



Developments in Japanese Politics: LDP Presidential Election and the Future of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

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Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election is scheduled for September 20, 2018, as the tenure of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will come to an end as the President of the party. Abe will be vying for a third consecutive term as LDP President eyeing to become the longest serving Prime Minister in Japanese history. If he gets elected, he can stay in power until 2021, considering the party's majority in the Diet.

Barring a few exceptions, most of the LDP Presidents have gone on to become the Prime Minister, as it was the party that dominated post-War Japanese politics. There is no limit on the tenure of the Japanese Prime Minister. However, restriction on the LDP leadership's tenure invariably has acted as term limit for the Japanese Prime Minister too. Until recently the LDP President's tenure was limited to two three year terms. In 2017, the party revised its rules to extend the maximum presidential tenure to three consecutive three-year terms for a total of nine years.ⁱ The changed rule enabled Prime Minister Abe to contest for the fourth time and for a third consecutive term. He was elected to lead LDP for the first time in 2006, the second time in 2012 after a break of five years following his resignation in 2007. He was re-elected without a contest in 2015. The current tenure ends in September 2018.

Abe announced his candidature on August 26, 2018. His election campaign so far has mainly focused on regional provinces in an attempt to win over party's local votes. Emphasis on provincial campaign reflects yet another change in LDP Presidential election process in recent years. Through an amendment in 2014, rank-and-file members were given more power than they had in the past.ⁱⁱ Now LDP party member votes carry the same weight as the votes of Diet members. In the upcoming election, since LDP has 405 members in both houses of the Diet, the same number of votes will also be assigned to the party's local chapters. If one candidate could

not get a majority in the first round, then the second round of faceoff between two leading candidates from the first round will take place. In the second round, 405 Diet members can cast vote but the local representative votes will be reduced to 47, one for each prefectural chapter. Previously the second round was only restricted to Diet members.

The main challenge to Abe comes from former Defense Minister and former General Secretary of LDP Shigeru Ishiba, who declared his candidature on August 9.ⁱⁱⁱ Ishiba is a longtime rival and critic of Abe and was defeated by Abe in the 2012 Presidential election. Former Foreign Minister and current Chairman of LDP's Policy Research Council Fumio Kishida, a potential contender for LDP's leadership has declared that that he would not contest the election and would support Prime Minister Abe's candidature.^{iv} Internal Affairs and Communication Minister Seiko Noda has also announced her interest in the contest. However, she is struggling even to get the support of 20 Diet members, a mandatory requirement to file candidature.

Public Opinion on LDP Leadership

Abe has been under pressure over the last one year over the Kake Gakuen and Moritomo Gakuen scandals, which raised alleged favoritism in government's decision-making involving two private school operators who are personally linked to the Prime Minister and his wife.^v Abe's chance of staying in power looked bleak as the public approval rating plummeted since February 2018, when the opposition questioned his involvement in the alleged scandals during the Diet session. The public approval rating of the Abe administration fell from 55 per cent in February to 33 per cent in March, while the disapproval rating rose from 34 per cent in February to 51 per cent in April.^{vi} However, the inability of the opposition to produce evidence that directly implicated the Prime Minister's involvement in these scandals enabled Abe to avoid a political storm. In June approval rating of Abe stood at 42 per cent while the disapproval rate was 42 per cent.^{vii}

Along with the higher public approval rating, when a public survey was undertaken on the LDP leadership Prime Minister Abe emerged to be the most favourite to win. In August, 32 per cent selected Abe, while Ishiba and Noda received 26 per cent and 6 per cent support.^{viii} Similar polls conducted in the previous months reflected the impact of the scandals as in the case of approval rating. Support for Abe in the month of April was 22 per cent while Ishiba scored 27 per cent in comparison to 31 per cent support for Abe and 20 per cent for Ishiba in January.^{ix} In August, Abe's leadership was supported by 59 per cent, Ishiba and Noda received 20 per cent and 5 per cent respective. The figures in April were 46 per cent and 25 per cent for Abe and Ishiba respectively.^x

