

**7 September 2025**

## **Ishiba bows out**

### **Key takeaways**

- Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru announced his intention to step down on Sunday, 7 September, preempting what was likely to be an overwhelming defeat in a vote on whether to hold an early election.
- The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will move quickly to set the rules and schedule for a new leadership election.
- The LDP faces a difficult choice, as it seeks a leader who can unify the party, restore public trust, and work with opposition parties to restore the government's control of the Diet.
- Koizumi Shinjirō likely enters as the favorite, but could still face strong challenges from conservative Takaichi Sanae and others.

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In the end, Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru bowed to the inevitable, announcing on the afternoon of Sunday, 7 September that he will step down as leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). His resignation clears the way for a new leadership election and the selection of a new prime minister who may be able to have more success bringing in a new coalition partner that stabilizes the government's control of the Diet and, no less urgently for the LDP, begins rebuilding the loss of trust in the longtime governing party.

Ishiba's decision forestalls the party vote on whether to hold an early leadership election, which was shaping up into an overwhelming victory for the "yes" camp that would be a clear rejection of Ishiba's leadership. Indeed, the outlook was so dire that Agriculture Minister Koizumi Shinjirō and former prime minister Suga Yoshihide, key players in Ishiba's victory last year, visited Ishiba on Saturday evening and urged him to resign before the vote in the interest of party unity.

With Ishiba stepping down, LDP leaders will now move forward to schedule the leadership election and determine whether they will hold the election using emergency rules – in which lawmakers would have more than double the votes of the prefectural chapters, with no guaranteed role for dues-paying supporters – or whether the party will hold a “full spectrum” leadership election like the 2024 leadership election, in which lawmakers and the party rank-and-file would control an equal number of votes in the first round. Ahead of the recall vote, there was already discussion that the party would aim for an early October leadership election, possibly on 4 October, and that it would be full spectrum to give the party an opportunity to reconnect with its supporters and give the next party leader a more robust mandate. Meanwhile, by resigning before the vote, the LDP will now be electing a leader to serve out the remaining two years of Ishiba’s term rather than for a full three-year term.

As for who will contest the leadership election, the field will feature several of the leading candidates from the 2024 field, with **Koizumi Shinjirō** and **Takaichi Sanae** – who with Ishiba were in the top tier of candidates last year – entering this year’s race with the highest chance of success. Koizumi, his reputation boosted by his performance as agriculture minister, his popularity at least as robust as Takaichi’s, and his backing from among the party’s younger lawmakers significant, is the presumptive favorite at this stage. He stands the best chance of reassembling the coalition that cemented Ishiba’s victory last year and even expanding upon it, particularly if he can improve upon his relatively poor performance with rank-and-file members. Takaichi, meanwhile, enters the race in relatively worse position despite her strong performance in 2024. While she remains popular with grassroots supporters, her base within the parliamentary party is smaller due to electoral attrition over the past year, she has made few inroads with more moderate lawmakers, and she may not be able to count on the backing of **Asō Tarō**, whose last-minute decision to throw his faction behind her nearly secured victory. She may also have to reckon with **Kobayashi Takayuki**, the younger conservative who ran a respectable campaign in 2024, who has given few signs that he is willing to step aside to allow Takaichi to unify the right wing. This divide reflects both the undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Takaichi even among conservatives as well as the desire for generational change on the right wing.

What Asō decides to do will be a critical indicator of how this leadership campaign unfolds. The faction boss is undoubtedly jubilant at the resignation of his longtime rival Ishiba, but he has been openly worried about the potential for political chaos at a moment of peril for Japan. While Asō’s 43-person faction cannot decide the election on its own, it nevertheless represents a sizable chunk of votes that will influence the shape of the race. There have been reports suggesting that Asō has cooled on Takaichi and could be looking for an alternative. The faction boss could work with other kingmakers to unify the party around, say, Koizumi; he could push for an experienced leader like his ally **Motegi Toshimitsu** in the interest of repairing relations with the United States; or he could push his own alternative candidate who could improve the party’s image like, say, **Obuchi Yūko**.

For Koizumi, the question – beyond his ability to improve on his performance with rank-and-file supporters – is whether he will also have to contend with a moderate like Chief Cabinet Secretary **Hayashi Yoshimasa**, who ran a surprisingly strong campaign last year. Hayashi would be a capable and steady premier, but he is older, which would do little to ease concerns about the party's being out of touch, and is widely disliked by the right wing. Koizumi likely enters the race in a stronger position than Hayashi, having the backing of **Suga Yoshihide** and his reformist allies; many of the party's younger lawmakers, hungry for generational change and party reform; and he may even enjoy the backing of former prime minister **Kishida Fumio**, which could complicate Hayashi's prospects given that Hayashi would look to his colleagues in the former Kishida faction for support first.

The upshot is that this leadership election may be less of a free-for-all than in 2024, with a more consolidated field and more of an effort by bosses like Suga, Kishida, and Asō to steer the process. Ultimately, having watched the party's fault lines widen over the past year – and over the past several weeks – party leaders may look for a leader who can promote party unity, generate public excitement and support, and work with one or more opposition parties to stabilize the government. Other factors – views on foreign or economic policy or diplomatic experience – may be less significant as the LDP grapples with an existential crisis that may well still result in the party going into opposition for the third time in its history.

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