

A Panoramic View of Possible Candidates to Succeed Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba

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Introduction

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) now finds itself at a pivotal moment, facing a rapid leadership transition following the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. In the wake of his departure, five potential successors have begun to take shape: Sanae Takaichi, Shinjirō Koizumi, Toshimitsu Motegi, Yoshimasa Hayashi, and Takayuki Kobayashi. Each carries a distinct vision for the renewal of the party and the future direction of the country.

The contest will hinge on four decisive factors. First, the extent of support each candidate can secure among lawmakers and through inter-factional alliances. Second, the degree of backing they draw from the LDP's prefectural chapters. Third, the level of public approval they command in nationwide opinion polls. And finally, the endorsements they receive from key party figures, notably former prime ministers Taro Aso, Fumio Kishida, and Yoshihide Suga.

Early polls conducted after Ishiba's resignation suggest a race increasingly shaped as a duel between Takaichi and Koizumi. Yet Japanese politics remains highly dynamic, and the balance of power could shift rapidly as the campaign unfolds. Takaichi has positioned herself as the champion of the party's conservative wing, while Koizumi embodies reformist energy—bolstered by his broad public appeal but hindered by a weak factional base. Motegi, meanwhile, seeks to consolidate his role as the establishment's unifier, relying on deep intra-party networks. Hayashi presents himself as a technocratic compromiser, offering balance over confrontation. And Kobayashi, the youngest of the contenders, represents an intergenerational renewal rooted in moderate conservatism.

The LDP's two-round electoral system adds another layer of complexity. The first ballot is expected to fragment across multiple contenders, paving the way for a runoff where negotiations among factions and prefectural chapters will prove decisive. Yet public opinion—though formally secondary—may still weigh heavily on lawmakers and party members alike, exerting pressure that could tip the outcome.

Profiles of the Potential Contenders

Sanae Takaichi (64)

- **Profile:** Former Minister of Economic Security and a key figure in Japanese conservative nationalism. With flexible fiscal positions close to Shinzo Abe's legacy, she was a close

ally of the former prime minister. If elected, she would be the first woman to lead the government.

- **Strengths:** Clear ideological alignment with Abe's conservatism; high public recognition; favorable media narrative; and a strong base among conservative lawmakers. Backed by experienced operators such as Hirofumi Nakasone (son of former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone) and Keiji Furuya, and enjoyed strong prefectural support in last year's LDP election.
- **Weaknesses:** Her candidacy provokes mixed reactions in the establishment, still hesitant about female leadership. Her strong conservative stance could complicate internal and external negotiations. Visits to Yasukuni Shrine and Taiwan have triggered diplomatic frictions, and her support among urban and moderate voters remains limited.
- **"Kingmaker" Support:** Has yet to be endorsed by a former prime minister, though Aso backed her in the previous runoff.

Shinjiro Koizumi (44)

- **Profile:** Agriculture Minister and the youngest aspirant. Projected as the "new face" of the LDP, inheriting visibility from his father, former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.
- **Strengths:** High charisma and popularity, with an accessible and direct communication style. Represents change against the old guard, with support from young and unaffiliated lawmakers. Secured significant prefectural backing in last year's election.
- **Weaknesses:** Lacks a clearly defined policy program and is seen as more of a media figure than a strategist. His performance as Environment Minister drew criticism for lack of results. His criticism of factional politics could cost him support among Diet members.
- **"Kingmaker" Support:** No formal endorsement yet, but maintains close ties with Suga.

Toshimitsu Motegi (69)

- **Profile:** Former Foreign Minister, Minister of Economy and Trade, and LDP Secretary-General. First to formalize his candidacy, presenting himself as a guarantor of party unity.
- **Strengths:** Long political and governmental career; experienced international negotiator. As former Secretary-General, controls internal networks that could attract multi-factional support. Pragmatic profile positions him as a potential bridge with the opposition in a minority government.
- **Weaknesses:** Low popularity with the public; perceived as continuity with the old guard. His firm, sometimes confrontational style has caused friction. Influential in party machinery but lacks the media appeal of Koizumi or Takaichi. Had weak prefectural support in last year's race.
- **"Kingmaker" Support:** No formal endorsement yet, but has a close relationship with Aso.

