

Japanese prime minister resigns

Peter Symonds
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After just 11 months in office, Shigeru Ishiba resigned last Sunday as Japan's prime minister—a move that will deepen the crisis of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the political establishment in Tokyo as a whole.

Ishiba's resignation followed mounting opposition within the LDP after it lost control of the parliamentary upper house in elections in July, having already done so in the lower house last October. A post-election review last week called for a “complete overhaul” of the party, fuelling calls for an early leadership contest that was due to be decided at a meeting on Monday.

Ishiba said he was resigning to head off a “decisive split” in the LDP, which has ruled Japan for most of the past 70 years. Ishiba has presided over a slowing economy that is now being hit by the Trump administration's large tariffs on Japanese imports, amid rising social tensions.

Ishiba attempted to put the best face on his resignation by declaring that he had stayed on as prime minister until a trade agreement with the US was reached last week. Under the deal, the Trump administration agreed to drop the planned auto tariff from 25 percent to 15 percent, in return for Japan agreeing to invest \$550 billion in the US in areas nominated by Trump.

Ishiba came to office last October after the resignation of Fumio Kishida, who was mired in a series of scandals, including revelations that different LDP factions had established slush funds by under-reporting millions of dollars in political donations. The party also continued to face criticism of its longstanding ties to the right-wing religious cult known as the Unification Church, exposed following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022.

In an attempt to consolidate his grip on power, Ishiba called a snap election last October 27 that backfired

badly on the LDP. For only the third time since its formation in 1955, the LDP, together with its longstanding ally Komeito, failed to win a majority in the lower parliamentary house. While Ishiba had promised to crack down on corruption in the LDP and provide cost-of-living relief, voters turned away from the party.

Ishiba and LDP had managed to limp on as a minority government as a result of deep divisions in the parliamentary opposition between the far right, such as the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin), and the supposed “progressives” such as Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP).

The LDP did not resolve any of the issues that fuelled resentment and opposition in the lower house election—rising prices, particularly of the staple rice, falling real wages and the lack of well-paid permanent jobs, especially for young people. Ishiba dramatically boosted military spending, in line with the LDP's support for the US war drive against China, at the expense of social spending.

As a result, in the upper house election in July, the fascistic Sanseito party, which ran a Trump-style campaign scapegoating immigrants for every social ill from low wages and crime rates to rising property prices to dangerous driving, made significant gains. It was able to capitalise on the continuing decline in living standards under both the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which held office from 2009 to 2012.

The DPJ split in 2016 into the DPP and CDP. While not a far-right party, the conservative DPP also made upper house gains, based on a populist appeal to younger voters and a vague promise to “increase take-home pay.”

Within the right-wing LDP, Ishiba, regarded as something of a moderate conservative, has come under attack from the party's more hardline right factions, for

ceding political ground to Sanseito and Ishin. One of the likely contenders for the party leadership is Sanae Takaichi, who narrowly lost the party leadership contest last year to Ishiba.

Takaichi was promoted by Shinzo Abe, who was instrumental in loosening the constitutional and legal restrictions on the Japanese military, known as the Self Defence Forces, and aligning Japan more closely with Washington in its aggressive confrontation with China. She supports revising Article 9 of the constitution that formally bars Japan from going to war overseas or maintaining a military and she is notorious for her relations with far-right activists, and visits to the Yasukuni Shrine that memorialises class A war criminals.

Shinjiro Koizumi, the son of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, also contested the LDP leadership last year. He has served in Ishiba's cabinet as agriculture minister and has had to deal with the surge in rice prices that has fuelled the LDP's unpopularity. He has reportedly fostered ties with the far-right party, Ishin.

Koizumi and former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga met with Ishiba on Saturday and undoubtedly discussed the possibility of his resignation.

Ishiba will remain as caretaker prime minister while the LDP undertakes the complex process of selecting a new party president. To nominate requires the backing of 20 lawmakers. A ballot is taken of all LDP lawmakers and an equal number of votes from the party's members. If no candidate receives a majority, a second round run-off takes place with the share of the vote for the rank-and-file dropping to 47—one for each of the country's prefectures.

On most previous occasions, the LDP president has automatically become the prime minister. However, the LDP does not command a parliamentary majority so there is no guarantee that whoever is chosen will be endorsed. In 2024, Ishiba managed to gain parliamentary endorsement by relying on a divided opposition and an upper house majority. Now the LDP is in a minority in both houses.

Whatever the outcome of this process, the next government will be one of crisis from the outset, as Japan aligns with the accelerating US preparations for war with China, and at the same time confronts Trump's economic war on friend and foe alike. The

social tensions revealed in this year's election will only be compounded as the government imposes new burdens on workers and youth.



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