FROM THE EDITOR

On September 29, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will hold an election to determine the next president of the LDP, who will succeed Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and lead the party in an upcoming parliamentary election. When Suga recently decided not to run for re-election, it opened the doors for four candidates to enter the race: Fumio Kishida, Taro Kono, Seiko Noda, and Sanae Takaichi.

In the 24th issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Leonard Schoppa, professor of politics at the University of Virginia, and Tobias Harris, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, to share their perspectives on whether Japan is entering a period of political instability.

RESOLVED
Japan Is Entering a Period of Political Instability
The period since 2012 has been one of remarkable continuity and stability in Japanese politics. Prior to December of that year, when Shinzo Abe assumed the position of prime minister, Japan had a series of one-year leaders going back six years. The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) could not produce leadership stability, cycling through Abe, Fukuda, and Aso in the three years leading up to the 2009 election. Following them, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) proved it could do no better, cycling through Hatoyama, Kan, and Noda during its three years in power.

Abe’s ability to stay in office for almost eight years was record-setting and particularly striking after this remarkable run of short-termers (one of whom was Abe himself). When he was replaced last September by Yoshihide Suga, the question everyone asked is one they are asking even more now, after Suga lasted just one year. Are we back to the instability in leadership we saw before Abe? I think we are.

One reason we should expect instability is because after eight years of Abe, there are many ambitious politicians of the next generation who have been waiting for their turn as prime minister. The atmosphere is similar to 1987 when Yasuhiro Nakasone stepped down after five years in office. At that point, all of the faction bosses of his generation had enjoyed a turn as prime minister, and the next generation leaders were eager to get their shot at the top job. A period of rapid turnover ensued. The same happened after Junichiro Koizumi left office—ushering in the period of six short-termers mentioned above.

The fact that the race to replace Suga has attracted four aspirants is a signal that this dynamic could play out again. Regardless of who wins the LDP leadership race and steps into the prime minister’s office in October, there will be a line of rivals eager to bring him or her down. The LDP has shown that it is willing to ditch leaders if they show any weakness in delivering election wins, so even if the new prime minister pulls out a victory in the general election this fall, he or she will have additional opportunities to fail to meet expectations, starting with the upper house election next July.

The expectations game will be especially challenging for the next LDP leader because Abe set such a high bar with his string of lower and upper house victories between 2012 and 2019. All of these were assisted by divisions in the opposition ranks after the DPJ split, opening the door for the LDP to win a large number of single-member district seats against multiple opposition parties that were unable to coordinate around a single challenger. The current leading opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party, remains a work in progress, but it has absorbed several splinter parties and is coordinating with the other leading opposition parties to do a much better job this fall at coordinating on a single challenger in most districts.

The other factor that will limit the longevity of the next prime minister is the backlog of difficult decisions Japan will need to make to meet its economic and security challenges in the next few years.
In recent years, Japan has managed to keep its labor force from shrinking by drawing in a higher proportion of women and older Japanese. However, prior to the pandemic, it seemed to reach the limits of this strategy, facing severe labor shortages in specific sectors. Will Japan take further steps to bring immigrants and women into the workforce to meet these labor needs, or will some sectors see production and service cutbacks? Relatedly, will it adopt further changes to labor markets to accelerate the lateral movement of labor from low productivity to high productivity areas? Immigration, gender equality, and job protections are all tough issues, and the LDP is split on all of them.

Then there are the difficult questions about how Japan will change its energy mix to address the challenge of climate change and lingering concerns about the safety of its nuclear power plants. The contenders for leadership include Taro Kono, who has called for Japan to phase out nuclear power plants as it invests heavily in renewables, as well as Fumio Kishida, who wants to restart more plants and keep building new ones.

Finally, the choices are equally challenging in foreign affairs. Should Japan respond to the rise of China by sharply accelerating its defense spending, acquiring missile strike capability to deter missile attacks from North Korea and China, and even moving toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons? Should it continue to rely on the U.S. alliance and add additional partners? Or should it accommodate China's rise as a fait accompli and learn how to work with a neighbor that is increasingly dominant in this region?

