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Group leaders had been seen as possible successors

Faction woes cast shadow on PM's rivals

ERIC JOHNSTON
STAFF WRITER

Just a couple of months ago, powerful Liberal Democratic Party faction leaders, including party Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi, were being talked about as potential successors to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

But with the political funds scandal resulting in the dissolution of four of the LDP's six factions, they have found themselves losing momentum and power as their members start to bolt.

Motegi, who heads the LDP's third-largest faction, appeared to be on the rise last spring when he paid a visit to Washington — a move seen as a possible challenge to Kishida's leadership.

Having dodged an investigation by prosecutors into the slush fund scandal — which ultimately brought down the party's largest faction as well as Kishida's — Motegi has said he will not disband his 53-member faction, but key members have nonetheless announced they will be leaving.

On Thursday, LDP election strategy chief Yuko Obuchi announced that she was leaving the faction, which is officially known as the Heisei Kenkyukai. That day, the party's political reform panel issued a report advising that factions be formally downgraded to political policy groups, stripped of their influence and made to meet tougher rules on political fundraising activities.

"I was born and raised in the Heisei Kenkyukai and have always loved it. But I made the decision (to leave) ... amid the critical situation the party finds itself in," Obuchi told reporters.

Obuchi was followed out the door on Friday by four other members: LDP Upper

House caucus chair Masakazu Sekiguchi, LDP Upper House parliamentary affairs chair Junichi Ishii, LDP Upper House policy board chair Takamaro Fukuoka and Kazuhiko Aoki.

Aoki is the son of powerful former Upper House member Mikio Aoki. The elder Aoki, who died in June of last year, served as chief cabinet secretary in 1999 and 2000 under Yuko Obuchi's father, Keizo Obuchi, when he was prime minister.

Mikio Aoki was also an informal adviser to the Motegi faction and heavily promoted Yuko Obuchi. But Mikio Aoki and Motegi did not get along, while Motegi saw Yuko Obuchi as a potential rival for power.

It remains unclear whether those who have left the Motegi faction will form or eventually join a new political policy group. But as Motegi struggles to hold his faction together, the fate of other potential successors to the prime minister also remains in the balance.

They include former industry minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, former LDP Upper House Secretary-General Hiroshige Seko, former LDP policy chief Koichi Hagiuda, the party's former parliamentary affairs chief Tsuyoshi Takagi and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, all of whom belong to the party's largest faction.

The leaders of this faction, which has been without a formal chair since former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assassination in July 2022, were forced to resign from Cabinet and party posts, and the faction has agreed to dissolve itself. But although it was the main focus of Tokyo prosecutors' investigation into the slush funds scandal, the top leaders were not prosecuted.

Information from Jiji and Kyodo added



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visits a munitions factory at an undisclosed location in this picture released on Jan. 10. KCNA / VIA REUTERS

Is Kim Jong Un preparing for war?

North Korea watchers warn of heightened danger in the region

Analysis

JESSE JOHNSON
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Could war again leave its bloody mark on the Korean Peninsula? Judging from an unusual rhetorical shift by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, some longtime observers believe he may be disillusioned with diplomacy and is girding for conflict.

Though the two Koreas have remained technically at war since the Korean War ended in just an armistice in 1953, Kim has in recent weeks labeled the South his nation's "principal enemy" while abolishing agencies focused on reunification and threatening to enshrine in the North's constitution a goal of "completely occupying, subjugating

and reclaiming" its southern neighbor.

The North Korean strongman has also signaled that his regime no longer recognizes the two Koreas' de facto maritime border, the so-called Northern Limit Line, even staging days of live-fire artillery drills in the area that prompted the evacuation of residents of one nearby island.

"As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal 'northern limit line' and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation," Kim told a key parliamentary meeting last week, referring to the South's official name, the Republic of Korea.

"We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it," Kim added.

This apparent shift prompted two veteran North Korea watchers — Robert Carlin, a former senior U.S. State Department official who took part in U.S.-North Korean negotiations, and Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in the

U.S. who made several trips to the North's Yongbyon nuclear plant between 2004 and 2010 — to warn in an essay this month that "the situation on the Korean Peninsula is more dangerous than it has been at any time since early June 1950."

"That may sound overly dramatic, but we believe that, like his grandfather in 1950, Kim Jong Un has made a strategic decision to go to war," the pair wrote on the North Korea-focused 38 North website.