A major factor that contributes to the Japanese citizen's confidence in Abe is his ability to bring stability to the government. Another factor is the unpopularity of the opposition parties and their lack of alternatives to Abe's economic and social welfare policies. The majority of Abe supporters appreciate his handling of foreign affairs especially the North Korean crisis and the management of Japan's relations with President Donald Trump.^{xi}

Role of LDP Factions

Up until the 1990s when LDP had uninterrupted dominance in Japanese politics since its formation in 1955, intense competition between factions that constituted the party contributed to fill the democratic void arising from the uncompetitive nature of the broader Japanese political system. Factions jockeyed each other for power within the party and in the government. Though factions still constitute an integral aspect of LDP structure today, their influence has considerably reduced in the last two decades following electoral reforms. Centralisation of power under charismatic leadership and dismantling factional authority has been a key feature of LDP under former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-06) and Shinzo Abe (2012-). Consolidating executive power under the Prime Minister and by appointing a cabinet of loyalists, Abe even tried to undercut the tradition of factional allocation of power. Through the centralisation of power in the party and the government, Abe's control over policymaking has been greatest than any another post-War prime minister.^{xii}

Prime Minister Abe's consolidation of power within the party in the wake of the upcoming presidential election is now visible and most of the factions have fallen in line under his leadership. Among the seven factions, five have thrown their weight behind him. Supporters of Abe include the Hosoda faction headed by ex-Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiroyuki Hosoda, largest among the factions which boast 94 diet members. Abe himself belongs to the Hosoda faction. LDP's second-largest faction headed by Finance Minister Taro Aso which has 59 Diet members and a group led by LDP Secretary General Toshihiro Nikai with 44 members have also endorsed Abe. Former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida's withdrawal from LDP Presidential race enabled the support of Kishida faction for Abe. The Kishida faction has 48 diet members. On August 9, a faction consisting 12 diet members headed by LDP former Secretary-General Nobuteru Ishihara, has also announced their support for Abe.^{xiii}

Ishiba, a longtime critic of LDP's faction politics founded his own faction following 2015 Presidential election when he could not manage to get the support of 20 Diet members to endorse his candidature. Ishiba faction now has a strength of 20 Diet members, which ensured his candidature for the upcoming election.

The developments in the third largest faction, Heisei Kenkyu Kai with a membership of 55 lawmakers, in recent months witnessed some element of the return of older factional politics within LDP. After being frustrated over its leader, Fukushima Nukaga's inability to use the faction's numbers to jockey for power within the LDP, members of the faction asked him to step down in February 2018.^{xiv} However, under its new leader, LDP General Council Chairman Wataru Takeshita, the faction could not come to an agreement on whom to support and decided to leave the decision to individual members. Lower House members of the faction are largely in favour of Prime Minister Abe, while 21 Upper House members have decided to back Ishiba.^{xv} The split in the Takeshita faction would help Ishiba to put up a decent fight against Abe. With the backing of five factions, Abe is likely to get more than 70 per cent of the 405 LDP Diet members' vote. This includes the 28 out of the 73 members who are not affiliated with any faction.^{xvi}

Representation of LDP Factions and Support for Presidential Candidates^{xvii}

	Factions	Diet members (Lower House and House of Councilors)	Abe	Ishiba	Noda	Undecided
1.	Seiwakai- Hosoda Faction	94	94			
2.	Ikokai- Aso Faction	59	59			
3.	Heisei Kenkyukai- Takeshita Faction	55	9	21		25
4.	Kochi Kai- Kishida Faction	48	48			
5.	AtarashiiNami- Nikai Faction	44	44			
6.	Kinmirai Heisei Kenkyukai- Ishihara Faction	12	12			
7.	Suigetsu-kai- Ishiba Faction	20		20		
8.	Unaffiliated	73	28	2	2	41
	Total	405	294	43	2	66

To win against Abe, who has an overwhelming support of the LDP Diet members; Ishiba should secure more than 80 per cent of party's rank and file members vote. For Ishiba, who also served as the Minister in charge of regional economic revitalisation and used to be popular among party members in rural area, the task remains ambitious. In the 2012 presidential election Ishiba secured twice the number of party members' votes than Abe in the first round, however, was beaten in the second round. The situation is very different from 2012, with an expanded support base for Abe at the provisional level over the course of last 6 years as the leader of the party.