If the new LDP takes the most hawkish course, as it might if it chooses Sanae Takaichi as its new leader, the party's relations with China and with coalition partner Komeito will be strained, and this could usher in a great deal of political instability. If the LDP goes with one of the others, Japan might get a more moderate approach to foreign affairs, but at any point, any of these leaders could be tripped up—as the DPJ's Noda was in 2012—by a sudden provocation and the pressure to show strength. So, these three challenges will be tough for any new leader to tackle—and I did not even mention the challenge of bringing Covid under control.

In the coming years, my bet is that the recent dethroning of an incumbent prime minister after just one year in office will not be the last such episode.
As Japan prepares for its second leadership change in as many years, many observers are anxious that Japan could be in the midst of a new era of fragile, short-lived governments that are unable to make necessary policy changes and adapt to a fast-changing international environment. Fears of a return to a “revolving-door” premiership abound. These fears, however, are overblown.

First, despite the resignation of former prime minister Shinzo Abe last year and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s decision not to seek a new term as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader (and prime minister) this year, the conditions that enabled Abe to serve for a record-setting seven years and eight months remain largely unchanged. The public’s support for the LDP continues to dwarf that for the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the leading opposition party, even after the Suga government’s approval ratings plummeted amid widespread disapproval of its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Public trust in the ability of the opposition to govern plummeted during the 2009-2012 tenure of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and neither the now-extinct DPJ nor any of its successor parties has succeeded at regaining public confidence. While it had appeared possible that the opposition might gain a sizable number of seats in the forthcoming general election if Suga remained at the head of the LDP, the CDP and its partners could struggle against a new leader enjoying a honeymoon period.

Beyond the public’s lack of trust in the opposition, opinion polls suggest that the electorate has a limited appetite for political change, notwithstanding dissatisfaction over the government’s handling of the pandemic. An NHK poll conducted this month found that only 26 percent of respondents want the opposition parties to gain seats in the general election that must be held by the end of November—only slightly more than the 22 percent who want the ruling coalition to add seats to its already-large majority. (Most expressed no opinion one way or another.) Meanwhile, a Nikkei poll this month found that 60 percent of respondents want the next prime minister to remain in office for at least four years.

Moreover, despite the abruptness of Suga’s exit, it may be a sign not of political instability but of political health. The public, by and large, did not think that Suga should remain in office beyond the end of his term as LDP leader in September and seemed poised to punish a Suga-led LDP at the ballot box. Senior party leaders, concerned about their party’s electoral prospects, declined to express their confidence in Suga’s leadership when he sought their support for a last-ditch effort to bolster his position, forcing him to bow out. Instead, the LDP is in the midst of a wide-open campaign for its leadership, with candidates engaged in a much-needed debate about the post-Abe LDP that was forestalled by Suga’s coronation last year. It would have been more destabilizing if Suga had held on to lead the LDP into the general election, failed to prevent a significant loss of seats, and then either resigned—forcing the LDP to conduct another leadership election—or clung to power at the head of an unhappy party facing an upper house election next year.
Finally, despite the spirited debate among the four LDP leadership candidates—Seiko Noda, Taro Kono, Sanae Takaichi, and Fumio Kishida—their remarks during the campaign have revealed that Abe’s legacy is a broad consensus on policy issues that in the recent past served to fracture the party. For example, though the LDP was once bitterly divided on when and how to balance the government’s budget and reduce Japan’s outsized national debt, all of the contenders are prepared to run large deficits for the foreseeable future. The leading candidates are alarmed by Xi Jinping’s China, support more defense spending, and are willing to consider new capabilities. To the extent that there are differences between the candidates, they have more to do with “culture war” issues—whether it should be possible for a woman to accede to the throne or whether couples must use the same surname—than the more fundamental questions of national policy. The LDP is not without conflict, but these clashes often seem to be more about personality than policy and may prove less destabilizing than, say, former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi’s pursuit of structural reform over the objections of significant portions of his own party.

Accordingly, it would be premature to conclude that Japan is in the midst of a new period of political instability. The conditions that enabled Abe’s historically long tenure remain largely intact. Political stability under unrivaled LDP dominance may not necessarily be a good thing—more vibrant political competition, for example, might be “destabilizing” but could lead to more creative policymaking. However, for the moment, it appears to be what most Japanese voters want.
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