

Political Transition in Tokyo

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On September 3, 2021, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga abruptly withdrew from seeking reelection as leader of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Suga's announcement thrust Japanese politics into uncertainty, with the range of outcomes holding potentially significant implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance. Suga's [support ratings](#) had fallen to 30% and below, mainly from [widespread perceptions](#) that his government was mishandling the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. For months, infection and hospitalization numbers have risen, prompting the government to rededare a state of emergency in many regions, due in part to [Japan's slow progress on vaccinating its population](#). Hosting the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo during the summer failed to give Suga a hoped-for boost in the polls.

Upcoming Election Season

Japan is facing a crowded political calendar to end the year, with LDP leadership elections in September 2021 and general elections for the Lower House of Japan's parliament (known as the Diet) [due in October or November 2021](#). Whomever the LDP chooses as party president will lead the party in the general election campaign. Given the LDP and its coalition partner's control of the Diet, the next LDP leader is [overwhelmingly favored](#) to become the next Prime Minister. Since the spring of 2021, Suga's unpopularity appears to have convinced him and party leaders that he posed an electoral vulnerability, a perception that was reinforced by multiple LDP [defeats](#) in by-elections and local elections in the spring and summer of 2021, including in Suga's home city of Yokohama.

Likely Candidates

Several candidates have already declared their intention to compete in the leadership elections: Taro Kono (Minister of Administrative Reform and vaccine czar, as well as a former Defense Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister), Fumio Kishida (former holder of the powerful party policy chief position as well as former Foreign Affairs Minister), Sanae Takaichi (former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications, as well as several other Cabinet posts), and Seiko Noda (executive acting secretary general of the LDP and former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications). Kono appears to lead in [the polls](#), with Kishida, Takaichi, and Noda behind him. Kono, 58, is considered a political maverick,

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displays [media savvy](#) through his popular Twitter accounts, and speaks fluent English due to his education in the United States. If elected, Takaichi or Noda would be Japan's first woman premier. Takaichi is [rumored to have Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's backing](#).

Questions About the LDP's Dominance and Leadership Continuity

With fractured and weak opposition parties not expected to threaten the LDP coalition's majority in the parliamentary elections, Japan likely will remain essentially a one-party system, as the LDP has held power for nearly all of the post-World War II period. In general, disarray among Japan's opposition parties since 2012 has contributed to the electoral success of the LDP and its small coalition partner, the Komeito Party. For example, Japan's largest opposition party, the center-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), has rarely broken out of the single digits in opinion [polls](#) in recent months, compared to over 30% for the LDP. However, some analysts anticipate this election might reflect a [generational shift](#), with traditional political factions [holding less sway](#) over the process of selecting a party leader and candidate for Prime Minister. If the CDP is able to coordinate with other opposition parties to present single candidates in district elections and appeal to independent voters, as it successfully did in earlier 2021 local elections, it could make the fall general election [surprisingly competitive](#). Recently, the CDP and three other opposition parties announced a [joint policy agenda](#) for the upcoming campaign. The removal of the unpopular Suga, however, deprives the opposition of the chance to make the election a [referendum on his leadership](#).

Regardless of who becomes premier, it appears inevitable that he or she will continue to grapple with curbing COVID-19 in Japan and the economic implications of the global pandemic. It is unclear whether—or which—new Prime Ministers will continue [Suga's additional priorities](#) of an aggressive [campaign to lower Japan's carbon emissions](#) and green its economy, his emphasis on digitalization of Japan's outdated administrative systems, or his and Abe's proactive foreign policy that dovetails with the U.S. approach to the region.

Some observers fear that without a natural successor in place, Japanese politics will revert to its earlier pattern of short-lived leadership. Before Abe became Japan's longest-serving postwar leader from 2012 to 2020, Japan experienced a slew of [premiers serving for year-long stints](#): six different men (including Abe for his first term) served as Prime Minister in just over seven years. This period of political turbulence—which also coincided with leadership transitions in Washington—made policy coordination in the U.S.-Japan alliance more difficult.

Implications for U.S.-Japan Relations

The Biden Administration [has emphasized](#) the U.S. alliance with Japan as a [key plank](#) of its Indo-Pacific approach, particularly its stance of mobilizing allies and partners to push back against perceived Chinese aggression. Abe was widely viewed as a stabilizing force in Japan's foreign policy, and he and Suga were highly supportive of [reinforcing the U.S.-Japan alliance](#). If Japan were to return to a practice of frequently shifting leaders, Tokyo could be viewed as a [less reliable partner](#). Japan's constraints on its ability to use force—particularly those enshrined in the pacifist Article 9 of its constitution—can limit joint U.S.-Japan military operations. While those constraints have loosened over the years as threats from North Korea persist and fears of China's regional intentions rise, some security analysts believe that Japan's defense policy [requires more flexibility](#) in order to meet those challenges. Without an effective leader at the helm, initiating and executing such changes becomes more unlikely.

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