

Japan: The New DPJ president Yoshihiko Noda, his New Government and its Pro-Nuke Stand

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Noda to become Japan's new PM after winning DPJ election

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Finance Minister Yoshihiko Noda will become Japan's new prime minister, the sixth in five years, after beating industry minister Banri Kaieda in a runoff Monday in the Democratic Party of Japan's presidential election.

The 54-year-old Noda, a fiscal hawk, gained 215 of the DPJ lawmakers' votes to Kaieda's 177, having trailed the industry chief in the first round of voting. He is likely to continue many of the policies pursued by his predecessor, Naoto Kan, who is expected to be formally replaced as prime minister later this week.

The DPJ election, with a record five contenders, was held after Kan confirmed his resignation last Friday amid criticism of his leadership following the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that devastated the country's northeastern region and triggered the ongoing nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant.

Noda, who has held the finance post since June 2010 when he took over from Kan, supports raising taxes to combat Japan's ballooning debt, currently twice the size of the country's gross domestic product, and to finance the huge additional costs of the largest reconstruction work since the years after World War II.

In the initial round, Kaieda, 62, backed by DPJ power broker Ichiro Ozawa and his allies, won 143 votes, the highest proportion among the 398 DPJ lawmakers who were the only ones eligible to take part in the leadership election, followed by Noda, with 102 votes.

As none of the five candidates won an outright majority in the first round, Noda and Kaieda immediately squared off.

Noda will serve out Kan's term as head of the DPJ until September next year and will be named as Japan's new prime minister Tuesday afternoon in parliament, as the party controls the more powerful House of Representatives.

After the victory, Noda pledged to strengthen unity within the DPJ, which has long been beset by internal divisions, mainly between pro- and anti-Ozawa lawmakers.

Noda quickly met with the heads of the Liberal Democratic Party and the New Komeito party after the election, and agreed with them that the DPJ and the two major opposition parties would work closely on the rebuilding of the devastated northeastern region.

Whether to stick to the party's policy pledges in the 2009 general election through which it came to

power, how to generate funds for reconstruction efforts and how to avoid legislative gridlock in the current divided Diet were major issues.

Unlike Kaieda, Noda said that he will “abide in good faith with an agreement” made by the DPJ with the two major opposition parties on reviewing major DPJ pledges, including monthly child allowances and toll-free expressways.

Noda’s diplomatic skills are still unknown. As with other candidates, he said the Japan-U.S. alliance is the cornerstone of Tokyo’s foreign policy.

But Japan’s ties with neighboring countries, especially with China and South Korea, may have some twists as Noda believes Japan’s wartime leaders, convicted by an Allied tribunal at the end of World War II, were not in fact war criminals.

Noda has also voiced concerns over China’s military buildup and its growing assertiveness in territorial disputes.

Despite some differences the leadership contest focused, once again, on the struggle for power within the DPJ rather than policy.

The battle was between champions and adversaries of Ozawa, the head of the largest party faction who is known as the “shadow shogun” for his prowess in backroom dealing.

Ozawa was not eligible to vote in the election as his party membership has been suspended due to a political funds scandal. But he still holds sway over more than 100 DPJ parliamentarians.

Ozawa and his allies have criticized the way in which Kan has run the party and the government since he took the helm in June last year.

In particular, they say many of Kan’s policies have gone against the party’s 2009 pledges that were based on wresting control of policymaking from the powerful bureaucracy, cutting wasteful spending and putting more cash into people’s pockets.

Kyodo, August 29, 2011

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/08/29/20110829p2g00m0dm032000c.html>

Japan’s Noda forms Cabinet with younger allies to tackle challenges

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Japan’s new Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda handpicked his allies in their 40s for key posts in the Cabinet he launched Friday to attain his goals of reconstructing areas hit hard by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, and propping up the flagging economy amid budgetary constraints.

Noda, who will adopt policies similar to his predecessor Naoto Kan’s, also gave some Cabinet positions to lawmakers critical of Kan’s leadership, with an eye to easing tension within his conflict-prone ruling Democratic Party of Japan.

“Under the severe circumstances, my government gives top priority to overcoming issues of reconstruction from the disaster and the nuclear crisis, and getting through several crises the economy is facing,” Noda said at his first press conference as prime minister.

But it remains to be seen whether he will be able to display active initiative in formulating policy as some members are opposed to his ideas of economic and financial management, including the promotion of higher taxes and free trade.

To pursue budgetary reform, Noda, known as a fiscal hawk, picked Jun Azumi, 49, the DPJ’s former Diet affairs chief and a proponent of fiscal discipline within the ruling party, as finance minister.

