

Former Japanese defense minister announces challenge to Abe

By Ben McGrath
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The leadership race for Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) effectively began on Friday after former defense minister Shigeru Ishiba declared his candidacy. Ishiba is challenging current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the election slated for September 20 in a move designed to push Abe even further to the right. Campaigning will officially begin on September 7.

Ishiba, who also previously served as the party's secretary-general, is a longshot to take over as LDP president and thus prime minister. Abe currently has support from more than 70 percent of the party's 405 lawmakers in the National Diet. Eligible voters are split evenly between LDP parliamentary members and the party's regional members—the latter could potentially shift the outcome more in Ishiba's favor.

Abe defeated Ishiba in 2012 to become LDP president and ran unopposed in 2015. After the removal of the two-term limit, Abe can now run for an additional three-year term, which could make him Japan's longest sitting prime minister. The only other declared candidate is Seiko Noda, a member of Abe's cabinet. However, with only two endorsements from Diet members, she has been unable to gather the 20 needed to formally run.

Ishiba has won support from his own 20-person faction within the Diet while winning another 21 supporters in the Upper House from the Heisei Kenyu Kai faction. However, the Lower House members of this faction have backed Abe. Ishiba hopes to win at least 40 percent of the regional vote to position himself as a major figure within the LDP.

Despite his support in the Diet, various scandals surrounding Abe have some LDP members worried that he is a liability ahead of next year's nationwide local and Upper House elections. "There is unspoken

criticism of the prime minister smoldering [within the party]," Ishiba said on Saturday. Conscious that a good showing for Ishiba could weaken Abe's influence, an official close to the prime minister stated, "We can't just win. It has to be a landslide."

Abe held a rally with his supporters on Saturday, though he stopped short of formally declaring his candidacy, which he is expected to do later in the month. He emphasized his push to revise Article 9 of the constitution, known as the pacifist clause. The article states in the first paragraph that Japan "forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right" and in the second bars Japan from maintaining all "war potential" and rejects the "right of belligerency."

Conscious of the mass opposition to changing Article 9, Abe has proposed keeping the two existing paragraphs intact while adding a third that explicitly legalizes the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), the official name of Japan's military. "Most school texts mention that there are arguments that the SDF are unconstitutional. I have great responsibility to bring an end to this situation. That is the responsibility of the LDP and politicians living in this age," he stated.

Ishiba, on the other hand, has criticized Abe's proposal in the past, calling for completely overhauling Article 9, by deleting the second paragraph, and legalizing the "right of belligerency." The prime minister would also be made commander-in-chief. In addition, Ishiba has called for the prime minister to be given extraordinary emergency powers during events such as national disasters. These could easily be used against the population during times of social unrest.

The former defense minister, however, is avoiding a public debate over amending Article 9 given its unpopularity. Instead, he simply stated on Friday that "a deep understanding from the people is needed" on

the issue. In other words, Ishiba wants to be seen primarily as an opponent of Abe while hoping to stall the proposed revisions in order to push through even more militarist changes.

In addition, given that a national referendum is necessary to approve constitutional changes, some sections of the ruling class fear that a rush to a vote and a rejection of the proposed amendments would make it even harder in the future.

Jun Okumura, a visiting scholar at the Meiji Institute for Global Affairs said in May 2017 after Abe unveiled his agenda for revising Article 9, “I actually believe that Ishiba is deeply ticked off that Abe has gone back on the more extensive revisions to the Constitution that were promised.”

In the past, Ishiba has also supported Japan having the ability to build its own nuclear weapons while allowing the US to bring its own nuclear weapons into Japan. He has also called for Tokyo to have the means to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea and for the creation of a US-styled marine corps as well. These provocative and unconstitutional measures would be carried out under the threadbare ruse of “self-defense.”

Economically, Ishiba is demanding further attacks on the living conditions of Japan’s working class. While one in four Japanese companies reported record profits for the April-June fiscal quarter, Ishiba on Friday attacked Japan’s limited social programs, saying “government spending and social insurance cannot be maintained as is.”

Abe has been criticized by Japan’s ruling class for twice delaying the increase in the consumption tax from 8 to 10 percent, currently to be implemented in October next year. At the same time, he has slashed corporate taxes. Since 2003, Japan’s tax rate for companies has decreased by approximately a quarter. Stimulus packages under Abe, which have been portrayed as a means of boosting spending, have been used to offset these tax cuts.

The tax cuts for the wealthy in the US, coupled with uncertainty over the impact of Washington’s trade war measures, will undoubtedly lead to demands for imposing further austerity measures on workers in the name of remaining competitive. On this, Abe, Ishiba, and the Japanese ruling class as a whole are united.

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