

**16 July 2024**

## **Key questions about the LDP's leadership election**

### **Key takeaways**

- While the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is still debating when to hold its leadership election, potential candidates have quietly begun preparing their campaigns.
- It is still unclear whether Prime Minister Kishida Fumio will run again – and whether he can win if he runs – and he is all but certain to face a contested election, perhaps with a crowded field.

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With roughly two months remaining in Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's tenure as leader of the LDP, there remain some significant questions about the party's leadership election, which will not only determine who leads Japan's government but will also have implications for the timing and outcome of the next general election. This research note provides a snapshot of the state of the race as of this writing.

### **When and how will the election be held?**

Kishida's term ends on 30 September; party rules stipulate that a leadership election will have to be held within ten days before the term ends, meaning between 20 and 29 September. The LDP's election administration committee, however, is debating the details about the leadership election. Regarding the timing, there is some concern that the leadership election could conflict with the opening of the UN General Assembly in New York, which could lead the vote to be held no later than 20 September. Although some have called for a rule change to move up the vote, LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu has said that the UN General Assembly is not a factor, suggesting that the vote will be held on either 20 or 27 September. There is also some debate over how

long the campaign period should be, particularly whether it should be longer than the typical twelve-day period between the filing date and the election.

The process of setting the rules for the election is further complicated by the need to select members of the election administration committee, as there are three spots held by lawmakers who lost their seats in the 2021 general election and Kishida may want broader turnover on the 11-member committee anyway. The LDP's general council will select committee members later this month.

As far as the election itself, it will be conducted according to the same rules as in 2021. In the first round, candidates will compete for 738 votes, 369 from LDP Diet members and 369 distributed proportionally based on a vote of dues-paying party members. If no candidate receives a majority in the first round, the vote goes to a runoff in which the top two candidates compete for the 369 votes of LDP lawmakers and 47 votes for the LDP's prefectural chapters, one per chapter. To run, candidates will need to be endorsed by twenty current LDP lawmakers.

### **What does Prime Minister Kishida intend to do?**

The prime minister has not stated his intentions regarding the leadership election. Asked about his plans while in the United States for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit last week, he said, "I am not thinking about anything right now other than delivering results in response to current challenges." However, with Kishida back from overseas travel and the clock ticking on his term, he will face increasing pressure from LDP members to clarify his plans for the election.

While there has not necessarily been a surge of calls from LDP lawmakers for Kishida to resign or bow out of the leadership race, since former prime minister Suga Yoshihide's [call](#) for a leadership change in June, there has been a steady trickle from different sections of the party for Kishida to "take responsibility" for the LDP's crisis of public trust and step aside. Despite his low approval ratings – and low standing in polls asking who should be prime minister – it may be difficult for the LDP to keep Kishida from running again. Presumably he can still find twenty LDP lawmakers who would endorse him.

But it is significantly more difficult to see what his winning coalition looks like. While it depends on the size of the LDP's field (see below), he could struggle to win votes from the LDP's right wing, its reformist wing, and younger lawmakers anxious about their electoral prospects. Without the organizing role of factions, it will be more difficult for him to count heads. The impact of the surprising second-place finish of Ishimaru Shinji in Tokyo's gubernatorial election last week could be to make LDP lawmakers – particularly among younger and more urban representatives – more receptive to change. The other factor influencing Kishida's prospects is Asō Tarō, whose faction is effectively the last remaining faction. It is still unclear whether Kishida will be able to

count on Asō's support, after the latter criticized the prime minister for his handling of the political reform legislation. If Asō were to oppose Kishida explicitly, it might be enough to convince him to not run. Anything short of full-fledged support from Asō could be enough to wreck Kishida's chances if he were to run.

If Kishida were to run and lose, he would be the first sitting prime minister to lose an LDP leadership election since Fukuda Takeo in 1978.

### **What is the shape of the election field?**

LDP politicians have begun positioning themselves for the leadership race, although none has formally declared their candidacy. **Ishiba Shigeru**, a senior party leader who has sought the leadership unsuccessfully four times before, may be closest to declaring his candidacy. While he has been careful to avoid directly criticizing the prime minister, he has not downplayed his interest in running and said that he would decide after the Obon holidays, which are the week of 12 August. While Ishida appears to be courting Suga, who has emerged as the boss of the LDP's "reformist" wing, it is uncertain whether they have cemented an alliance or whether this would be enough to bolster his support among LDP lawmakers. Ishiba has struggled to build relationships with his parliamentary colleagues, who often resent his insistence on policy expertise above all else, especially in cabinet appointments, even as a plurality of voters favors him over other candidates to serve as the next prime minister. He can be a formidable candidate – particularly if LDP lawmakers are sufficiently alarmed by their electoral prospects – but his liabilities are not inconsiderable. The right wing may be particularly disinclined to support him, and, in a race between Ishiba and Kishida, could opt for the latter.

