

International

Japan ruling party elects Kishida as leader, next PM

Soft-spoken centrist defeat popular vaccine chief Kono

TOKYO: Japan's ruling party elected former foreign minister Fumio Kishida its new leader yesterday, setting him on course to become the next prime minister of the world's third-largest economy. The soft-spoken centrist defeated popular vaccine chief Taro Kono in an unusually close race to succeed Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who is stepping down after just a year in office. Kishida, 64, will be confirmed as the new premier in a vote in parliament on October 4 and will then lead the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) into general elections that must happen by November.



An unusually close race to succeed Suga



TOKYO: Fumio Kishida, former foreign minister, speaks during a press conference after being elected as the new leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), at the LDP headquarters yesterday. — AFP

Speaking after his win, he called on members to "show the public that the LDP has been reborn, and appeal for their support." The scion of a political family from Hiroshima, Kishida has long targeted the prime minister's office and ran unsuccessfully for party leader last year, losing out to Suga. He became the first candidate to step into the race this time around and ran on a platform of pandemic stimulus while carrying a suggestion box to events to receive proposals from citizens.

"My skill is to really listen to people," he said after his win yesterday, promising to work for "a bright future for Japan". The race was a tight one, with Kishida edging Kono by just a single vote in the first round before taking the second with 257 votes to Kono's 170. Two other candidates, hawkish right-winger Sanae Takaichi and feminist former gender equality minister Seiko

Noda, did not advance beyond the first-round vote.

A former LDP policy chief, Kishida sought to capitalize on public discontent over Suga's response to the pandemic, which has seen his government's approval ratings slump to record lows. "We need to keep seriously pursuing coronavirus measures by all means. I need to create an atmosphere in which we can address the crisis together," he told reporters. On foreign policy, he pledged to "protect basic values led by democracy" and "show our presence by contributing to global challenges, led by the environment issue."

Pelosi is always quick to frame vehement internal disagreement as "family discussion" that ultimately fosters togetherness. But progressives have been emboldened since the election to state in increasingly stark terms their frustration over centrists they see as beholden to special interests and too keen to subjugate Democratic values to bipartisanship. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the most-high profile emissary of progressives in Washington, has urged centrist colleagues to view them as allies, not the enemy.

'Divide, divide, divide'

But trying that to Joe Manchin, the West Virginia centrist Ocasio-Cortez recently lambasted over his record on climate change after he refused to support the \$3.5 trillion spending bill. Ocasio-Cortez said Manchin had allowed oil industry lobbyists to dictate his climate positions and accused him of "bipartisan" corruption that masquerades as clear-eyed moderation. Manchin in turn castigated the congresswoman for "just awful" rhetoric that he said had only one purpose—"divide, divide, divide." When top Senate Democrat Elizabeth Warren came out against Jerome Powell's reappointment as chair of the US Federal Reserve on Tuesday she pulled no punches, calling him a "dangerous man to head up the Fed."

And the internecine mudslinging shows no sign of cooling. Ilhan Omar, another progressive, suggested Monday in an interview that is sure to ruffle feathers that Manchin and other centrists balking at the high price of Build Back Better, were in the wrong party. "It is saddening to see them use Republican talking points, we obviously didn't envision having Republicans as part of our party," she told CNN. If Democratic infighting sometimes feels like one of life's inevitabilities, it is because the party's ethos places as much value on diversity as unity.—AFP

Civil war: Democratic infighting threatening Biden's legacy

WASHINGTON: Eight months after Joe Biden swept to victory on a pledge to make America more livable, equitable and environmentally-friendly, a Democratic civil war is threatening to shred his domestic agenda. Internal squabbles are nothing new in Washington but twin proposals to spend up to \$5 trillion rebuilding the post-COVID economy have laid bare the extent of the eyewatering divisions confounding the party in Congress.

So profound are the disagreements between the party's left and centrist factions that they could easily leave Biden with no legacy to speak of and torpedo Democrats' chances in next year's midterm elections. By Friday morning, it is possible that Biden's bipartisan \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill will have failed, imperiling a larger, \$3.5 trillion "Build Back Better" package of investments in child care, education, family leave and climate mitigation.

Moderates want the House to wave through the Senate-passed infrastructure bill without delay, giving Biden an easy win while negotiations play out on the larger package. But as many as 50 House progressives are expected to tank the bipartisan bill if they have no clear commitment on the larger-ticket legislation, known as the Build Back Better Act. They argue that they've already compromised on the price—which started at \$6 trillion—as well as demonstrating unity on a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package that passed earlier this year.



WASHINGTON: Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) leaves the House Democratic caucus meeting at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — AFP

Want to live forever? Theoretically, you could, study says

TOKYO: Humans can probably live to at least 130, and possibly well beyond, though the chances of reaching such super old age remain vanishingly small, according to new research. The outer limit of the human lifespan has long been hotly debated, with recent studies making the case we could live up to 150 years, or arguing that there is no maximum theoretical age for humans.