"We do not know when or how Kim plans to pull the trigger, but the danger is already far beyond the routine warnings in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo about Pyongyang's 'provocations.'"

The two based their prediction on what they said was a "profound change" in the North's thinking after the dramatic failure of Kim's second summit in Hanoi with U.S. President Donald Trump in 2019. It was then, they said, that Kim — having concluded that all other options had been exhausted — began to look to part ways

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Japan aims to direct tourists to places less traveled

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As inbound tourism from East and Southeast Asia continues to rise, Japan is attempting to direct visitors to places outside Tokyo in order to prevent over-tourism, specifically by appealing to "light repeaters" who have visited Japan more than twice.

The popularity of Japan as a travel destination among East and Southeast Asian tourists is very high, with a survey conducted by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) showing that in all major markets besides South Korea, people chose Japan as the country they want to visit the most.

The survey, conducted between January and March last year, demonstrated that interest was highest in Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong, with over 60% of respondents picking Japan as their top destination.

Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and China were the other major markets in Asia that had Japan as their top choice.

The number of visitors rose over the past year, with the total number of inbound tourists beginning to surpass pre-pandemic levels around the end of 2023. Looking specifically at South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong — the top three sources of travelers — the number of tourists in 2023 reached 104% of what it was in 2019.

Yet visitors tend to stick to Tokyo, and compared with 2019, the recovery of tourism to rural areas remains slow, especially among visitors from East Asia. Many visitors from this region have visited Japan more than once due to its close proximity, and they used to make up a large portion of rural travelers.

As interest in Japan remains high, JNTO is attempting to lure such repeat visitors to rural destinations around the nation by conducting a large-scale campaign targeting markets in East and Southeast Asia.

The campaign has assigned target areas for travelers from specific countries and regions, based on the needs of both the destinations and visitors, as well as travel trends from the first half of 2023.



Best foot forward

Japan not taking Bahrain lightly ahead of Asian Cup knockout stage match | **SPORTS, PAGE 6**

Inflation complication

Figures from Tokyo may cause trouble for BOJ's price view | **BUSINESS, PAGE 3**

Warm welcome

Biden invites Kishida to Washington for state visit | **NATIONAL, PAGE 2**

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Foreign workers in Japan surpass 2 million

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The number of foreign workers in Japan has surpassed 2 million for the first time, reaching a record high, as the nation grapples with a worsening labor shortage.

The labor ministry announced Friday that, as of the end of October, there were 2,048,675 foreign workers in the nation, an increase of 225,950 from a year before. The report also showed an increase in the number of technical trainees, a figure that had decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of workplaces employing foreign workers increased to 318,775, up 19,985 from the previous year and also a record high.

Tokyo had the largest population of foreign workers, followed by Aichi and Osaka prefectures.

The number of foreign workers has hit a record high every year since 2013, but in 2023 the year-on-year increase was 12.4%, much higher than the 5.5% rise marked the previous year.

People from Vietnam accounted for the highest number of foreign workers at



A Mongolian trainee takes care of a patient at a hospital in Tokyo in April 2023. KYODO

518,364, or 25.3% of the total, followed by those from China at 397,918 (19.4%) and the Philippines at 226,846 (11.1%).

The number of foreign workers was highest in the manufacturing sector, representing 27% of the total. The number working in the construction sector saw the largest increase, rising 24.1%.

Among workplaces that were employing foreign nationals, those with fewer than 30

employees made up the majority, at 61.9%, with the number of such businesses up 7.5%, the largest increase among all workplaces hiring non-Japanese workers.

By residence status, those in specialized and technical professions saw a 24.2% increase, totaling 595,904, while the number of technical interns increased by 20.2% to reach 412,501.

The category of "designated activities," which includes working holidays, witnessed a 2.3% decrease, totaling 71,676 individuals.

Amid the rebound in the number of foreign trainees coming to the country, the government plans to submit a bill in the current parliamentary session to establish a new technical intern program, due to concerns over human rights violations.

A government panel in November proposed scrapping the current system and introducing various changes, including allowing workers to switch jobs under certain conditions.

Immigration Services Agency data showed that 9,006 foreign technical interns went missing in 2022, the second-highest number after the 2018 figure of 9,052.



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