The right wing is one of the biggest questions about the leadership election. **Takaichi Sanae**, the former lieutenant of Abe Shinzō who ran a surprisingly strong campaign in 2021 thanks to Abe's support, has signaled that she is thinking about running again, having taken the quintessential candidate-in-waiting step of releasing a book this month. But without Abe, her support may be softer, to the point that it is possible that she could struggle to find twenty lawmakers to endorse her candidacy. Her weakness makes it possible for another candidate to compete for right-wing votes. The most likely candidate to challenge Takaichi on the right is **Katō Katsunobu**, who, like Takaichi, was close with Abe, but is also close with Suga, having served as deputy chief secretary under him during the second Abe administration and chief cabinet secretary during the Suga administration. Katō could quietly be positioned to take votes from across the party, including the establishment and reformist blocs. If Ishiba were running an "outside-in" campaign – trying to use his popularity outside the party to convince LDP lawmakers that he is their best option – Katō would be campaigning "inside out," trying to use his broad support from other lawmakers to build some momentum behind his candidacy and raise his popularity with the general public, as a relative lack of name recognition is perhaps his biggest liability. His lack of experience in foreign policy – compared with Ishiba, a highly regarded defense policy expert – could also be a liability

in a leadership election that will be shaped by if not decided by the prospect of the next prime minister having to manage a second Trump administration.

Foreign policy will likely be critical to the candidacy of **Motegi Toshimitsu**, who has made little secret of his desire to run for the leadership. Motegi has significant liabilities. His popularity with the public is limited and other LDP lawmakers do not particularly like him, finding him difficult to work with and work for as a senior official. His best argument will be that, as Abe's state minister for economic and fiscal policy – which included responsibility for trade negotiations – from 2017-2019 and foreign minister from 2019 to 2021, he is better positioned than any of the alternatives, including Kishida, to work with Donald Trump if he is elected as US president in November. He has already started making this argument in public, saying in a speech in Miyagi prefecture on Sunday, 14 July that even if Trump returns he would be able to handle the bilateral relationship well. It is unlikely that this appeal alone will sway LDP voters.

Other candidates are possible. If Kishida stands down, Foreign Minister **Kamikawa Yōko** or Chief Cabinet Secretary **Hayashi Yoshimasa** could run as representatives of Kishida's former faction, although the latter would face vociferous opposition from conservatives who view him as too soft on China. The former could have a better chance, as she may be able to draw on support from Asō and the right wing, while also appealing to change-minded voters as the potential first female prime minister. **Kōno Tarō** has also indicated his interest in running, but his position is precarious. His public support has plummeted relative to 2021, there is little sign that he will have the support of Asō (to whose faction he belongs) or Suga (with whom he has enjoyed good relations in the past as a fellow reformist from Kanagawa prefecture), and he is still disliked by the right wing. **Kobayashi Takayuki**, a former economic security minister under Kishida, has also hinted at his interest in running as the candidate of generational change, since, at forty-nine, he would be the youngest in the race by far. However, he suffers from low name recognition, weak standing in the party outside of a group of younger lawmakers, and has a relatively thin resume. His prospects are likely not helped by his links to the Unification Church, which led to his dismissal from the Kishida government in 2022. His candidacy could be more about positioning himself as a next-generation leader than as a serious bid for the leadership this year.

### **What are the signposts to watch for?**

With the Tokyo gubernatorial election concluded and Kishida back from Washington and Berlin, the shadow campaign for the leadership election will intensify. Kishida will be taking soundings of his support from key parliamentary figures – most notably Asō – and meeting with LDP supporters across the country. LDP backbenchers, meanwhile, will likely continue to weigh in publicly on the party's prospects ahead of the next general election. Other would-be candidates will launch their own shadow campaigns, engaging in a steady procession of speeches and media appearances that will fuel speculation about the race.

Ishiba Shigeru's statement that he will decide after Obon may make it difficult for other candidates to move before then, but if Kishida's shadow canvassing suggests that his chances of reelection are small, it is possible that he could make an announcement sooner, perhaps enabling him to act as a kingmaker in his own right and prompting candidates to declare earlier. Barring that, by mid-August the shape of the field will become clearer.

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