

Current Issue

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Taro Kono, vaccine czar and social media star, is the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister

BY GRADY MCGREGOR

September 7, 2021 3:16 PM GMT+7



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Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- On Friday, Japanese **Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga** announced that he will **not stand for reelection** in his party's late-September elections.
- Suga's party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), is the dominant force in Japanese politics, and the winner of the **LDP's intraparty election on Sept. 29** is virtually guaranteed to become **Japan's next Prime Minister** when Japan votes in its general election, which must be held before Nov. 28.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- **Fumio Kishida**, 64, a **former foreign minister** who was once seen as the likely successor to former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, officially declared his candidacy last week before Suga stepped down.
- **Sanae Takaichi**, 60, a staunch conservative and **former minister of internal affairs**, has signaled that **she would like to become Japan's first-ever female Prime Minister**.
- One leading contender, **former defense minister Shigeru Ishiba**, 64, hinted on Monday that he may **not have enough support** to mount a campaign for the position.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- In a nationwide survey conducted by Japan's Kyodo News over the weekend, **31.9%** of over 1,000 Japanese voters said **Kono** was their top pick to become Japan's next Prime Minister.
- Meanwhile, **26.6%** of voters supported **Ishiba**'s candidacy, while **18.8%** said they would vote for **Kishida**.
- **Kono** also narrowly emerged as the **top choice** to lead the LDP in a Nikkei Asia survey last week.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- The winner of the LDP election may ultimately come down to the candidate who best navigates the LDP's internal factions.
- But at the moment **Kono**, a **fluent English speaker** and **social media star**, appears to be in **pole position** to become **the next Prime Minister**.
- Like many LDP politicians, Kono comes from a **long line** of **Japanese politicians**.
- He hails from a **wealthy farming family** in **Kanagawa** Prefecture, just south of Tokyo.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- His **great-grandfather**, Jihei Kono, served as **chairman of the prefectural assembly**.
- His **grandfather**, Ichiro Kono, was a **member of the Diet**, Japan's national legislature, and a **key political power broker** in the postwar era.
- **Kono's father**, Yohei Kono, served as **president of the LDP**, speaker of Japan's House of Representatives, and **deputy prime minister** from 1994 to 1995.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- Kono **left Japan** in **1982** at the **age of 19**.
- He attended **Suffield Academy**, a small preparatory school in **Connecticut**, and later enrolled at **Georgetown University**, where he studied **comparative politics**.
- During his years at Georgetown, Kono worked for **Democratic Sen. Alan Cranston** of California and **Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama** (then a Democrat).
- He studied abroad at the **Warsaw School of Economics** in **Poland**.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- After graduating from Georgetown in 1985 with a bachelor of science degree in foreign service, Kono worked briefly for **Fuji Xerox** in **Singapore**.
- Later he joined **Nippon Tanshi**, a **supplier of electric components** to **Toyota Motor** among other manufacturers.
- He was **elected** to Japan's **House of Representatives** in **1996** from a district adjacent to his father's in Kanagawa.
- He has since been **reelected eight times** and continues to hold the seat today.

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- Kono's **social media savvy** has also given him **a boost**, especially **among young LDP members** and the **wider population**.
- At **2.3 million followers**, his Twitter account has **more followers than any other Japanese politician** including Shinzo Abe, who served as Japan's Prime Minister from 2012 to 2020.
- "It's **not just that he has a big following, it's how he uses the medium**," says Tobias Harris, a Japan expert at the Center for American Progress. "He shares goofy fan art. **He replies to people**. He is willing to laugh at himself."

Taro Kono: the front-runner to become Japan's Prime Minister (cont'd)

- Kono's **main selling point** may be **his professed competence** in **commandeering Japan** through the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Suga appointed Kono** to spearhead Japan's COVID-19 vaccine **rollout in January**, and it has emerged as a bright spot in an otherwise deteriorating COVID-19 response.
- **By April**, Japan had administered COVID-19 vaccine **doses to roughly 1%** of its population, **lagging places like the U.S.**, which, at the time, had provided at least one shot to **over 40% of its population**.
- **Now 48%** of Japan has been **fully vaccinated**, one of the **highest vaccination rates in Asia**.



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KONO Taro @konotaromp · Aug 28
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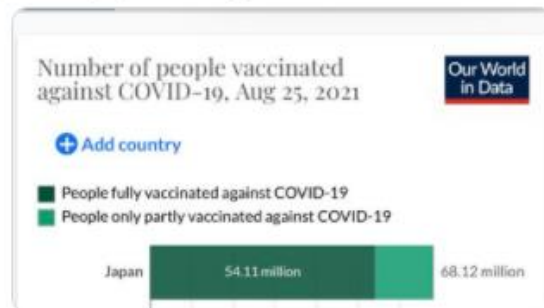
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50

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