As worries grow about his lack of political experience because Azumi joined the Cabinet for the first time, Noda, finance minister under the government of Kan, is expected to be at the forefront of steering fiscal policy.

Koichiro Gamba, 47, national policy minister and an advocate of free trade, was picked for the post of foreign minister. Azumi and Gamba were born in Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures, respectively, which were ravaged by the natural disasters in March.

Motohisa Furukawa, 45, former deputy chief Cabinet secretary, assumed the post of national policy minister and concurrently state minister for economic and fiscal policy. Furukawa, a former elite bureaucrat in the Finance Ministry, was one of the pivotal members who compiled the DPJ’s proposals for integrated tax and social security reform including a consumption tax hike.

As Noda has pledged to eliminate waste in government, Renho, 43, returned to the post of state minister in charge of administrative reform, which she left under Kan’s reshuffled Cabinet.

The new prime minister reiterated at the news conference that tax increases to fund the rebuilding of the disaster-stricken areas will not take place before cutting more wasteful spending of taxpayers’ money.

With the government planning to establish by next April a new nuclear safety regulatory agency under the Environment Ministry, Noda retained Goshi Hosono, 40, as minister in charge of handling the ongoing Fukushima nuclear crisis to ensure continuity and will have him double as environment minister.

Tatsuo Hirano, 57, remained in the post of reconstruction minister.

Noda appointed Osamu Fujimura, 61, one of the DPJ lawmakers closest to him, as chief Cabinet secretary, a post making him the top government spokesman.

Apparently to reinforce unity within the ruling party, Noda picked lawmakers close to DPJ veteran Ichiro Ozawa, a vocal critic of Kan’s leadership, including Kenji Yamaoka, former DPJ Diet affairs chief, and Yasuo Ichikawa, chief of the House of Councillors policy board of the DPJ caucus.

Yamaoka, 68, was named chairman of the National Public Safety Commission, while Ichikawa, 69, took the post of defense minister.

Noda also retained Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Michihiko Kano, 69, who was one of his four rivals in the DPJ’s presidential election Monday, as a move to underscore party unity.

But concern is growing among some DPJ members that focusing too much on party unity could prevent Noda from coordinating government policy.

Ozawa and most of his loyal supporters are opponents of tax hikes. While Noda has signaled his readiness for Japan to join the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade talks, farm minister Kano has been reluctant to do so.

Ozawa welcomed the new Cabinet lineup, saying, "This is so good," according to his allies. But a senior DPJ lawmaker close to DPJ policy chief Seiji Maehara, an anti-Ozawa lawmaker, said, "I'm skeptical whether the team can help the DPJ to turn around."

Takeshi Maeda, 73, head of the upper house Budget Committee, became land, infrastructure, transport and tourism minister, while former education minister Tatsuo Kawabata, 66, took up the position of internal affairs and communications minister.

Former DPJ Diet affairs chief Yoshio Hachiro, 63, became economy, trade and industry minister. Postal reform minister Shozaburo Jimi, 65, a member of the DPJ's coalition partner the People's New Party, also kept his post.

The Cabinet was formally inaugurated with an attestation ceremony at the Imperial Palace in the afternoon.

After arranging the Cabinet's lineup, Noda has to scale up efforts to deal with the divided Diet, where opposition parties control the upper house and have prevented the ruling party from concentrating on legislation.

The prime minister on Friday called for cooperation from the opposition camp again, saying he hopes that the DPJ can map out policies on reconstruction and economic matters for the public, together with Japan's two largest opposition parties.

Noda has asked the Liberal Democratic Party and the New Komeito party to help create a framework to discuss three issues — how to grapple with the negative effects of the yen's surge and deflation, reconstructing the country following the March disaster, and tax reform.

Kyodo, September 2, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/09/02/20110902p2g00m0dm010000c.html>

Noda Cabinet approval rate polled at 65%

The new Cabinet led by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has scored an approval rating of 65 percent in a Yomiuri Shimbun survey, the fifth-highest figure since the Yomiuri began polling the popularity of just-formed cabinets in the late 1970s.

In the latest nationwide telephone survey, conducted Friday night through Saturday, 19 percent disapproved of the Noda Cabinet, launched Friday. The survey covered 1,775 households with eligible voters using a random digit dialing method. A total of 1,100, or 62 percent, gave valid responses.

The Yomiuri Shimbun began conducting such surveys in 1978 with the inauguration of Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira.