The new research, published yesterday in the Royal Society Open Science journal, wades into the debate by analyzing new data on supercentenarians - people aged 110 or more - and semi-supercentenarians, aged 105 or more. While the risk of death generally increases throughout our lifetime, the researchers' analysis shows that risk eventually plateaus and remains constant at approximately 50-50.

"Beyond age 110 one can think of living another year as being almost like flipping a fair coin," said

Anthony Davison, a professor of statistics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), who led the research. "If it comes up heads, then you live to your next birthday, and if not, then you will die at some point within the next year," he said. Based on the data available so far, it seems likely that humans can live until at least 130, but extrapolating from the findings "would imply that there is no limit to the human lifespan," the research concludes.

The conclusions match similar statistical analyses done on datasets of the very elderly. "But this study strengthens those conclusions and makes them more precise because more data are now available," Davison said. The first dataset the team studied is newly released material from the International Database on Longevity, which covers more than 1,100 supercentenarians from 13 countries. The second is from Italy on every person who was at least 105 between January 2009 and December 2015.

The work involves extrapolating from existing data, but Davison said that was a logical approach. "Any study of extreme old age, whether statistical or biological, will involve extrapolation," he said. "We were able to show that if a limit below 130 years exists, we should have been able to detect it by now using the data now available," he added.—AFP

'A bet for stability'

Kishida's low-key persona has at times been described as a lack of charisma, and his policy ideas suggest more continuity than change. But in the end, that won more support within the party, who shied away from Kono's reforming and direct style. "The powers within Jiminto (LDP) have decided for a variety of reasons that Kishida is a better bet for stability, longevity, etcetera. They've made this bet before," said Brad Glosserman, a senior advisor to the Pacific Forum. For Kishida, "the expectations are low, which could be good... because if you expect little of someone it is easy to surprise," he told AFP. In his victory speech, Kishida pledged to unleash economic relief measures worth tens of trillions of yen (billions of dollars), which will be key to shoring up support before the general election.

The party is expected to retain its parliamentary majority, but could lose some seats over public discontent with the government's handling of the pandemic. Generally, Kishida is expected to hew to Japan's existing path on defense, foreign and economic policy. "Kishida shares the same policy core as Suga and (predecessor Shinzo) Abe," said Corey Wallace, an assistant professor at Kanagawa University who focuses on Japanese politics. "What he really, really stands for is a little bit unclear... nothing really stands out as Kishida's personal hobbyhorse issue," he said. Kishida has called for greater economic equality, urging a "politics of generosity", but stopped short of suggesting hiking taxes. And despite his liberal reputation, he was more reticent than Kono on hot-button issues like legalizing gay marriage or allowing married couples to have different surnames. He faces a series of immediate challenges, including post-pandemic economic recovery and confronting threats from North Korea and China, as well as questions about longevity - with Suga's one-year term reviving memories of a period where Japan shuffled through new premiers almost annually.—AFP



This picture released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency shows the Academy of Defense Science of the DPRK test-firing a hypersonic missile Hwasong-8 newly developed by it in Toyang-ri, Ryongrim County of Jagang Province, North Korea. — AFP

Fire power: North Korea's nuclear weapons program

SEOUL: In the latest provocation by "rocket man" Kim Jong Un, North Korea said it successfully tested a new hypersonic gliding missile, in its latest advance in weapons technology. Here we look back at the development of the regime's banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs:

The beginnings, 1970s

North Korea starts working in the late 1970s on a version of the Soviet Scud-B missile with a range of around 300 kilometers, carrying out its first test in 1984. Between 1987 and 1992, it begins developing longer-range missiles, including the Taepodong-1 (2,500 km/1,500 miles) and Taepodong-2 (6,700 km/4,200 miles). The Taepodong-1 is test-fired over Japan in 1998 but the following year, Pyongyang declares a moratorium on such tests as ties with the United States improve.

First nuclear test in 2006

It ends the moratorium in 2005, blaming the Bush administration's "hostile" policy, and carries out its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006. In May 2009, there is a second underground nuclear test, several times more powerful than the first. Kim Jong Un succeeds his father Kim Jong Il - who dies in December 2011 - and oversees a third nuclear test in 2013.

2016, Japanese waters reached

There is a fourth underground nuclear test in January 2016, which Pyongyang claims is a hydrogen bomb. In March, Kim Jong Un claims the North has successfully miniaturized a thermonuclear warhead, and in April it test-fires a submarine-launched ballistic missile. On August 3, it fires, for the first time, a ballistic missile directly into Japanese-controlled waters. Later that month, it successfully test-fires another submarine-launched ballistic missile. There is a fifth nuclear test on September 9.