Constitutional Revision vs Abenomics

The September election most likely would be a two-way contest between Abe and Ishiba. Even though Ishiba does not have much chance of winning the election, his candidature could pave way for a debate on important policy issues. In his campaign, Ishiba called Abe's political style into question and is campaigning on a platform of "honesty and fairness" and promising to "regain public trust in politics."^{xviii} This is clearly an attempt to capitalise on the recently tarnished image of Abe from the corruption allegations. During one of his provincial campaign, Ishiba said that it's important to have an election, adding that there is "no point at all in running if no objection is raised to the status quo".^{xix} In his challenge to Abe, Ishiba is focusing on the negative aspects of the "Abenomics" a mix of economic policies initiated by the Abe government. He argued for the prioritisation of revitalising the economies of rural areas that have not sufficiently benefited from Abenomics by initiating policies that would "spur growth of small and medium-sized companies and rural areas are completely different from those for major companies and urban areas."^{xx}

Abe, on the other hand, seems to focus on constitutional revision. In a recent press conference, Abe insisted on "speed up discussions" on revising the Constitution, by saying that he

is “determined to ensure that the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) will be provided for in the Constitution and fulfil my responsibility for that.”^{xxi} Abe’s focus on constitutional revision is tactical in a situation where the issue has lost its momentum within LDP. By focusing on the issue, Abe is trying to highlight the difference in his position to that of his opponent. Ishiba insists on amending the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Abe, on the other hand, proposed to add a paragraph that would provide legality to Japanese Self Defense Force while retaining the war-renouncing clause of the constitution.^{xxii} Abe’s proposal is considered to be more realistic and would gain more support from LDP legislators and members considering strong sentiment in Japanese public against deleting the peace clause. Abe seems to gather support around his profile of being the “more realistic leader”.

Conclusion

Barring any major political shock in one month time from now and the leadership election on September 20, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will continue as the LDP President and go into history as the longest-serving prime minister of post-War Japan. A comfortable victory would seal Abe’s consolidation of power in the Party and the government, which was weakened for a year in the context of corruption allegations. The damaged image forced Abe a year ago to reshuffle the cabinet to accommodate his rivals in the LDP. A comfortable win would likely see an immediate cabinet reshuffle where Abe would try to incorporate his loyalist to centralize executive power under the prime minister office.

Prime Minister Abe is less likely to take up some agendas which are of personal priority but controversial, early in this final term like the constitutional revision rather would focus on managing planned events and continuity in existing initiatives. Avoiding any kind of controversy before the House of Councilors election scheduled for the summer and the Unified Prefectural & Municipal Elections in April 2019 would be a high priority. Poor performance in the House of Councilors election can increase pressure on Abe. The imperial transition schedule for April 2019 is another high profile event that Abe needs to manage. The imperial transition of 2019 features the abdication of the current Japanese Emperor, the first to do so in the last two centuries. It is important to note that, Abe in August 2017 postponed the much controversial consumption tax law for October 2019 in anticipation of political developments.

The other priority of the new Abe administration would be foreign policy. Amongst many issues, North Korea would be high on the agenda. Abe would try all means for a Summit with Kim Jong-un to find a solution for the abductee issue. Improving relations with China is another priority area for Japan. The Japanese government has already communicated to the Chinese side a possible visit by Abe in October 2018 if he gets reelected in the LDP Presidential election. While engaging with China, the Abe administration would also prioritise to promote its Indo-Pacific partnerships in an attempt to balance growing influence of China.

