



GR Japan report on the Cabinet and LDP leadership reshuffle

Summary

As has been widely anticipated since June, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reshuffled his Cabinet on 13 September in a bid to stabilize his waning popularity. Top LDP party positions were also decided, although many key persons remain in office, a theme we also saw in the Cabinet reshuffle. There has been speculation about a possible snap election since the end of the G7 summit in May, but the Cabinet shakeup provided little insight. On the night of the Cabinet reshuffle, Kishida announced that he would compile a set of “drastic” economic measures but did not clarify when the supplementary budget for the measures would be passed, leaving open the possibility of a snap election as early as this fall.

Until the very last moment, it seemed there would be no significant changes and that Kishida would play it safe rather than introducing a major overhaul. Expectations were that many LDP veterans and strongmen would stay in position or move to other senior posts, prioritizing internal party politics rather than looking to increase popularity with fresh appointments. In the end, there are 11 new Cabinet ministers out of the total of 19, with the two most notable changes being former Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa’s appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs, replacing Yoshimasa Hayashi, a close ally of Kishida and second in line in his faction, and Minoru Kihara, who replaced Yasukazu Hamada as Defense Minister. Surprise reappointments are Taro Kono and Sanae Takaichi, who were both expected to leave.

Results of the Cabinet and party reshuffle show that Kishida aimed to strike a balance between revitalizing his administration’s popularity and maintaining a sense of continuity. Keeping close allies and old friends in key posts (with the exception of Hayashi) reveals his intention to pave the way for a stable path to September 2024 when the next LDP presidential election will take place. Keeping potential rivals like Toshimitsu Motegi, Taro Kono, Sanae Takaichi, Koichi Hagiuda and Yasutoshi Nishimura in key positions will prevent them from becoming vocal critics of or potential challengers to Kishida’s leadership.



Details

Kishida decided against holding a snap election¹ in June, despite widespread speculation that he would do so after a successful G7 Summit held in his constituency of Hiroshima earned him all-time high support rates. Hinting at the possibility of an election, ultimately not making a decision and failing to give a clear explanation to the public served to reinforce the main criticism about Kishida's personality: a lack of leadership and decisiveness. Combined with numerous scandals, this has contributed to a rapid decline in his support rate, which finally stabilized in late August.

Notable changes

Stabilizing relations with Komeito

One issue Kishida faced when reshuffling his Cabinet was whether to give the post of minister of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), a role traditionally held by the LDP's junior coalition partner Komeito, to an LDP candidate. MLIT oversees a broad portfolio and a robust budget; the ministerial position has allowed Komeito to exert political influence well above its relatively light political weight and to maintain its SME voting base. This summer there were calls within the LDP to change this but, in the end, Kishida chose to maintain the status quo and not jeopardize the intra-coalition relationship.

Losing and replacing key allies

A noteworthy change is the removal of Seiji Kihara, one of Kishida's closest aides who served as Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary since the first Kishida Cabinet was inaugurated in October 2021. While Kishida had intended to reappoint Kihara, he likely had to rethink this after a scandal broke recently involving Kihara and his wife. Instead, Kishida made an unprecedented double appointment of Kihara as Acting Secretary-General of the LDP and Acting Chair of the party's Policy Research Council, highlighting Kihara's ongoing, valued presence within the administration. Kihara's appointments will help Kishida to maintain influence over the party's operations and overall policymaking. Kihara's successor is Hideki Murai, a Harvard graduate and former Ministry of Finance bureaucrat. Murai is very close to Kihara and, just like his predecessor, is a representative of the Kishida faction.

¹ A snap election means an election held after the dissolution of the Lower House before its four-year term expires. Early elections are more the norm than the exception in Japanese politics.



In an unexpected move, another close ally of Kishida, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, also departed the Cabinet. There were no previous signs that Hayashi would be removed; he visited Ukraine on 9 September and would have chaired a session of the G7 foreign ministers' meeting later this month. However, Hayashi's removal is far from a demotion; during a particularly demanding year due to the G7 presidency, it will allow him to dedicate his expertise and time to domestic issues. It is important to note that, in domestic politics, the foreign ministerial post has meagre influence.

