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THE CURRENT: Who is Yoshihide Suga, Japan's next prime minister?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

After last month's surprise resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party has elected its Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yoshihide Suga, into leadership, all but assuring he will become the next prime minister following a parliamentary vote on Wednesday.

With us again with some insight into what to expect from Mr. Suga's leadership is Mireya Solis, director of our Center for East Asia Policy Studies and the Philip Knight Chair in Japan studies. Mireya, thanks for talking to us again.

SOLÍS: It's wonderful to be here. Thank you, Adrianna.

PITA: So, who is Mr. Suga, and what do we know about him?

SOLÍS: Well, he has an interesting biography. I think I would start first by pointing out that he is a self-made man. It's a very important characteristic of Japan that political lineage matters a great deal. It is very common to have second-generation politicians who inherit the family name. That is not the case for Mr. Suga. He comes from Akita prefecture, rural Japan. His father had a strawberry farm and therefore he started in the political world without any connections, without any advantages, and he now has risen to the top. So that's the first point in his biography. But I think it's important to highlight.

Second, I would note that Mr. Suga is really the candidate of continuity. He has been through and through a loyalist; he has stayed close to the Prime Minister Abe, even after Prime Minister Abe abruptly resigned in his first term. Mr. Suga was there with him, encouraged him to come back and then he stayed on in this key position as chief cabinet secretary for the entirety of Abe's second term.

And the last, you know, I think in terms of who he is, what he skill set is, I think that he has keen political instincts. He has been seen as the ultimate political operator. He has an extensive network. He has operated in his position as chief cabinet secretary mostly behind the scenes. Key tasks for him were to coordinate government policy, and he did that very effectively. Some people would say too effectively in the sense that he reasserted control over the bureaucracy by controlling appointments over the senior bureaucrats. He has a lot of assets going for him. But now, of course, he has to prove himself. You know, it's not easy to come after Prime Minister Abe just wrapped up the second longest [term] serving as prime minister. He was not that well known to the public, even though he appeared in press conferences. He was not seen as someone that would be at the front. He was always seen as someone that would be operating behind the scenes.

PITA: Okay. Surely COVID-19 will be at the top of his priority list as he comes into office, but what are some of the other major challenges that will be facing him in his early days?

SOLÍS: He faces many; he comes at a time when Japan is obviously facing a major crisis, but I would think, I would say that the first set of tasks and challenges have to do with political management. He has to form his cabinet and accurate and, actually Adrianna, just before we met this morning, the news is coming fast and furious as to what his picks are. Importantly, Mr. Suga does not belong to any faction. But again, if you remember when we talked last time, I told you it was a very open field, that there were many contenders, but it was really striking how quickly Suga became the candidate that the most important factions chose to support. That's why he won the party vote with a landslide. And now it comes to the time to show whether he's going to be paying attention mostly to factional balance and make appointments that please the factions, or whether he can be his own man and he can choose people for the positions that can advance his agenda, if he's going to be truly a reformist.

One item I'm going to be paying close attention to is how many women in his cabinet. There was a very interesting debate before the election among the contenders to become party president and there was a discussion about "womenomics" and about the difficulty that women face in Japan to have a political career. And one of the ways in which you really advance this is through role models. So, I would hope that there would be more than before, in terms of, you know, selecting competent women for these cabinet positions; I very much want to see that happen.

So, after this initial task of forming a cabinet, there is another very important political management task, and that is to keep the coalition with the Komeito whole and well-functioning. As you know there's been a little bit of a conversation and speculation as to whether Japan would have a general election next month. The Komeito is not keen to see that; the party would prefer the new Suga administration to be focused entirely on the COVID-19 crisis. Some heavyweights in the Liberal Democratic Party have been dropping hints that a snap election is something that should take place. They want to take advantage of the momentum of the incoming Suga administration and Mr. Suga has not yet declared what he's thinking about this. He has said that, again, that COVID-19 is the top priority. But, you know, who knows, maybe I'll try to come back to your show next month in case there's a snap election. We'll have to wait and see.

In addition to this, of course, what to do with the economy is very important. Japan is facing a very severe economic crisis. Mr. Suga has already given us hints as to what types of structural reforms he wants to see implemented. He's talking about consolidating regional banks, which have been in a weak position. He's been talking about increasing competition in the communication sector so that people can enjoy lower cell phone bills. And, more importantly, he is very keen in setting a new government agency that will deal with digitalization and it is very much needed for Japan. Japan is a little bit behind the curve here, for sure, but Adrianna, what I'm describing so far are very specific set of policies. They are important. But I think what we still need to see is whether Mr. Suga is going to provide us with an overarching vision, with an overarching reform plan. And for that plan to really have traction, he would have to address what have been the weaknesses of Abenomics, why has the recovery been so fragile, why every time there has been an increase in the consumption tax, the economy has tanked and the consumers have been very discouraged and therefore the economy takes a hit. So, you know, there's a lot to do still in making sure that Japan can overcome the public health crisis, but also the economic contraction.

