

Politics Watch

Future trends for LDP presidential election

- Many candidates expected considering PM Kishida's slumping approval rating, disbanding of party factions
- If Kishida also runs, cabinet ministers and some party officials may refrain from running; Many lawmakers who have distanced themselves from Kishida administration could be mentioned as possible candidates
- Official candidacy announcements may start after Obon holiday; Actual candidates, leading contenders not yet known; After campaigning in first half of September, voting likely to take place on 20 Sep

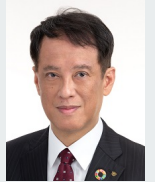
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The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election in September will be an extremely important event in terms of setting Japan's macroeconomic policies for the second half of the year and beyond. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has continued implementing appropriate macroeconomic policy management in the form of a "virtuous cycle between wages and prices," but his re-election prospects have become increasingly challenging. A new prime minister could lead to major changes for Japan's macroeconomic policies.

The current outlook for the LDP presidential election, to be honest, remains very unclear. First, there will probably be many candidates competing to become the next party leader. There could be many candidates due to the slumping approval ratings for the Kishida administration and the disbanding of LDP party factions.

At this point, Kishida has also expressed his willingness to run for re-election. If Kishida, who is both the incumbent prime minister and president of the LDP party, were to seek re-election, cabinet ministers and party officials closely tied to Kishida might refrain from running in the party president election. LDP Diet members who are not that close to the Kishida administration will likely be quicker to announce their intentions to run for office.

Formal announcements by each candidate are expected to begin in earnest after the Obon holiday (mid-Aug). However, at this juncture it is too early to say who will actually run for office and who will become the leading candidates. After a slightly longer-than-usual campaign in the first half of September, a 20 September vote seems likely.

Many candidates for Sep LDP presidential election?

The LDP presidential election in September is likely to have many candidates.

One reason is that approval rating for the Kishida administration has remained poor and there are no signs of a turnaround. The next prime minister/LDP party president will serve as the "face" of the party for the Upper House election next summer and the Lower House election by next fall. If the current conditions do not change, the LDP will likely struggle in those two elections if Kishida is re-elected as party president. That said, there is no unanimous and influential successor at this point. Many LDP Diet members are likely to announce their intention to run for party president in a post-Kishida era.

Another reason is that all LDP party factions, except for the Aso faction, have decided to disband. Members of some factions are likely to continue working with each other, even after the decision to disband party factions. However, unlike previous LDP presidential elections, members will be less bound to vote for candidates selected by the former factions. If more Diet members vote based on their personal judgments, many more candidates will have a chance.

Candidate lineup and impact of Kishida's candidacy

The LDP members who have so far expressed their intention to run for office or have been endorsed by those around them are as follows.

Kishida seems unfazed by his administration's low approval ratings and continues to work on his candidacy. Members of the former Kishida faction also met on 30 July to confirm their support for Kishida. He is also likely to collect the 20 endorsements needed for his candidacy. The rest will depend on Kishida's own assessment of the situation and his decision.

When an incumbent prime minister/LDP president runs for office, a cabinet member or party official in a position to support that prime minister cannot easily run for office. Indeed, doing so would be viewed as a rebellious act. Such candidates would easily lose the support of party members and Diet members.

Sanae Takaichi (Minister for Economic Security), Taro Kono (Minister for Digital Transformation), and Toshimitsu Motegi (LDP Secretary General), are prominent cabinet ministers and party officials. If Kishida actually runs for re-election, it is possible that they may not run themselves or they may hold off on declaring their intent to run for office.

Shigeru Ishiba (former Secretary General), Shinjiro Koizumi (former Environment Minister), Seiko Noda (former Internal Affairs Minister), and Takayuki Kobayashi (former Minister for Economic Security) have all distanced themselves from the Kishida administration. If they are willing to do so, and if they can gather 20 endorsements, they will be able to formally announce their intentions to run sooner rather than later.

There was a time when LDP Vice-President Taro Aso was pushing Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa to run, but she is originally a member of the Kishida faction. It is hard to imagine that she, on her own volition, would choose to run against Kishida. Former chief cabinet secretary Katsunobu Kato has also been mentioned as a candidate for party president. However, he is a member of the Motegi faction and Secretary General Motegi is also considering running for party president. So, Kato is in a difficult position.

Candidate declarations in earnest from end of Obon holiday

With the Diet not in session right now, many LDP lawmakers are making official trips overseas or are back in their hometowns preparing for the next election. Formal candidacy announcements are expected to begin in earnest after the Obon holiday.

Some of the potential candidates are very motivated, but their party base is weak. Whether they can secure 20 endorsements is uncertain. Conversely, there are those who have high expectations from others and are likely to collect the needed number of endorsements, but they may decide not to run in the election. It is still too early to say who will actually run in the election and who will be the leading candidates.

The Aso Faction is the only party faction that has not dissolved and its members are strongly united. An endorsement from Aso, who is both LDP Vice-President and Chairman of his faction, would have a major impact. Former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also enjoys the trust of many Diet members who never belonged to a faction. Who Suga endorses will likewise have a significant impact.

Election date to be set on 20 Aug

Looking at the schedule going forward, the lineup of candidates will probably be ready from the end of the Obon holiday to early September. From the beginning of September until around 20 September, candidates are likely to engage in debates and other electoral battles with each other. Voting is expected to take place on 20 September.

The LDP's Presidential Election Committee held its first meeting on 5 August. This committee apparently confirmed that the presidential election will be conducted under the current regulations and that the election schedule will be decided at the next meeting on 20 August.

Under the current regulations, Prime Minister Kishida's term as LDP president expires on 30 September. The voting day will be within ten days before Kishida's term expires (= 20-29 Sep). The date for announcing plans to run in the election will be 12 days before the voting date.

Addresses will be delivered at the United Nations General Assembly sometime from 24 September. During a typical year, that address would be delivered by the prime minister. In order to meet that timeframe, the schedule is seen as being quite tight, even if the voting day is 20 September (earliest possible date).

Once the campaigning starts, media coverage will increase. Even if a candidate is not well known now, such media coverage could provide an opportunity to get his or her name out to the public. There are also hopes that the LDP's election campaigning and candidate debates will help to ease the public's distrust of the LDP's politics and money scandals. Many in the party have suggested that the election period should be as long as possible.

Even though the regulations state that the party presidential election must be announced at least 12 days before voting, the election period could apparently take more than 12 days. If we assume that the voting date is 20 September and the election period is about two weeks before that date, election campaigning could be in full swing as early as the start of September.

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