Increasing female representation

A frequent criticism of Japanese politics is the low number of women in key positions. The previous Kishida administration did not excel on this front, with only two female Cabinet members out of 19. In the new Cabinet, there are five female ministers, a significant increase. Sanae Takaichi (Minister for Economic Security), a conservative female politician in the LDP who has been losing influence in the party since the death of her mentor, the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, remains in the Cabinet. Yuko Obuchi, daughter of the late prime minister Keizo Obuchi, had hoped for a Cabinet position, but the shadow of a previous scandal still looms over her. She can nevertheless console herself with one of the top positions in the party leadership as Chair of the LDP's Election Strategy Committee. In a surprising and clever move, Kishida appointed Yoko Kamikawa as the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, the first woman to lead Japan's diplomacy since 2004.²

Keeping potential rivals at bay

Three Cabinet ministers seen as potential rivals to Kishida were retained. The popular and outspoken Taro Kono was reappointed as Digital Minister despite public outrage about glitches in the introduction of the My Number identification card system. Similarly, Sanae Takaichi was retained as Minister for Economic Security, despite her waning influence inside the party. One of the leading figures of the Abe faction, Yasutoshi Nishimura, also continues as Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry. Nishimura was likely deemed most suitable to handle ongoing correspondence concerning the release of treated water stored at the damaged Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station.

² It is not easy to bring female politicians into such positions. Only 12 percent of LDP Diet members are women, and there are not many who have enough experience to meet the LDP's unwritten rules on who can hold a Cabinet post, such as having been elected to the House of Representatives five or more times. On the other hand, there is a male-dominated "waiting list" of close to 60 lower house members with five or more terms or upper house members with three or more terms.



Bringing in new faces

Periodic Cabinet reshuffles are useful tools to give positions and opportunities to Diet members who have not yet served in Cabinet positions and are on an unofficial “waiting list” based on their history and experience. This time there are 11 appointees who have not previously served in the Cabinet.

Among the new faces, Minoru Kihara has been appointed Minister of Defense. He served as a national security adviser to former PM Suga and was a key architect of three revised security documents. Kihara has been at the top of the waiting list, as a well-known defense and security oriented LDP politician and former Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Defense. He is also a notable member of the Japan-Taiwan parliamentary friendship group. Another newcomer to the Cabinet is Keizo Takemi who was appointed Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare. A member of the House of Councilors, 71-year-old Takemi briefly served as State Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare over 15 years ago. Shinako Tsuchiya, another female Cabinet appointee, became Minister for Reconstruction.

The position of Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)³ is traditionally held by the Abe faction. The new MEXT minister, Masahito Moriyama, also a first timer, is from the Kishida faction. An important agenda item this fall will be the passing of a bill to dissolve the infamous Unification Church, the center of a scandal that shook the LDP after the murder of Shinzo Abe. MEXT will be in the spotlight over the coming months, and Kishida’s faction will lead the charge to bring the scandal to resolution.

The Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tetsuro Nomura, was replaced by first-time minister Ichiro Miyashita. Nomura recently stirred controversy when he referred to ALPS-treated water from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station as “contaminated” instead of “treated”.

Party positions

Despite speculation, Kishida quickly confirmed that Toshimitsu Motegi would continue as LDP Secretary-General and Taro Aso as its Vice-President. Both are influential LDP politicians, heading the second and third largest factions, each larger than Kishida’s faction. Motegi has already voiced his intention to lead the LDP in a post-Kishida era. He has had a rocky relationship with Kishida and has failed to properly manage the LDP’s relationship with

³ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology



coalition partner Komeito. Nevertheless, removing Motegi from his position would have rendered him an outright competitor. Just as he did with the Cabinet, Kishida is keeping influential politicians in key LDP positions to prevent them from becoming powerful rivals and vocal critics of his leadership.

Koichi Hagiuda, former Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry and strongman of the Abe faction, and Hiroshi Moriyama, head of a smaller faction, remain in LDP leadership positions. A notable newcomer at the top of the party is Yuko Obuchi⁴, appointed to chair the Election Strategy Committee. Her appointment serves several purposes for Kishida: there is a woman in the senior LDP leadership, which is to be applauded; with increased influence she could become a candidate for leadership of the Motegi faction; and as she is close to Komeito⁵, she may be able to help rebuild ties where Motegi has not.

Implications for Japanese politics

Cabinet and party leadership changes are periodically used by prime ministers to address declining popularity, to signal shifts in policy direction, and to give opportunities to Diet members of a diverse factional make-up in order to maintain balance between them.

As we saw in this week's Cabinet reshuffle, Kishida aims to strike a balance with his new line-up. Instead of striving for a boost in popularity with a slew of new appointments, the prime minister is creating a stable environment for the next twelve months to focus on pushing through key policies and to keep rivals at bay. He is playing down the lower house election speculation that backfired this summer, and instead wants to focus on tackling key policy issues over the next year.

