

## JAPAN: The silence defeated Suga, as eyes turn now to Kono

- Strategic silence from Abe and Aso undermined Yoshihide Suga, but the prime minister's own gambits hastened his departure.
- Taro Kono is set to enter the race as the favorite, and Kishida may now be joined by Ishiba and other candidates.
- The LDP's prospects for the general election will now improve, as will the likelihood of another stimulus package

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The dominos all fell quickly at the end. Perhaps the chief factor in Yoshihide Suga's decision to step down from his positions as party president and prime minister was the ongoing silence of two of the kingmakers, his boss of eight years and former PM Shinzo Abe, and his current deputy PM and Finance Minister Taro Aso. Their lack of public support created the space for doubts to fester in Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) circles about whether the factionally-unaligned premier would secure the votes to repeat his unlikely victory of 12 months ago.

Suga also hastened his own departure with two consequential gambits this week – first floating the idea of a snap September election that resulted in blowback from jittery party colleagues, then presenting several prominent names with a back-me-or-I'll-sack-myself ultimatum with his plan to reshuffle top posts only weeks before the party vote. Environment Minister Junichiro Koizumi and others ultimately seem to have concluded that Suga's offers of promotion were akin to being given front-row deck chairs on the Titanic.

### The leadership race opens

The incumbent's withdrawal leaves the field open in the party leadership race. All eyes are now on Taro Kono. The Defense Minister is set to run following talks with his faction leader Taro Aso, and he will surely be the candidate to beat. By happy coincidence, Kono has just published a new book entitled "Moving Japan Forward," setting out his political vision as a progressive, paternalistic conservative. Former foreign minister Fumio Kishida has run a solid campaign to date, promising a sort of kinder Abenomics and a more effective pandemic response, but many in the party continue to doubt his mettle. Ex LDP secretary-general and well-known Abe critic Shigeru Ishiba took the wooden spoon last year in his fourth tilt at the top job. Since then, his political standing has suffered, but he remains popular in certain parts of the party and beyond and could re-emerge now with Suga leaving the stage.

Among the may-also-competes, Sanae Takaichi could finally find the sponsors she needs to get nominated formally, but current party policy chief Hakubun Shimomura has hinted that he may now get back in the race and compete with Takaichi on the right wing of the party. Seiko Noda is also still contemplating running. Youthful Shinjiro Koizumi's name continues to get mentioned in public opinion polls, but he still lacks a party base and may do better to bide his time. The darkest horse of all would be Shinzo Abe himself. Talk of yet another comeback has cooled in the last few months, and his wider reputation remains tarnished by previous corruption scandals and two health-related resignations. However, he remains influential in the party and is still only 66.

## What happens next

Would-be candidates have until 17 September to secure the sponsorship of 20 of their colleagues to enter the race, which will be held on 29 September with votes coming from both LDP Diet members and the party's prefectural chapters. In the case of a close result, there could be a run-off with only parliamentarians voting. With elections traditionally held on Sundays, the winning candidate could call the Lower House general election for as early as 17 October or run the clock out on the current Diet session for a poll as late as 28 November.

Given the extent of his personal unpopularity due to a ham-fisted pandemic response and a general lack of charisma, Suga's departure improves the LDP's prospects for the general election. The new leader is still likely to see a reduced majority, but the party's structural advantages in the electoral system make it likely to be returned to power yet again. Whoever wins the LDP race, the probability of another round of stimulus measures has risen further, with a new leader typically wanting to establish their agenda by digging deep into the nation's pockets.

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