Yoshimasa Hayashi (64)

- **Profile:** Chief Cabinet Secretary and seasoned diplomat, with a career including Foreign Affairs, Education, and Defense. Comes from a political family in Yamaguchi.

- **Strengths:** Moderate and technocratic profile; highly regarded in markets and diplomatic circles. Analytical, consensus-driven style with cross-factional acceptance.
- **Weaknesses:** Low popularity despite broad experience. Received limited prefectural backing in last year's election.
- **“Kingmaker” Support:** No endorsement yet, though he belongs to the Kishida-linked Kōchikai faction.

Takayuki Kobayashi (50)

- **Profile:** Former Minister of Economic Security and ex-Finance Ministry official. Represents a new generation of conservatives with fiscal and international policy expertise.
- **Strengths:** Recognized expert in strategic security and economic policy. Seen as symbolic of LDP renewal, attracting younger lawmakers seeking generational change.
- **Weaknesses:** Lacks factional affiliation, limiting internal leverage. With just over a decade in parliament, has less experience compared to veteran aspirants. Neither enjoys Koizumi's media popularity nor Motegi or Hayashi's institutional weight.
- **“Kingmaker” Support:** Has not received endorsements and lacks close ties with former prime ministers.

The Role of the “Kingmakers”

Within the LDP, former prime ministers Aso, Kishida, and Suga retain significant influence in leadership contests. Though no longer in office, they maintain parliamentary networks, factional sway, and the ability to influence decisive votes in both the Diet and prefectural chapters. Their backing or neutrality could tip the balance in the runoff, and in some cases, determine the outcome itself.

- **Taro Aso:** Instrumental in pushing for early elections, contributing to Ishiba's resignation. While he has not openly endorsed a candidate, he could favor Takaichi, whom he backed previously. He also maintains a close relationship with Motegi, making him a pivotal figure.
- **Fumio Kishida:** Has not endorsed anyone but may lean toward Hayashi, who belongs to his Kōchikai faction. He opposes Takaichi's hardline conservatism.
- **Yoshihide Suga:** No endorsement yet, but influential among unaffiliated lawmakers. His closeness to Koizumi makes him a potential strategic ally.

In last year's LDP race, Kishida and Suga allied against Aso, helping Ishiba defeat Takaichi — proof that coordination among these three figures can decisively shift results.

Conclusion

Unless the party's factions converge rapidly around a single candidate, the outcome of the leadership contest will depend on what each group in the party values most. Conservatives are likely to coalesce around Sanae Takaichi, while demands for change and reform could channel support toward Shinjiro Koizumi. Toshimitsu Motegi may benefit from those seeking stability within the party, with Yoshimasa Hayashi positioned as a potential compromise figure. Meanwhile, Takayuki Kobayashi represents an appeal to younger lawmakers eager for generational renewal.

The role of influential “kingmakers” such as Taro Aso, Fumio Kishida, and Yoshihide Suga will be decisive, as their endorsements could alter factional alignments and significantly reshape the second-round dynamics.

In the immediate term, close attention must be paid to the composition of candidates’ teams and the policy platforms they advance, the progress of negotiations among parliamentary factions, the timing and weight of endorsements from senior leaders, and the evolution of public opinion polls, which could influence both prefectural and parliamentary voting behavior.

Ultimately, this leadership contest will determine not only Shigeru Ishiba’s successor but also the trajectory of the Liberal Democratic Party itself. Its outcome may signal whether the LDP can sustain the political architecture of the so-called “1955 System,” which has enabled the party to govern Japan almost without interruption for the past seven decades.