

Japanese Prime Minister Suga announces resignation

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Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced Friday that he will not run for re-election as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), meaning his term as premier will come to an end when a new party leader is chosen on September 29. The Suga government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by defending the interests of big business has generated widespread anger in Japan, reflected in its approval rating hovering around 30 percent.

While announcing his decision, Suga claimed he would put his energies into responding to the pandemic, saying, "The campaign for the LDP presidential election officially kicks off on the 17th, but I realized it would take up enormous energy working on the coronavirus measures and campaigning—it's impossible to do both."

Suga's term comes to an end a year after he was selected as LDP president last September, succeeding Shinzo Abe, who stepped down as prime minister citing health reasons. His tenure in office was marked by a continuation of the right-wing policies of his predecessor, which includes the growing war drive aimed at Beijing and provocatively developing relations with Taiwan alongside the United States. A general election must be held by November 28, meaning whoever takes over for Suga may be in office for barely two months.

A number of prominent LDP figures have announced their intention to run for party leader, including former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, current Minister for Administrative Reform and Regulatory Reform Taro Kono, who has handled Japan's vaccination program, and former Minister of Internal Affairs Sanae Takaichi. Former Prime Minister Abe, who remains influential in the LDP, will reportedly back Takaichi. Former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba is considered another

potential rival.

Suga's unpopularity stems from his government's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included hosting the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo. Despite widespread opposition to holding the events and warnings from medical experts, Suga's Cabinet pushed forward with the Games in order to protect the profits of big businesses that are connected to the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee generates nearly 75 percent of its profits from selling broadcasting rights.

As of Saturday, the seven-day moving average for daily cases in Japan officially stood at 18,481 while there have been well over 1.5 million total cases. More than 16,300 people have died including 82 on Thursday, the highest since June. This is, however, a drastic undercounting of the real situation. The testing program remains slow and inefficient, with health experts warning that this and a high positivity rate of 20 percent indicate that the true number of positive cases is much greater than the government's numbers indicate.

As a result, Japan's hospitals have been overwhelmed, with the government forcing people with so-called mild cases of COVID-19 to self-quarantine at home, rather than seek medical help. People in critical condition are being driven around for hours in ambulances as they seek a hospital that will admit and treat them.

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that between August 16 and 22, there were 250 patients in Tokyo forced to wait more than three hours in ambulances, or 30 percent of the total number of people seeking medical assistance. However, an additional 1,160 people were told to go home and self-isolate or the patients simply gave up looking for a hospital.

All of this has had deadly consequences. In a story that has generated widespread anger in Japan, a pregnant woman in her 30s from Kashiwa City, Chiba Prefecture and infected with COVID-19 was forced to give birth prematurely at home on August 17 while self-isolating. She had been unable to find a hospital that would admit her. The baby did not survive.

Young people are also being affected. A man in his 20s with no underlying health condition was found dead while forced to self-isolate at home in Chiba Prefecture in mid-August. He tested positive with a fever of 40 degrees C (104 degrees F). The medical facility explained that because the duration between his diagnosis and his death was so short, they did not have the time to make initial contact with him. This was the second case of a COVID-19 patient in their 20s dying in Chiba prefecture.

With increasing reports of COVID-19 patients dying at home, the main opposition party in the National Diet, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), requested the government release information on the total number of deaths among those self-isolating. The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare responded by saying, “There are many cases that we do not have a grasp on, so we do not have a comprehensive grasp of the situation.”

However, there is no genuine opposition to the government’s policies from the CDP, or any other party in the Diet. With an eye towards the upcoming general election, Yukio Edano, leader of the CDP, criticized the Suga government at the beginning of August, saying, “If the current administration continues to be in charge of crisis management, people’s lives can’t be protected. We, the largest opposition party, can only replace it.” Edano did not offer any concrete solutions to the pandemic.

A number of CDP politicians told the *Asahi Shimbun* after Suga’s announcement he would step down that they preferred the prime minister to stay in office. “If the (upcoming general) election were being held with Suga at the helm, we would have said, ‘Thank you very much,’” according to a high-ranking CDP official. “But now that there will be a change in prime minister, it becomes less clear if voters will still be clamouring for the opposition or whether they will simply welcome a ‘quasi-change in government.’”

In other words, the CDP’s opposition to Suga and the

LDP is not based on a desire to stop the pandemic, but merely to score political points at the expense of people’s lives. If elected to power, the CDP will follow in the footsteps of its predecessors in the Democratic Party of Japan when it held power from 2009 to 2012; pledges will not be honoured as the party bends over backwards to meet the demands of big business.



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