



Prime Minister Abe's Resignation and the Prospects of Japan's Next Prime Minister

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Japan's Prime Minister Abe announced that he would resign at the press conference on Friday, August 28. The decision was a surprise, and yet it was not the first time for Abe suffers from ulcerative colitis, which was also a factor in his first resignation. While Japanese politics will be drawn into a whirlpool again, the biggest question lies on who will become the next president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and be the Prime Minister of Japan.

The candidates narrow down to three: Kishida Fumio, the former minister for foreign affairs, Ishiba Shigeru, the former minister of defense, and Kono Taro, the current minister of defense. There are also Suga Yoshihide, the current Chief Cabinet Secretary, Motegi Toshimitsu, the current minister for foreign affairs, and Noda Seiko, the former chairperson of LDP. However, they are not the strongest candidates in the LDP presidential election, which depends on intra-party politics and public approval ratings.

Kishida is considered the strongest candidate in traditional factional dynamics. He is the leader of the LDP's oldest and the fourth-largest faction, Kochi-kai (宏池會). This faction has 47 members at this point of July 2020, and it is well known for a moderate and international position within the party. As Abe fully supports him, Kishida may win support from Abe's Hosoda faction and other independent members of the party. The Hosoda faction, with 97 members, is the largest in size among the factions. However, since the current Prime Minister Abe belongs to the Hosoda faction, the faction may not field candidates for the upcoming LDP presidential election. Kishida's faction and the Hosoda faction alone account for one-third of the 395 Diet members of the LDP.

However, close ties with Abe may not turn out to be solely advantageous. Although Abe announced his resignation over health issues such as his chronic ulcerative colitis,

his approval rating was already declining due to his inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and corruption scandals of his close associates. In other words, criticisms have been following Abe. Then questions arise. Can a close tie with Abe really benefit? Can different factions openly support this affiliation? That Kishida ranked fifth with 7.5% in a Kyodo News poll on who should be the next prime minister implies a lot of things.

As Japan's general election of members of the House of Representatives is held through the combined system of single-seat constituency and proportional representation, the image of a party president—the face of the party—is known to play a big role. Therefore, the key is whether Kishida, who is considered Abe's successor, can win the next election as a new face of the party while his approval rating varies depending on the survey agency, but fell to 27% in the Mainichi Shimbun poll. The next prime minister will serve until the remainder of Abe's term, September 2021. However, as the term of the current members of the National Diet is also until October 2020, the aforementioned image has to be thoroughly considered. For these reasons, Ishiba has the potential to win the election.

Ishiba, a former Secretary-General of LDP, is currently leading his own faction, the Suigetsu-kai' (水月會), which only has 19 members. He has been almost always critical of Abe. For example, he expressed his position that security-related legislation passed by the National Diet in 2015 was not fully discussed beforehand. He also ran against Abe, who sought his third term in the LDP presidential election in 2018. Such anti-Abe moves have led Ishiba to lose some of his members; however, he was able to take the top spot in the aforementioned polls on who should be the next prime minister.

Ishiba's anti-Abe moves are supported by local and general party members who feel left out in the faction dynamics among Diet members. In the 2012 LDP presidential election, although he was defeated in the second round, Ishiba had won the first round against Abe with a huge number of votes from fellow party members, which only fell short of a majority.

To be elected as the next prime minister, Ishiba must overcome two major hurdles. First, the election must be carried out in a party convention manner, in which party members and their votes are allocated the same as the number of diet members for Ishiba to win. Secondly, even if the election method is changed, Ishiba must win a majority in the first round or get even more support from the diet members.

As the next prime minister will serve until September 2021, however, the election is likely to be carried out through a perfunctory meeting of the two houses based on the adjudication of the party's senior members and elites than in a party convention manner. For this reason, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, who managed Abe's cabinet well for a long time, becomes a strong candidate. However, the challenge for Suga, like the aforementioned case of Kishida, is that he will be equated with Abe's Cabinet.

Another question is how the candidates' view of China or their policies toward China will play a role amid the intensifying U.S.-China conflict. In fact, how Japan understands China may be different than how the U.S. under President Trump understands China. Nonetheless, with the Senkaku Islands dispute, Japan is not as pro-China as it used to be. It will be interesting to see how this aspect will affect Kishida and Ishiba, who are known to be pro-China. This is one of the reasons why Defense Minister Kono, who has been vocal in Hong Kong's democratic and human rights issues, is another strong candidate.

As seen above, various aspects must be considered when asked who will become Japan's next prime minister. At first glance, traditional factional dynamics and public approval ratings seem to be the biggest keys; however, more aspects must be looked at for the upcoming election. These points should be considered in order to break the deadlock between South Korea and Japan. A new leader will not cause a sudden, big change. However, it may bring an opportunity for a fresh approach to various aspects. ♣

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.