

Japanese Prime Minister Abe suddenly resigns

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced on Friday that he would resign, citing the impact of ulcerative colitis on his health. He will remain as prime minister until the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) elects a new party leader, possibly on September 14, and intends to remain a member of the lower house of the National Diet.

Abe said he was “no longer in a condition to confidently respond to the mandate given him by the public” after receiving a health update earlier in August. The new LDP leader would become prime minister without a popular vote, but a snap general election could be called in an attempt to give Abe’s replacement an air of legitimacy.

Potential candidates now jostling for support from party leaders include former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who challenged Abe for party leadership in 2012 and 2018, and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga. LDP policy chief Fumio Kishida, who previously served as Abe’s foreign minister, is considered Abe’s preferred choice. Each would continue or accelerate Japan’s remilitarization. Abe has not publically backed a replacement, but said all the potential candidates were “very promising.”

By Sunday, Suga had apparently emerged as a favored candidate in the LDP, according to media reports. He posted in a blog the previous day: “For someone who has supported (the prime minister) for all these years, it is truly regrettable, but I’ll fulfill my duties with all the strength I have to protect the people’s lives and livelihoods.”

Suga’s selection would be seen as a continuation of Abe’s policies. Ishiba previously attacked Abe for not pursuing remilitarization at a fast enough pace. Economically, Ishiba also criticized government social spending and called for deeper attacks on Japan’s

working class than those carried out under the current government’s pro-business “Abenomics” program.

“Abenomics” failed to end two decades of stagnation as Abe had promised. Instead, despite corporate subsidies, the economy shrank at an annual rate of 27.8 percent in April–June, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, the worst contraction since World War II. This has especially hit “non-regular” workers with low-paying, part-time jobs, who make up 38 percent of all employees in Japan.

Ishiba leads in public polls with a 34.3 percent support, but lacks Suga’s internal party support. The latter is believed to have the backing of LDP Secretary General Toshihiro Nikai, who leads a prominent parliamentary faction and is a strong supporter of Abe.

Japanese parliamentary parties are dominated by inner factions. Support from the faction leader almost guarantees support from junior members.

After announcing his resignation, Abe received glowing compliments from government leaders, including US President Donald Trump. In a rambling manner, Trump called Abe “a great friend of mine” and “a great gentleman and so I’m just paying my highest respect.” Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said: “[Abe] has been the senior statesman in our region and across the globe, a strong promoter of open trade and an outstanding international diplomat for Japan.”

The same glowing praises for Abe were not the case in Japan. This month, his cabinet’s approval rating fell to 34 percent, its lowest since Abe took office in 2012, according to a poll by public broadcaster NHK. A Jiji Press poll came in even lower at 32.7 percent. An official close to Abe complained earlier this month: “Now we’re in trouble. The administration is being blamed for everything.”

The sharp contrast between the public reaction to Abe and that of his counterparts abroad is a result of his government's close alignment with Washington against China and its attacks on the jobs and conditions of the working class.

Abe first became prime minister in 2006 but left office in 2007, also on the grounds of his ill-health. He became prime minister again in December 2012, following three years in office by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The DPJ is the predecessor of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and the Democratic Party for the People, today's main opposition parties.

Elected on the basis of professed opposition to the LDP's austerity and militarism, the DPJ became massively unpopular while in office. Its first prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, resigned in 2010 in the face of pressure from the Obama administration over a controversial US military base on Okinawa, which the DPJ had promised to move. The DPJ caved in to US demands and demonstrated it would in no way pursue a policy in line with the anti-war sentiments of the public. It also ditched its promised social spending.

This left the door open for Abe and the LDP. Lacking a genuine and viable alternative, Abe was able to remain in office for nearly eight years, despite his pursuit of remilitarization, frequent scandals and broad unpopularity.

Abe's administration contributed to the arms race across the Asia-Pacific region, drastically raising tensions with China. Under Abe, the military budget has grown each year by record numbers, including another high this year of 5.31 trillion yen (\$US48.5 billion).

Abe pledged in 2017 to revise the country's post-World War II constitution by this year, most notably Article 9, known as the pacifist clause, in order to explicitly recognize the legality of the military, formally known as the Self-Defense Forces. Other proposed revisions would sharply attack democratic rights. This agenda has been overshadowed by the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Abe hoped to push through the changes by 2021.

In December 2013, Abe visited the Yasukuni war shrine, which honors Japan's war dead, including 14 Class A war criminals, and serves as a center for historical falsification regarding Japanese imperialism.

Abe was the first prime minister to visit the shrine since the LDP's Junichiro Koizumi in 2006. Koizumi made six trips to the shrine. Due to the deep anti-war sentiment in the population, visits to the shrine are provocative and viewed as support for war.

In 2014, Abe's cabinet carried out a "reinterpretation" of the constitution to justify Japanese participation in wars overseas alongside an ally, i.e., the US, in the name of "collective self-defense." Abe and the LDP then pushed through military legislation in September the following year to codify this change despite mass anti-war protests, culminating in a demonstration of 120,000 people outside the National Diet.

Whoever replaces Abe will attempt to continue to pursue this militarist agenda, risking war with China.



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