Seventy-one percent of respondents said they approved of Noda's decision to give Cabinet and DPJ executive posts to lawmakers from various intraparty groups.

Noda's moves to unite DPJ party members is believed to have contributed to the Cabinet's strong approval rating, observers said.

The support rate for the DPJ rose to 28 percent from 21 percent in the previous survey conducted on Aug. 27 and 28, exceeding the approval rate for the Liberal Democratic Party, which stood at 23 percent in both surveys.

When asked their reasons for supporting the Noda Cabinet, 48 percent—the largest percentile—said the Cabinet was better than the previous one, while 17 percent said they could trust the prime minister. A further 12 percent said they have high expectations of his policies.

Meanwhile, 72 percent said they praised Noda's decision to observe a recent agreement among the DPJ, LDP and New Komeito that centered on a drastic review of the DPJ manifesto for the 2009 House of Representatives election.

Noda has said tax increases will be necessary to fund reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake, and 61 percent of respondents said they supported the idea.

Concerning the prime minister's stance to promote the restart nationwide of nuclear power plants that are now suspended for regular checkups, 56 percent said they agreed, exceeding the 34 percent of respondents who disagreed with the idea.

Yomiuri Shimbun , September 5, 2011

Most Japanese support Noda's Cabinet

More than half the Japanese public support Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's new Cabinet, a marked improvement on the dismal approval ratings during the death throes of Naoto Kan's administration, according to an Asahi Shimbun poll.

The telephone survey, conducted on Sept. 2 and 3, reported a 53 percent approval rating for the Cabinet. Kan's administration reached a low of 15 percent in July.

The support rate for the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) also jumped to 31 percent, from 18 percent in the previous survey conducted on Aug. 25 and 26.

That puts the DPJ significantly ahead of the main opposition Liberal Democratic Party, which saw its approval rating crawl up to 17 percent from 15 percent in the last survey.

The latest poll covered a randomly selected sample of eligible voters from across Japan. Valid responses were received from 1,051 people, or 59 percent.

The support rate for the new Cabinet is lower than those of the two predecessor DPJ administrations as they entered office. Kan's first Cabinet initially enjoyed a 60 percent approval rating, and Yukio Hatoyama's administration had a 71 percent support rate as it entered office. But this is the first time since last fall that more than half of eligible voters have supported a DPJ government.

The survey also found some support for a new tax to pay for the post-quake reconstruction and a hike in consumption tax rate to secure funds for social security, both policies that Noda supports. Fifty-seven percent of respondents backed his approach, compared with 32 percent who disapproved.

Fifty percent of the sample thought the government would not be able to cut wasteful spending, a step seen as a prerequisite for possible tax hikes, compared with only 30 percent who thought it would.

Ashishimbun , 2011/09/06

<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201109050264.html>

New industry minister vows efforts to resume halted nuclear reactors

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Newly appointed industry minister Yoshio Hachiro on Friday vowed to back Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's policy of resuming halted nuclear power reactors once their safety is thoroughly checked.

Hachiro's comment at a news conference is in line with Noda's view that restarting nuclear reactors suspended for regular checkups is necessary to ensure a stable power supply for now.

The new industry minister also shared Noda's stance on nuclear energy policy in the medium to long term, saying it would be "very difficult" to build new nuclear power plants in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

"On the issue of the resumption of idled reactors, the most important thing is to employ a tougher safety standard," Hachiro said, suggesting the possibility of reexamining even the current review system to judge if such reactors are safe to restart.

After Kyushu Electric Power Co. halted a reactor at its Sendai plant in Kagoshima Prefecture on Thursday for a scheduled checkup, only 12 of Japan's 54 commercial nuclear reactors are now in operation.

It remains uncertain when the idled reactors will resume operations, given new safety assessment requirements introduced by the previous administration in the wake of the Fukushima crisis. Approval from local municipalities is another condition for utilities to restart reactors currently out of service.

As for reactors whose service life has expired, Hachiro said, "it is necessary to decommission them." But he stopped short of saying whether he would follow in the footsteps of former premier Naoto Kan and seek a society without nuclear power.

Hachiro added that he plans to hold an advisory committee meeting on energy and natural resources by the end of this month to start reviewing the nation's basic energy policy, which was compiled before the Fukushima Daiichi plant disaster and calls for building new nuclear reactors.

On trade issues, Hachiro said it would be necessary to conduct a "thorough study" on the issue of whether Japan should join the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade talks.

Hachiro, known for his strong interest in agricultural policy, said it would be “difficult” to balance the revitalization of Japan’s agriculture and the TPP, which drew opposition from farmers for fear of competition with cheaper farm products from overseas.