PITA: Yeah, that's a lot to handle. Looking internationally, what are you expecting to see there from a Suga administration and what challenges will he be needing to address?

SOLÍS: Well, one first challenge, he has is that he himself does not have diplomatic experience. You know his rivals that wanted to become leaders of the LDP and therefore prime minister, they did have that kind of track record, they had had a portfolio of the foreign ministry or defense minister, but Mr. Suga has not had that kind of position. He himself has said that even though he does not have that direct diplomatic portfolio experience, he has been part of the Abe administration for eight years. And therefore, he has been part and parcel of the deliberations, the policymaking when it comes to these important Japanese foreign policy initiatives and therefore that he would probably say that he's not a novice to all of this. What I expect, Adrianna, is that there's going to be a lot of continuity and Mr. Suga will double down on the initiatives that have worked very well for Japan.

First of all, the comprehensive and progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and the host of other initiatives that Japan has undertaken to position itself as a leader of free trade, that's going to continue. It has been a winning initiative for Japan, and also the domestic political constraints were already largely taken care of during the administration when the agricultural lobby lost that battle. So, I also expect that Mr. Suga when he becomes prime minister tomorrow, he will also double down on the Indo-Pacific strategy that has really become the way in which actually many other countries are articulating their own strategies toward the region. And we're talking about a well-institutionalized initiative with a whole-of-government approach and therefore different agencies in the Japanese government are all geared up to continue with this initiative. I would also say, for example, with the Quad, I expect that to continue; the Quad has not been institutionalized, but nevertheless, those habits of cooperation, of identifying like-minded countries and tackling a specific issues, those are all very well ingrained and therefore I expect that there will be continuity there.

Now I think for Mr. Suga, what will be very challenging is that important angle of personal diplomacy. And it's challenging because he himself does not literally have the diplomatic mileage. He has not embarked on tours representing Japan before, and this also happens at a time, Adrianna, when it's difficult to do so. It's difficult to hit the road because of COVID-19. So, a lot of those international summits or meetings with foreign leaders have become difficult to carry out and therefore it's hard to create that personal connection to other leaders.

My last point, Adrianna, is that we need to wait and see how Mr. Suga would handle the balance between the domestic and international portfolios. Where will his passion be? Where would he like to devote the most attention? We know that Prime Minister Abe was very much keen on the international agenda. It could very well be that Mr. Suga prioritizes the domestic structural reform agenda. And I would also say that this does not mean that he would be an inward-looking leader. Actually, some of the initiatives to which his name has been attached are about making Japan a more open country. By this I mean the agricultural reform, immigration reform, and the promotion of tourism in Japan. So, you know, it's obviously an important transition. Japan has already well-institutionalized policies on which he can double down. But then that extra edge, the personal diplomacy edge to be decided, and then how he handles the domestic and the foreign portfolio, the balance of his time.

PITA: Alright, thanks, Mireya. Lastly, looking further ahead. You've described Mr. Suga as someone a long time Abe loyalist, someone playing a very important continuity role. Is he seen as someone who will be playing more of a caretaker role as prime minister, just until the next general election comes along, or is he thought to be someone who perhaps has some of his own larger political ambitions and policy goals that he might extend into a long time - if he can - career as prime minister?

SOLÍS: Well, he was elected to fulfill to finish the term of Prime Minister Abe as party president. So, if he wants to stay longer, he will have to again throw his hat next year when the election for the three-year term takes place. Now if you hear what he's been saying about the kind of a structural reform that he wants to deliver for Japan, that does not strike me as an agenda that you could realize in a year.

So, I think that his political instincts and his plans for Japan would hint at longer-term ambitions. Whether he can realize those, that's where the art of politics comes in. It will depend on how he fares with the public, whether he has made wise choices with his cabinet appointments, avoid scandals, avoid instability, whether he can keep party unity, so that the factions will not try to plot against him and whether he can retain the confidence of the public and therefore the policies in him as a winning leader and he can deliver again those victories when it's time for an election. So, at this moment, Adrianna, it's hard to tell. You know, his administration will just start tomorrow, and we have to see how he plays his cards.

PITA: All right, we'll, we'll keep watching and Mireya, maybe we'll have you back again in another couple of months to check in and see how the new Suga administration is doing. Thanks so much for talking to us today.

SOLÍS: It has been my pleasure. Thank you.