Yoshihide Suga replaces Abe as Japanese prime minister

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) elected Yoshihide Suga as its new president on Monday, ensuring his selection as prime minister today in the National Diet. Suga will finish out Shinzo Abe's term as party leader, which ends in September 2021. Abe announced his resignation as prime minister and LDP president on August 28, citing poor health.

Suga won 377 out of 534 votes from eligible electors, which consisted of 393 LDP legislators and 141 regional representatives. Suga had served as Abe's chief cabinet secretary since December 2012 and received the backing of five out of seven party factions, including the two largest, led respectively by Hiroyuki Hosoda and Finance Minister Taro Aso, who will retain his position under Suga.

Suga's installation is regarded as a continuation of Abe's agenda of militarism, pro-business measures against the working class and the evisceration of democratic rights. Hosoda stated, before Monday's election: "The next prime minister will have to take over the Abe cabinet as well as his wishes."

The party's general council decided not to include rank-and-file LDP members in the election, though typically they would have a vote as well. The council stated that the process would take too long if normal procedures were followed, claiming this would have an adverse effect on the economy and management of the pandemic.

The decision not to hold a full leadership vote likely hurt challenger and former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba the most. He received 68 votes. Ishiba previously challenged Abe for the LDP presidency in 2012 and 2018, on an even more right-wing and militarist platform, and is reportedly more popular among regional party members. The other challenger, LDP Policy Research Council chairman Fumio Kishida, won 89 votes.

Suga could potentially call a snap election, in order to provide the installation of an unelected prime minister a veneer of public support, especially as Abe leaves office deeply unpopular. In August, shortly before announcing his resignation, the approval rating for Abe's cabinet stood at 32.7 percent, according to a Jiji Press poll.

This hostility is driven by the growing economic and social crisis in Japan and internationally.

While the official unemployment rate stands at just 2.8 percent, it hides the real situation facing the working class. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2.4 million workers have been furloughed and face being fired outright as companies seek to cut costs. In addition, 38 percent of all workers are in low-paid, non-regular jobs, and are at risk of being fired as well. Those who have given up searching for work are similarly not counted in the unemployment figures.

The ruling class therefore sees Suga as the most capable of pushing through the demands of big business over the objections of the working class. This will signify a continuation of monetary easing policies to boost the fortunes of the financial elite, while rolling back even the limited public spending carried out under Abe. When Suga indicated his intention to run for party head on August 31, the Nikkei Stock Average jumped 450 points.

Suga's election also indicates that Tokyo will continue to pursue a close alliance with the United States. On Saturday, he called the Japan-US alliance the "foundation" of Tokyo's diplomacy with other nations in Asia. On September 1, Suga stated: "The Japan-US relationship is stronger than ever and it is needless to say that we should continue to advance the alliance even further." He cited a phone call the previous day

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between Abe and Trump, where the former sought to reassure the US president on this point.

Tokyo will continue to align with the US in war preparations aimed at China. Mirroring Washington's push to "decouple" the US from the Chinese economy, Suga supported similar measures for Japan in April. As part of its COVID-19 bailout package that month, Tokyo provided 240 billion yen (US$2.3 billion) for companies to shift operations out of China and to Japan or Southeast Asia.

Like Abe, Suga belongs to Nippon Kaigi, an ultra-rightwing organization that promotes remilitarization, the restriction of basic democratic rights, and historical revisionism, to cover up the crimes of Japanese imperialism. Abe delivered a speech to the organization in May 2017, declaring his intention to revise Article 9 of the constitution, known as the pacifist clause, by 2020. While that agenda has been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Suga and his new government will attempt to follow through on Abe's pledge.

Article 9 explicitly bars the country from fielding a military force or waging war on other nations. Through various "reinterpretations" since the constitution went into effect in 1947, the Japanese ruling class has worked around this clause to build up the military, formally known as the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Abe's cabinet declared a reinterpretation in July 2014 to allow "collective self-defense," a euphemism for waging war overseas alongside an ally, namely the US.

In a September 8 debate, Suga called for constitutional revisions on four points the LDP proposed in March 2018. This included adding a clause to Article 9, which would explicitly recognize the SDF, as well as granting the government emergency powers that would restrict democratic rights. Suga is pushing for debate in the National Diet, where any constitutional changes would need a two-thirds majority of both houses before heading to a national referendum.

As for China, Beijing's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin formally congratulated Suga, saying: "China stands ready to work with Japan's new leader to continue to abide by the principles and spirit set in the four political documents between the two countries, deepen cooperation in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic as well as economic and social development, and promote the continuous improvement and development of China-Japan relations." The four documents referenced are diplomatic agreements between Beijing and Tokyo, adopted between 1972 and 2008.

In reality, the US offensive in the region is heightening the tensions between the Japanese and Chinese ruling elites.

An editorial on Monday, in China's state-owned *Global Times* , called for Beijing to boost China's economic attractiveness for Japan. This, it stated, was necessary to prevent the US from pulling Tokyo even closer into the aggressive anti-China campaign now being whipped up in Washington.

The editorial warned: "The US is trying its best to get its allies to gang up against China. This will also have an impact on Japan. For example, Japan values the Chinese market, but it is also interacting with the US, Australia and India to promote the de-Sinisization of the supply chain." It stated: "While China and Japan are seeking generally stable ties, and maintaining the status quo, there is also a possibility that the two countries' differences will slowly widen."

Despite these rising concerns in Beijing, Abe's militarist agenda will continue under Suga, since the Japanese ruling class lacks any progressive means of ending the growing economic and social crisis it confronts.

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