Hachiro’s remarks highlight his cautious stance on the TPP and contrast with his predecessor Banri Kaieda’s comments in January when he took up the post of the industry minister that the TPP is a “historical necessity.”

The Japanese government agreed in May to postpone its plan to decide by June on whether to join negotiations for the U.S.-led Pacific free trade accord. The action was taken to give the government time to review its policy priorities in the wake of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

There is not much time left before a summit meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in November, when Japan needs to show its stance on TPP.

Hachiro, meanwhile, vowed to promote measures to help companies cope with the yen’s appreciation against the dollar.

Kyodo, September 3, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/09/03/20110903p2g00m0dm019000c.html>

Hachiro hopes to resume halted reactors soon if local gov’ts approve

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Japan’s new industry minister Yoshio Hachiro said Monday he aims to resume operation of idled nuclear reactors in Japan “as soon as possible” once local governments approve their resumption.

Hachiro suggested in a group interview with media organizations that the resumption of reactors idled for regular checks could take place before the detailed cause of the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant becomes clear, saying it is “impossible” to investigate the cause within a few months.

“If people in the local areas (hosting nuclear power plants) approve, I hope (the resumption) will take place as soon as possible, although I cannot foresee whether it will be before the end of this year,” Hachiro said.

On the export of nuclear power plants, Hachiro said, “Considering contracts with partner countries, and if they still wish (to import)...I think exporting would be necessary.”

He refrained from commenting on whether he would decide on Japan’s participation in the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade negotiations by the time of a summit meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in November.

“Given the issue of disaster-hit areas and the issue of the hollowing out of (Japan’s) industry under the impact of the yen’s appreciation, we face various challenges and we are not at the stage to make a judgment.”

Nine Asia-Pacific countries including the United States and Australia have been negotiating on the

TPP hoping to conclude their talks at the APEC summit meeting, to be held in Honolulu.

Japan had aimed to decide by around June whether to join the TPP negotiations, but the deadline was effectively put off after the March disaster.

Hachiro, meanwhile, said the government needs to swiftly implement a five percent cut in corporate tax planned by the government under the previous Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

“A five percent cut in corporate tax is undoubtedly necessary at this stage,” Hachiro said, citing concern over the adverse economic impact of the yen’s recent appreciation to a postwar record high against the dollar.

But the tax cut is a matter that requires the agreement of both the ruling and opposition parties, he added.

Kyodo, September 6, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/09/06/20110906p2g00m0dm018000c.html>

Noda May OK N-Reactors under Construction: Fujimura

Tokyo, Sept. 6 (Jiji Press)—Japan’s new Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda may accept new nuclear reactors whose construction has already started, Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura indicated Tuesday.

Regarding Noda’s denial of new construction of nuclear reactors at his inaugural news conference Friday, Fujimura said the new construction means that building a new reactor by acquiring land from now.

At a news conference, however, the government’s top spokesman declined to comment on a specific new nuclear reactor, saying that the matter should be asked to the prime minister.

Power utilities have halted the planning or construction of new reactors following the crisis at Tokyo Electric Power Co.’s <9501> Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power station, which was badly damaged by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

Noda said Friday that although construction of 14 new reactors is planned in Japan, it is realistically hard to build new ones.

Jiji Press, September 6, 2011

<http://jen.jiji.com/jc/eng?g=eco&k=2011090600946>

Japan PM Kan announces his resignation

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Prime Minister Naoto Kan announced his resignation Friday, nearly three months

after first indicating he would do so, following the passage of two major bills in parliament.

The Democratic Party of Japan's presidential election to choose the successor to Kan, the current leader of the ruling party, will take place Monday, when only its 398 lawmakers will be eligible to vote.

More than four lawmakers, a record number since the party was formed in 1998, including former Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara and Finance Minister Yoshihiko Noda, may file for candidacy when campaigning officially begins on Saturday.

Kan, already Japan's fifth leader since 2006, said in early June that he would hand over his job to the DPJ's next generation after a certain level of progress had been made in reconstructing areas devastated by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, and the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant had been contained.

He later spelled out that the handover would take place if three conditions were fulfilled.

They were parliamentary passage of three bills — the second extra budget, a bill to allow the government to issue deficit-covering bonds to secure about 40 percent of the revenue needed for this fiscal year's initial budget and a bill to promote the use of renewable energy.

On Friday, the last two bills were enacted with sufficient support in the opposition-controlled House of Councillors.

Kyodo, August 26, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/news/20110826p2g00m0dm016000c.html>