The likelihood of Abe getting elected for another three years as Japanese Prime Minister is welcome news for India. Bilateral relations between the two countries have strengthened under PM Abe. His proactive foreign policy, characterised by a new level of military commitment and the will to assume a greater international role have been a major driving force for greater

convergence of interest between India and Japan. Tokyo would unlikely to continue this current level of international activism under a new leadership, as other leaders including Abe's opponent Shigeru Ishiba does not enjoy the kind of support that Abe has within the party and in the government. A major factor that keeps Abe's support base strong is his ability to bring stability to the government. In the context of shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, a "normal" Japan, which is not restricted by its constitution to take greater international security responsibilities, would bring more stability to the region. Likelihood of Japan amending its constitution has a better chance under Abe during his last term as the Prime Minister.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

ⁱ "Rule change could see Abe become nation's longest-serving leader", Japan Times, March 5, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/03/05/national/politics-diplomacy/rule-change-see-become-japans-longest-serving-leader/#.W3ETougzaM8>

ⁱⁱ "Abe looks beyond factions, courting LDP's rank and file for support as presidential election nears", The Japan Times, May 30, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/05/30/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-looks-beyond-factions-courting-ldps-rank-file-support-presidential-election-nears/#.W3EcAugzaM8>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Ex-minister Ishiba to declare candidacy in LDP leadership race", The Mainichi, August 9, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180809/p2g/oom/ofp/076000c>

^{iv} "Kishida decides against running in LDP election, will support Abe", Asahi Shimbun, July 25, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201807250037.html

^v The first of these scandals came to public in early 2017, when it emerged that the finance ministry had sold a plot of public land to Moritomo Gakuen, a company that runs private schools of a nationalistic bent, at a steep discount price. Despite denials from Abe and the government, many alleged an act of favoritism as the owner of the company was personally linked the Prime Minister and his wife. The second scandal allegation involved granting a license to Kake Gakuen, a company run by a close friend of Abe's, to start a new veterinary school. "Shinzo Abe, Pursued by Scandal", The New York Review of Books, April 17, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/17/shinzo-abe-pursued-by-scandal/>

^{vi} "A look at approval and disapproval ratings of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Cabinet over time", Sasakawa USA, <https://spfusa.org/category/japan-political-pulse/>

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} "Abe maintains slight lead over Ishiba in LDP presidential race", Asahi Shimbun, August 7, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201808070031.html

^{ix} "Asahi poll: Ishiba preferred over Abe for next LDP president", Asahi Shimbun, April 16, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201804160037.html

^x Ibid

^{xi} Tobias Harris, "June poll watcher: despite fluctuations, Prime Minister Abe recovers in the polls", SPF USA, June 29, 2018, <https://spfusa.org/japan-political-pulse/june-poll-watcher-despite-fluctuations-prime-minister-abe-recovers-in-the-polls/>

^{xii} Rob Fahey, "Is there a Future for the LDP's Factions?", Tokyo Review, February 13, 2018, www.tokyoreview.net/2018/02/future-ldps-factions/

^{xiii} "Ishiba to run for LDP president despite numbers in Abe's favor", Asahi Shimbun, August 10, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201808100053.html

^{xiv} "LDP faction boss Fukushima Nukaga pressured to step down ahead of September party leadership race", The Japan Times, February 7, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/02/07/national/politics->

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^{xv}"Ishiba to run for LDP president despite numbers in Abe's favor", Asahi Shimbun, August 10, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201808100053.html

^{xvi}"70% of lawmakers back Abe for LDP presidential election", The Japan News, August 6, 2018, the-japan-news.com/news/article/0004640264

^{xvii} Support for different candidate is based on Yomiuri Shimbun survey, "70% of lawmakers back Abe for LDP presidential election", The Japan News, August 6, 2018, the-japan-news.com/news/article/0004640264

^{xviii} "Ishiba to run for LDP president despite numbers in Abe's favor", The Asahi Shimbun, August 10, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201808100053.html

^{xix}"Ex-defense chief Ishiba intends to run in LDP presidential race", The Mainichi, July 26, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180726/p2g/oom/ofp/096000c>

^{xx}"Ishiba to run for LDP president despite numbers in Abe's favor", The Asahi Shimbun, August 10, 2018, www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201808100053.html

^{xxi}"Abe, Ishiba clash over priority issues for LDP leadership race", The Mainichi, July 24, 2014, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180724/p2a/oom/ona/009000c>

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