

## JAPAN: Suga's cabinet offers bland continuity but honeymoon is still likely

- Yoshihide Suga was officially selected as Japan's prime minister by the Diet on Wednesday, 16 September.
- Suga's cabinet retains ten members from its predecessor, but the new members contain few politicians who will raise excitement about the government.
- The new government will still enjoy healthy approval ratings, which could tempt Suga to call a snap election.

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In his first press conference Wednesday, Suga stressed that combating the Covid-19 pandemic and helping the economy recover its consequences after a historic contraction will be his top priorities, signaling that he wants an orderly transition from the Abe administration. However, while Suga will likely enjoy a honeymoon period at the outset of his government, he faces a [challenging](#) policy environment and the new cabinet lineup, announced on Wednesday, could contain some potential liabilities.

The most notable feature of the new cabinet is personnel continuity. Half of the cabinet – ten of 20 ministers – are holdovers from the Abe cabinet, with new Chief Cabinet Secretary **Katsunobu Kato** and new Administrative Reform Minister **Taro Kono** moving over from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) respectively. Other notable holdovers included Foreign Minister **Toshimitsu Motegi**, Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister **Taro Aso**, Economy, Trade, and Industry Minister **Hiroshi Kajiyama**, Economic Revitalization Minister **Yasutoshi Nishimura**, and Environment Minister **Shinjiro Koizumi**. In other words, the top-tier posts – and the posts most relevant for managing the most urgent issues he faces – were mostly left unchanged. Kato, a former Ministry of Finance (MOF) official who entered politics and drew close to Abe, held senior government and party posts for the entirety of the second Abe administration, including serving as deputy chief cabinet secretary under Suga from 2012-2015. This makes him a reliable choice for a job that requires managing policy coordination across the whole of government.

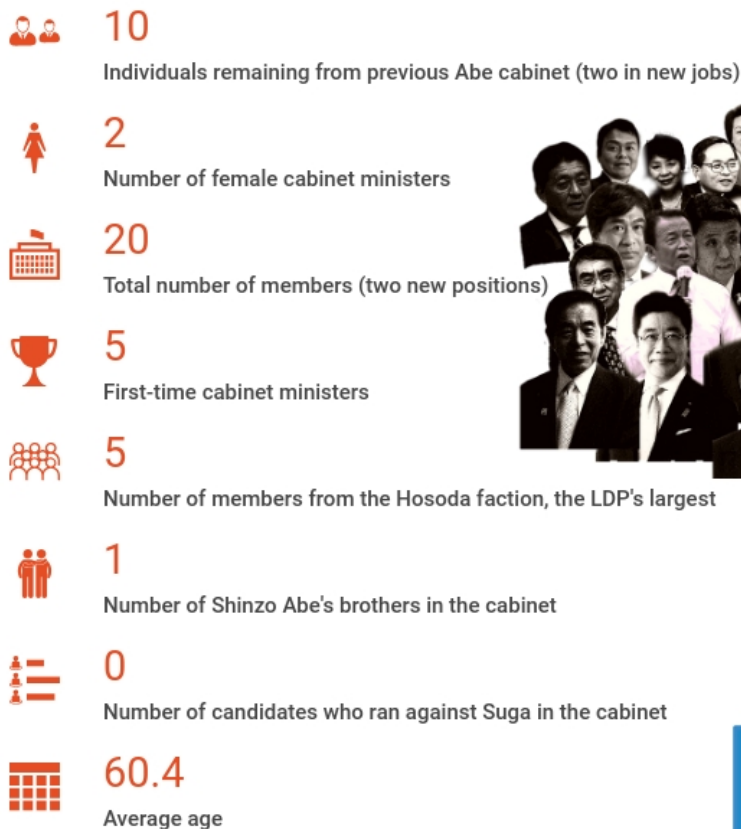
What could be a problem for Suga is the “lower tier” of the cabinet. Suga, of course, inherited a backlog of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians eligible for cabinet posts who had not yet had their turn. Of the ten new members of the cabinet, five are first-time ministers. First-time cabinet ministers are always risky, as their ability to handle their ministries, long hours of questioning in the Diet, and the media are all unknown. Also unknown are whether they have campaign finance violations or other scandals in their pasts that could embarrass the prime minister.

Most notable among the new ministers is **Nobuo Kishi**, Abe's younger brother by birth (but adopted by his uncle and aunt to preserve the Kishi name). Kishi has been given the defense portfolio, which has increasingly become a top-tier post as its responsibilities have grown, but other than a stint as a parliamentary secretary at MOD in 2008-2009, he is not recognized as a specialist on defense issues. Kishi's appointment, in addition to being a sign of Abe's continuing influence, suggests that Suga may be prepared to shelve [plans](#) for more ambitious changes to Japan's defense posture in the pending review of the national security strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) due by the end of the year. Otherwise, it would be risky to trust an untested minister with making the case in the Diet for potentially controversial defense policies.

But there are bigger problems with the cabinet lineup. First, it includes only two women, retained Olympics Minister **Seiko Hashimoto** and new Justice Minister **Yoko Kawakami**, leaving Suga vulnerable to the same criticism that Abe faced, that he is only paying lip service to the goal of expanding opportunities for women. It is particularly notable that all of the LDP's

most prominent female politicians were excluded. Second, the cabinet lineup as a whole reveals the extent to which Suga is indebted to the five major factions that backed him and made his selection a foregone conclusion. Abe's Hosoda faction, the party's largest, has five of 20 cabinet posts; 11 more are distributed among the remaining six factions in descending order by size. Of the four remaining posts, one is left for Komeito and three were given to lawmakers belonging to no faction. Notably, neither of his two challengers for the leadership, Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba, received a post in the cabinet or the party, although their faction members received two and one cabinet posts, respectively. If Suga appears overly beholden to the factions, it could undermine his support, particularly if his ministers make gaffes or other missteps. At the same time, without a faction of his own to support him, he could be isolated if his support falls.

## THE SUGA CABINET BY THE NUMBERS



Notwithstanding the shortcomings in the new cabinet, Suga is still likely to take office with robust approval ratings. Abe's support surged after he declared his intention to resign, at the same time that Suga's support surged in the succession race. The upshot is that the electorate will likely welcome Suga's commitment to continuity and stable governance. The question remains, however, whether he will try to convert robust approval ratings into a new parliamentary mandate in the near term, before his honeymoon period passes.

Both Aso and Kono have suggested that a snap election could be held as early as next month; LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai said he wanted to lay the groundwork for Suga to be able to call a vote. Suga himself, however, would not commit to a short timetable when asked on Wednesday. He recognized that an election would have to be held by October 2021, but said that he wanted to prioritize combating Covid-19 and guiding economic recovery, an approach that the LDP's coalition partner Komeito wants him to take. It is possible that Suga could be thinking about spring 2021 as a target. In his response to the question about the timing of the election, Suga mentioned Abe's pledge to roll out nationwide vaccine distribution by H1 2021, raising the possibility of linking a snap election to the fulfillment of that pledge, which could mean a spring election, before preparations for the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics enter the final stretch. The LDP, however, is anxious that if Suga's and the LDP's support fall later it will have to contest an election on less advantageous terrain and

is likely to continue pressing for an earlier election, suggesting that it is impossible to rule out a snap election before year's end.

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