Japan's foreign policy. But he added that relations with neighbors and the situation regarding world trade are currently changing. "For this reason, our government will have to adjust our foreign policy according to these changes and continue to reinforce close relations with neighbor countries."

In a comment on changes to Japan's Constitution, Tokyo's top envoy to Tirana said that if deemed necessary, and of course if the Japanese citizens agree, the Constitution may be adjusted to better reflect the current situation. "Currently the Advisory Council on the Constitution is discussing the constitutional amendments," he emphasized.



Day of Japanese culture in Korca, Mr Ito with Korca Theatre Director, Mrs Zamira Kita

The Ambassador also dwelt on Japan's cooperation with Eastern and Western European countries as well as on "Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative".

Part of the interview was focused on JICA's projects in Albania and activities in different fields, particularly in cultural cooperation in which, according to Mr. Ito, many steps have been made. "Many events are scheduled to take place in the next few months such as a Japanese Film Festival, a Noh theater performance as well as a Noh mask exhibition and a jazz musical performance."

Answering a question if the ongoing tense political atmosphere in Albania might be one of the reasons why Japanese businesses are hesitant to undertake initiatives in this country, Ambassador Ito believed that the current situation is only temporary, and it may happen on the way towards the establishment of a solid democracy. "I strongly hope that good governance and various reforms will bring great results towards the development of this country," said Ambassador Makoto Ito in the following interview:

Albanian Daily News: The

results of the vote for the upper house election have indicated a victory of PM Shinzo Abe's Party on July 21, 2019. He is now set to become country's longest-serving prime minister, having the majority in both houses of Parliament. According to you, Mr. Ambassador, which are some of the factors that gave him the 'green light' to go on to run the country?

Ambassador Makoto Ito: Many of the policies launched by Prime Minister Shinzo such as "Abenomics" aimed at revitalizing the economy through a monetary policy and flexible fiscal policy or "Womenomics" aimed at women empowerment have received the support of the majority of the Japanese citizens. These policies, launched back in 2013, were accompanied by structural reforms that have transformed the Japanese society bringing positive effects.

The foreign policy has also received wide support, as most Japanese citizens prefer stability. This is why the Liberal Democratic Party has been victorious for more than 60 years.

- Mr. Abe's new cabinet is reportedly to be unveiled

sometime in September. Which are expected to be the new challenges of the new cabinet to tackle during the next term internally taking into consideration the results of the last elections, particularly the fact that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has fallen short of the super majority it had before?

- I cannot make any comment on the new cabinet or the reshuffle of the current cabinet. However the Administration of Prime Minister Abe has been one of the longest in Japan since the Second World War. From time to time the Prime Minister makes some changes to the government, inviting new allies in order to tackle various issues the government is facing in the fields of domestic or international policy.

- As a follow up, Mr. Ambassador, are there expected to be any changes to the platform of the foreign policy of Japan in the future?

- I don't think our foreign policy will drastically change after the elections. However, relations with our neighbors and the situation regarding world trade are currently changing. For this reason, our government will have to adjust our foreign policy

according to these changes and continue to reinforce close relations with neighbor countries.

- In an historical move Japan is underway to change country's Constitution. "In this election, the constitutional amendment was also a big issue - it will be finally determined by the national referendum," Mr. Abe has said following the victory. He also called the two-thirds requirement "a very tall order." Do you think, Mr. Ito, that the new configuration in the upper house and generally on the political scene will complicate Mr. Abe's longstanding goal of completing the change of Japan's pacifist Constitution?

- Our Constitution was enacted in 1947, more than 70 years ago and during this period of 70 years both domestically and internationally the situation has changed. If deemed necessary, and of course if the Japanese citizens agree, the Constitution may be adjusted to better reflect the current situation.

Currently the Advisory Council on the Constitution is discussing the constitutional amendments. Hopefully the political parties and other stakeholders will continue to discuss this issue in a con-



Ambassador Ito with Japanese PM Shinzo Abe



Ambassador of Japan to Albania, Mr Makoto Ito

structive way.

- Mr. Ambassador, Premier Abe was in Slovakia in April this year as part of a 6-nation tour ahead of G20 summit which was held in Osaka in June this year. He also plans to speak further with leaders from the Visegrad 4 - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia - following up on a meeting on the sidelines of an international conference in Brussels in October. Which are the perspectives for the revitalization of Japan's ties with the countries of this

region economically and politically? Can this move be considered as a Japanese alternative to counterbalance the Chinese drive in that area through Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative?

- Japan has closely cooperated not only with the four Visegrad countries, but with the entire Eastern and Western European countries for more than 30 years, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, providing continuous support to the democratization and stability of these former Soviet Countries.

