

# Right-wing Japanese ruling party elects new leader

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30 September 2021

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) elected former foreign minister and defence minister Fumio Kishida as party leader on Wednesday to replace Yoshihide Suga. Suga stood down in early September amid widespread criticism of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and public opposition to his government's decision to proceed with the Olympic Games.

Kishida won a second-round vote against Taro Kono, also a former foreign minister and defence minister, after none of the four candidates in the first round won a majority. He relied on the support of the LDP factions and parliamentarians to defeat Kono, who is reportedly more popular among the LDP rank and file. Kishida will almost certainly be confirmed as Japan's new prime minister at a special session of the parliamentary Diet on Monday.

Kishida is variously characterised in the international media as "a moderate," "the establishment choice," or as the *Financial Times* put it, "Mr Status Quo." The LDP, however, is a right-wing party that shifted even further to the right under the eight-year prime ministership of Shinzo Abe who stood down for health reasons in 2020.

As foreign minister under Abe from 2012 to 2017, Kishida is closely identified with Abe's militarist build-up and increasingly confrontationist stance against China, encouraged by US President Obama as part of his "pivot to Asia." The Abe government further undermined the so-called Article 9 of the Japanese constitution that bars the country from having armed forces and renounces war as a sovereign right. It rammed through legislation in 2015 allowing for "collective self-defence"—that is, to take part in the wars with the US and its allies.

Successive Japanese governments have sought to pay

lip-service to Article 9 by claiming that the country's military forces are purely for self-defence and are armed only with defensive weapons. In an interview this month with the *Wall Street Journal*, Kishida advocated that the Japanese military be expanded to include missiles able to strike potential enemies like China and North Korea.

Kishida is supportive of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—a quasi-military alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia—which held its first face-to-face leaders' meeting in Washington last week. His comments to the *Wall Street Journal* mouthed the Biden's administration's propaganda that Asia is "the front line of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy," even as all four governments ride roughshod over democratic rights and norms.

Like their counterparts in the US, the Japanese ruling elites are fearful that the economic rise of China will undermine their economic and strategic interests. Japan lost its position as the world's second largest economy in 2010 when it was overtaken by China in GDP terms. By joining the Biden administration's aggressive confrontation and military build-up in Asia, the LDP government is seeking to reverse its historic decline.

Like Biden, Kishida provocatively advocates the strengthening of ties with Taiwan—an island that both the US and Japan de facto recognise as part of China. In doing so, he is undermining diplomatic relations with Beijing, which are based on the "One China" policy, and deliberately stoking up tensions around this explosive flashpoint.

Kishida can be considered a "moderate" only as compared to fascistic layers within the LDP leadership exemplified by one of the other contenders for party leadership—Sanae Takaichi. A former internal affairs and communications minister, Takaichi is an admirer of

Margaret Thatcher and gained notoriety for her endorsement of a 1994 book praising Adolf Hitler's electoral tactics. She regularly visits the notorious Yasukuni Shrine that is a symbol of Japanese militarism.

Abe, who retains considerable influence within the LDP, called on its supporters to back either Kishida or Takaichi. When Takaichi was forced to withdraw after the first round, Abe's forces ensured Kishida's victory. Like Abe, Takaichi and many other leading LDP figures, Kishida belongs to the ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi parliamentary grouping, which campaigns for a new constitution, promotes militarism and patriotism, and seeks to whitewash the crimes of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Kishida will shortly have to lead the LDP in lower house elections that are to be held before November 28. While the party is unlikely to lose the election, Kishida's position would suffer if he presided over significant losses. That is undoubtedly why his statements on domestic issues in the lead-up this week's leadership contest have had a populist tinge.

Kishida is well aware of the widespread public hostility to the government over its failure to stem the surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths, and its decision to proceed with the Olympics. He has promised tens of trillions of yen in economic subsidies and has called for a "new Japanese-style capitalism" that would address widening social inequality.

In his *Wall Street Journal* interview, Kishida declared: "If the profits from growth are monopolized by a few people, the gap will widen even further. It's not just about growth, it's about distribution. Distribution equals income."

The widening gulf between rich and poor has increasingly become a public issue as successive governments have undermined the life-long employment system that guaranteed permanent jobs to significant sections of workers. Around 40 percent of workers are now in uncertain "non-regular" jobs with lower wages and poorer conditions.

More than 10 million people live on less than \$US19,000 a year, while one in six lives in relative poverty on incomes less than half the national median. Last year under the impact of the pandemic, more than half a million workers lost their jobs. At the same time, Forbes Asia reported in April that the collective wealth

of the country's 50 richest people had surged by nearly 50 percent as compared to a year earlier.

Kishida's calls for a new Japanese capitalist economy are nothing but empty election posturing. He was a loyal minister in the Abe government that pushed through the pro-market restructuring that exacerbated social inequality. He promises tens of trillions of yen in economic stimulus—most of which will flow into the pockets of big business—while at the same time advocating fiscal discipline, which means further inroads into social spending.



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