There are many challenges ahead: implementing a robust defense build-up and finding a way to fund it without raising taxes; countering the aggressive economic and security threat posed by China; finding a sustainable solution to the country's dire demographic decline; successfully managing the negative repercussions of the release of treated water from Fukushima; putting an end to the Unification Church scandal; and setting the Japanese economy on a sustainable growth path. To achieve the latter, Kishida will assemble another

⁴ Obuchi is the daughter of the late prime minister, Keizo Obuchi, who was formerly the head of the faction now led by Motegi, making her a natural candidate to take over the faction in the future. Despite her relatively young age (49), she has been elected eight times to the House of Representatives.

⁵ The LDP and Komeito first formed a coalition government in 1999 under the premiership of Obuchi's father.



economic stimulus package this autumn. If he fails to regain momentum by delivering on his leadership and policy promises, it is safe to assume he will struggle next September and face serious challengers for the post of president of the LDP.

List of Ministers

Key: ★ First Cabinet appointment ● Retained

Ministry	Name	Faction	Age	Notable previous posts
Internal Affairs and Communications	Junji Suzuki ★	Abe	65	6th term. Former State Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications
Justice	Ryuji Koizumi ★	Nikai	71	7th term. No significant former post or Cabinet experience
Foreign Affairs	Yoko Kamikawa	Kishida	70	7th term. Former Minister of Justice; former Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs
Finance	Shunichi Suzuki ●	Aso	70	10th term. Former Minister of the Environment; former Minister in charge of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games; former State Minister for Foreign Affairs; former Chair of LDP General Council
Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology	Masahito Moriyama ★	Kishida	70	5th term. Former Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Justice
Health, Labor and Welfare	Keizo Takemi ★	Aso	72	5th term. Former State Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries	Ichiro Miyashita ★	Abe	65	6th term. Former State Minister of Finance
Economy, Trade and Industry	Yasutoshi Nishimura ●	Abe	60	7th term. Former State Minister for Economic Revitalization; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs
Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism	Tetsuo Saito ●	Komeito	71	10th term. Former Minister of the Environment; former Komeito Secretary-General; former Chair of Komeito Policy Research Council
Environment	Shintaro Ito ★	Aso	70	7th term. Former State Minister for Foreign Affairs
Defence	Minoru Kihara ★	Motegi	54	5th term. Former State Minister of Finance; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Defense, Chief Secretary of the LDP Research Commission on Security
Chief Cabinet Secretary	Hirokazu Matsuno ●	Abe	60	8th term. Former State Minister, then Minister of Education; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare



Digital Transformation	Taro Kono ●	Aso	60	9th term. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs; former Minister of Defense; former Minister of Administrative Reform; former Chair of National Public Safety Commission
Reconstruction	Shinako Tsuchiya ★	None	71	8th term. Former State Minister of the Environment; former Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Health, Labor and Welfare
National Public Safety Commission	Yoshifumi Matsumura ★	Motegi	59	4th term. Former State Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry
Regional Revitalisation	Hanako Jimi ★	Nikai	47	2nd term. Former Cabinet Minister of State for Special Missions
Policies Related to Children	Ayuko Kato ★	Tanigaki	44	3rd term. Former Cabinet Minister of State for Special Missions
Economic Revitalisation	Yoshitaka Shindo	Motegi	53	8th term. Former Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications; former State Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry
Economic Security	Sanae Takaichi ●	None	62	9th term. Former Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications; former Chair of LDP Policy Research Council

**List of key LDP officials**

Party position	Name	Faction	Age	Notable previous posts
President	Fumio Kishida	Kishida	66	10th term. Prime Minister. Former Minister of Defense; former Minister for Foreign Affairs
Vice-President	Taro Aso	Aso	82	14th term. Former Prime Minister; former Minister of Finance; former President and Secretary-General of the LDP
Secretary-General	Toshimitsu Motegi	Motegi	67	10th term. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs; former Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry; former Chair of the LDP's Policy Research Council and Election Strategy Committee
Chairperson, General Council	Hiroshi Moriyama	Moriyama	78	7th term. Former Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; former State Minister of Finance
Chairperson, Policy Research Council	Koichi Hagiuda	Abe	60	6th term. Former Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry; former Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
Chairperson, Election Strategy Committee	Yuko Obuchi	Motegi	49	8th term. Former Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry; former Minister of State for Social Affairs and Gender Equality; former State Minister of Finance
Executive Acting Secretary-General	Hiroshi Kajiyama	None	67	8th term. Former Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry; former Minister of State for the Nuclear Damage Compensation and Decommissioning Facilitation Corporation and for Regulatory Reform