

# Japanese PM resigns amid scandals and widespread unpopularity

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20 August 2024

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced on August 14 that he would not run in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership contest slated for September 27. Whoever is selected as the president of the ruling party will replace Kishida as prime minister, with the next general election not scheduled until October 2025. Kishida's three-year tenure in office has been marked, in particular, by the buildup of the military in preparation for war in league with the US against China.

Kishida has been under pressure to resign for months stemming from different party scandals. This includes revelations last November that different LDP factions had established slush funds by under-reporting hundreds of millions of yen (millions of dollars) in political donations. There also continues to be ongoing fallout from the exposure, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022, of the party's longstanding ties to the Unification Church, a rightwing cult also known as the Moonies.

Kishida tied his resignation to the slush fund scandal, stating, "It is necessary to firmly present a newly born LDP to the people." He added, "What is left for me to do is to take responsibility as the head of the LDP (for the scandal)." Kishida claimed he would not back a candidate to replace him, although he will almost certainly exert his influence behind the scenes.

Kishida has become widely unpopular. An *Asahi Shimbun* poll conducted in July, for example, found 74 percent of people were opposed to Kishida remaining prime minister in contrast to an 18 percent support rating. However, there was no clear support for any of Kishida's potential replacements.

The ruling class is not concerned with corruption or Kishida's personal responsibility for it. It is worried that Kishida will not be able to assert Japan's

imperialist interests internationally and suppress the growing opposition of the working class at home to attacks on their living conditions and to the danger of war.

There are no doubt concerns in ruling circles that the protests against the government's support for Israel's genocide in Gaza, ongoing since last October, will grow as the danger of war in the Indo-Pacific looms greater.

The pressure on Kishida to resign intensified following Joe Biden's announcement in July that he would not run for reelection this November. With an eye towards a Trump victory, a former cabinet member told the *Asahi Shimbun*, "The job of prime minister can only be filled by someone who can deal with a heavyweight (US) president."

The comment reflects concern that that carefully laid plans for war with China could be upended and Tokyo sidelined in the region should Trump return to the White House. During his first term, Trump eschewed traditional alliances while placing economic pressure on Japan. A Trump presidency would not lessen the danger of war, but could undermine the US-Japan alliance and further destabilize the Indo-Pacific.

Whoever replaces Kishida will continue and intensify Japan's remilitarization. This includes the de facto doubling of military spending to two percent of GDP by 2027, the acquisition of offensive weaponry, and the solidification of de facto alliances with countries like South Korea and the Philippines under the direction of Washington. Tokyo has also played a leading role in antagonizing Beijing over Taiwan by increasingly questioning the One China policy.

Potential replacements for Kishida include Shigeru Ishiba, who has previously held high-ranking positions including defense minister; Sanae Takaichi, the current

Minister of State for Economic Security in Kishida's cabinet; and Toshimitsu Motegi, the LDP's secretary-general and a former foreign minister.

Ishiba stands out for his pro-war positions among a party of far-right warmongers. He espouses tearing up Article 9 of the Constitution, known as the pacifist clause, which bars Japan from fielding a military. Eliminating the clause would represent a new stage in Tokyo's remilitarization, allowing Japanese imperialism to assert its interests overseas militarily without any restraints whatsoever.

In an interview with the *Diplomat* in December, Ishiba stated that Kishida's goal of raising military spending to two percent of GDP was "misguided" and called for more spending. "Some say that NATO countries spend two percent of GDP on defense, so Japan must follow suit. But Japan's security environment is worse than NATO countries', so two percent of GDP may not be enough," he said. Ishiba also hinted at the idea of Japan acquiring its own nuclear weapons, something he has called for in the past.

Sanae Takaichi ran in the 2021 party leadership election with the backing of Shinzo Abe. She is a pro-war, anti-China hawk. Shortly before the 2021 contest, she directly appealed to the most hawkish elements of the party by holding talks with then-President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, and calling for increased military ties between the two countries. She has on numerous occasions visited the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, a symbol of Japanese militarism, which enshrines class-A war criminals from World War II. Her most recent visit came on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's defeat in the war.

Toshimitsu Motegi has also exacerbated tensions with Beijing. He declared in May that Tokyo "intends to deepen ties further," following the inauguration of pro-independence Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te. "Taiwan is an important partner and irreplaceable friend with which we share the basic values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law," Motegi declared after a 30-lawmaker delegation travelled to Taiwan for Lai's inauguration. As foreign minister at the beginning of Kishida's government in October 2021, Motegi raised publicly and explicitly for the first time the possibility of Japan's involvement in a conflict between Beijing and Taipei.

None of these candidates represent Japanese working people who will have no say in who becomes prime minister. In the first round of voting, all LDP lawmakers from both houses of parliament are given a vote. This represents 50 percent of the total while the other half is determined by a vote of the LDP's approximately 1.1 million dues-paying members, meaning each LDP member's vote has only a tiny fraction of weight of that of a member of parliament.

Should one candidate receive a majority, they will be elected party president. If not, the top two candidates will compete in a run-off in which the lawmakers will again have one vote while the LDP chapter from each of Japan's 47 prefectures will also have one vote based on which candidate won the prefecture.

For all the talk of standing up for democracy in the Indo-Pacific and around the globe, these are the anti-democratic measures by which the Japanese ruling class ensures its grip on power while running roughshod over the will of the population.



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