2017, Japan and Guam under threat

Between February and May, the North tests a series of ballistic missiles that fall into the Sea of Japan. Pyongyang claims these are exercises to hit US bases in Japan. A test on May 14 is of a "newly developed mid/long-range strategic ballistic rocket, Hwasong-12", Pyongyang says. It flies 700 kilometers before landing in the Sea of Japan. Two months later, North Korea announces it successfully tested on July 4 - the US independence day - an ICBM capable of reaching Alaska, a gift for the "American bastards". There is a second successful ICBM test on July 28. Hours after US President Donald Trump threatens Pyongyang on August 8 with "fire and fury" over its missile program, the North says it is considering strikes near US strategic military installations in Guam.—AFP

News in brief

Nepal introduces 'third gender'

KATHMANDU: Nepal has introduced a third gender category in its census for the first time, a move the Himalayan nation's LGBTQ community hopes will bring them greater rights. Officials from the Central Bureau of Statistics have been visiting homes across the country of 30 million people since Saturday, giving respondents the option of choosing "others" as their gender, alongside male and female. Nepal already has some of South Asia's most progressive laws on homosexuality and transgender rights, with landmark reforms passed in 2007 prohibiting gender or sexual orientation discrimination. A third gender category for citizenship documents was introduced in 2013 and Nepal began issuing passports with the "others" category two years later. — AFP

Earthquake rattles Japan

TOKYO: A 6.1-magnitude earthquake struck off Japan's northwestern coast yesterday but no tsunami warning was issued, Japanese and US authorities said. The quake produced shaking across a large swath of the northeastern coast and was also felt in Tokyo, but there were no immediate reports of damage. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) said the quake hit at a depth of 368 kilometers in the Sea of Japan, known as the East Sea in Korea. Japan's meteorological agency said there was no tsunami risk following the jolt. Japan sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", an arc of intense seismic activity that stretches through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin. — AFP

Iran to resume issuing visas

TEHRAN: Iran will resume issuing visas to foreign tourists from next month, officials said, after suspending services for 19 months due to the coronavirus pandemic. "The issuance of tourist visas from land and air borders will resume" from October 23, Tourism Minister Ezzatollah Zarghami said, quoted Tuesday by the government-run Iran newspaper. Except for medical and business reasons, Iran banned the entry of foreign nationals in March last year, a few weeks after the Islamic republic detected its first cases of COVID-19 infection. The decision to restart visa services was taken on Saturday at a meeting of Iran's anti-coronavirus taskforce that was attended by President Ebrahim Raisi, local media reported. — AFP

Lebanese families protest

BEIRUT: Hundreds of outraged Lebanese, mostly relatives of people killed in last year's deadly Beirut port explosion, protested yesterday against the suspension of the investigation. Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe into Lebanon's deadliest peacetime disaster, had to suspend his work on Monday after what the victims' families and human rights groups said was another blatant case of political obstruction. The protesters gathered at the palace of justice in Beirut under close surveillance from a heavy police deployment and unfurled a large banner that read: "You won't kill us twice." Carrying portraits of their lost relatives and placards calling for justice, the protesters voiced their support for Bitar, whose summonses targeting senior officials have earned him a series of thinly veiled threats. — AFP

Bangkok on flood alert

BANGKOK: Thai authorities on Tuesday rushed to protect parts of Bangkok from floodwaters that have already inundated 70,000 homes and killed six people in the country's northern and central provinces. Tropical storm Dianmu has caused flooding in 30 provinces, with the kingdom's central region the worst hit, the Thai Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Department said. The level of the Chao Phraya River - which snakes through Bangkok after winding almost 400 kilometers from the north - is steadily rising as authorities release water from dams further upstream. Soldiers on Tuesday set up barriers and sandbags to protect ancient archaeological ruins and landmarks as well as neighborhoods in the old royal capital Ayutthaya, some 60 km north of Bangkok. "Most of the banana trees that I planted have been submerged. It's all gone," Ayutthaya flood victim Somporn, 52 said.—AFP

Thousands march for abortion rights

MONTEVIDEO: Thousands of women took to the streets across Latin America Tuesday to demand abortion rights, a practice largely prohibited in the region where hundreds of women are serving prison time under draconian laws. With banners that read "Legal Abortion Now" and "Right to Decide," and wearing green scarves that are characteristic of the global movement for decriminalizing abortion, protesters rallied in El Salvador, Chile, Peru, Mexico and Colombia. In El Salvador, where abortion is banned in all cases, women seeking the procedure can face up to eight years in prison for "aggravated homicide." Seventeen women currently remain in detention after having experienced obstetric emergencies, women's rights advocates say. — AFP