Besides bilateral coopera-

tion, Japan is also a founding member of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and one of its largest contributors, providing more than 190 million euros to the EBRD's Donor Funds Programme. The value of joint Japan-EBRD investment stood at 9.4 billion euros as of December 2018, of which EBRD accounted for 5.4 billion euros and Japan investment accounted for 4 billion euros.

- Following the same line, Sir, what can you say on the progress of the Japanese initiative towards the Western Balkans which was launched last year by PM Abe?

- Since the launch of the "Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative" several high level visits have taken place, as a step towards the materialization of this initiative. On January this year, H.E Mr. Jun Saito, Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkan region at Japanese MOFA, visited Albania in order to have the political dialogue with Albania. Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ditmir Bushati, Mayor of Tirana, Mr. Erion Veliaj, Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Mr. Etjen Xhafaj have visited Japan in the framework of this initiative, while Mr. Hiroshi Hase and Mr. Minoru Kiuchi, respectively the Chair and the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Friendship Group Albania-Japan have also held official visits. In addition, Mr. Minoru Kiuchi visited again last month as the State Minister of the Environment.

In cooperation with the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 18 youths from the Western Balkans visited Japan. JETRO organized an investment promotion seminar in Tirana and Japan; the representative of the Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Albania were invited to Japan. Several athletes of the Albanian Wrestling Federation visited Japan in February and trained with the Japanese Wrestling Federation. In addition, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Mr. Oltjon Muzaka, and the Director of the Museum of Oriental Art

"Bratko", Ms. Fjoralba Prifti paid a visit to Japan.

- Mr. Ambassador, a delegation of JICA paid a visit to Albania in mid-July having talks with local authorities. Also, there have been certain activities in the fields of environment, education, culture etc. Please can you shed some light on the impact of these events on the diversification of Japanese-Albanian cooperation, and what does the future 'agenda' anticipate?

- JICA has been operating in Albania for almost 18 years and during this period has supported the Albanian government through grants, loans and technical training programs in areas related to urban planning, environment, health, and agriculture. At the moment there are 4 ongoing projects: the "Greater Tirana Sewerage System Improvement Project" (loan of 97 million dollars); "The Project on Geospatial Information and Sustainable Land Development in Tirana-Durres Area" (3.13 million euros); the "Smallholder Families Financial Inclusion Project" (3.98 million euros) and of course the "Project for capacity building for improving Ecosystem-Based Management on Divjake-Karavasta National Park" (1.60 million euros).

A few months ago was the handing over of the Core Banking System and IT Hardware, which marked the finalization of the first step of the "Smallholder Families Financial Inclusion Project", while State Minister Kiuchi visited the "Divjake-Karavasta National Park" a few days ago to discuss the continuation of cooperation in this area.

Technical Cooperation is ongoing, and as of 2017 more than 460 Albanian professionals have received training in Japan, while for the Japanese fiscal year 2020 the total number of available seats for Albanian professionals is 17.

On the other hand, in the framework of the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects our Embassy signed agreements with the Municipalities of Korça and Berat, providing the municipality of Korça a grant of 80,004 euros for procuring machines necessary for greening and the munic-

ipality of Berat 75,000 euros for the procurement of a fire truck engine.

Many steps were made in the field of cultural cooperation. In January, our Embassy established the Grant Assistance for Cultural Grassroots Projects and donated 42,119 euros to the Polytechnic University of Tirana, providing new equipment for a Japanese Language Laboratory. In addition, we have organized or supported several cultural events, inviting the "Munedaiko Group" for a Daiko Performance (traditional drums) at the Cloud Festival and Korça "Japan Culture Day" this May, and the world renowned violinist Ms. Mayu Kishimoto hold a performance in Albania in a trio with Albanian violoncellist Mr. Vlorent Xhafaj and French pianist Ms. Varduhi Yeritsyan this summer.

Many events are scheduled to take place in the next few months such as a Japanese Film Festival, a Noh theater performance as well as a Noh mask exhibition and a jazz musical performance.

- In the meantime, how much interested are Japanese businesses in Albania's economy, and can it be said that the ongoing tense political situation in this Balkan country might be one of the reasons that they are hesitant to undertake business initiatives here?

- In my opinion the current situation is only temporary, and it may happen on the way towards the establishment of a solid democracy. I strongly hope that good governance and various reforms will bring great results towards the development of this country. With regards to business relations, there is growing interest, mainly due to:

1. The Albanian qualified workforce characterized by a hard working attitude, linguistic abilities, good education and a competitive labor market;
2. A relatively safe and comfortable environment for foreigners and business people to live in coupled with delicious food and moderate pleasant climate;
3. Religious tolerance and a respectful attitude towards other religions;
4. Very easy access to European markets.