



# Pragmatic Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's Legacy and the Most Regrettable Fact



Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide announces that he will not run in the presidential election of the Liberal Democratic Party, September 3, 2021  
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

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## **Many policies formulated and the biggest “what if” in the history of the Suga administration**

Former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide decided not to run in the Presidential election of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September 2021, bringing the curtain down on more than a year of the Suga government. While the main focus of the Suga administration was the fight against COVID-19, the formulation and implementation of many policies in line with the trends of the times based on popular sentiment is a highly commendable accomplishment of Suga's government. Such policies include setting decarbonization goals, directing the realization of a digital society, lowering cell phone charges, and expanding national health insurance for fertility treatments. Lagging digitalization in particular was a major issue by anyone's standards. The fact that Suga was able to set up the Digital Agency in under a year, despite the myriad challenges he was facing, was a credit to his ability as a pragmatist in moving the bureaucracy to achieve results. I regard this as the legacy of the Suga administration.



Prof. Nakakita Koji

While Suga had already coordinated many policies during his time as Chief Cabinet Secretary, the number of new policies formulated and favorable policy outcomes achieved went against initial expectations. If it had not been for the COVID-19 pandemic, he would have enjoyed a much longer term of office.

On the other hand, Suga's COVID-19 measures did not chime with public sentiment. Suga seemed to believe that he could quietly implement these measures and other policies, and public opinion would rally to his support later. However, that was not the case. Lack of public communication led to a fall in approval ratings and a series of election defeats, and eventually to his resignation. While ordinarily he may have been viewed as a "pragmatic prime minister," his approach backfired in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most regrettable fact about Suga is that he did not dissolve the Lower House immediately after the inauguration of his Cabinet in September 2020. That is the biggest "what if" in the history of the Suga administration. In a speech made at the time of the LDP presidential election, Suga said, "I was born the eldest son of a farmer in Akita, Japan, and after many twists and turns, I entered the world of politics at the age of 26 in Yokohama, where I have no social or family ties. Work hard and you can become prime minister or president," he said, resonating with the public and earning him a 74% cabinet approval rating (according to a Yomiuri Shimbun opinion poll). Over the next three months, he maintained a very high approval rating of over 60%.

If the Lower House had been dissolved during this period, when the opposition parties were unprepared, the LDP would have won a landslide victory in the general election. Since the public would have recognized the Suga administration as the one they themselves elected [to succeed the Abe administration], Suga may have been able to retain slighter higher approval ratings even when approval ratings dipped from the winter of 2020 onward when the number of new COVID-19 cases increased. Moreover, this would have enabled him to ensure a longer gap between the LDP presidential election and the Lower House general election.

Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo played the dissolution card at the right time during his term of office, whereas Suga did not dissolve the Lower House, prioritizing COVID-19 measures over the election. While his spirit is understandable, he should have sought the will of the people earlier and created his own administration.

## **Successful vaccination program and two issues**

Just as he had done during his time as Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Abe administration, Suga was adept at using personnel as leverage by influencing the bureaucracy. For example, when he declared that one million vaccinations would be administered per day, many people were skeptical that this could be achieved. However, Suga made it happen by pushing the bureaucrats to act. This was a major achievement. The highly contagious Delta strain had begun to spread in Japan from the summer of 2021 and if vaccination had not proceeded at a rapid pace, many more victims would have succumbed. Despite the confusion arising from the shortage of vaccines and the delay in establishing a system for their administration, Suga succeeded in accomplishing a far preferable outcome.

Suga's measures highlight two issues linked to the aforementioned lack of communication.

The first was his inability to engage and connect with the public. In the case of COVID-19

measures, the key to controlling infection is individual behavior change. This includes staying home, avoiding closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings, and not eating and drinking in large groups. For this to work, clear standards need to be established and communicated carefully to gain the acceptance of the public. Regrettably, Suga lacked skill in this regard and failed to gain sufficient trust.

The second issue was poor team play within the administration. Since his time as Chief Cabinet Secretary, Suga has been wont to make decisions independently after gathering information through multiple channels. Even after becoming prime minister, he did not delegate matters that he considered important, instead continuing to make his own decisions. Overruling advisors at the final stage slows them down. Bureaucrats too become dispirited, making them less likely to be forthcoming with information.

In the first wave, the soft “Japan style” approach of urging public self-restraint helped to keep the number of infected people low compared to other countries. The successful outcome of this approach caused Suga to be optimistic and continue to handle it in the same way. In order to restore normal daily life, the government resorted to an approach that relied on vaccination alone, and did not take adequate measures to address the shortage of hospital beds and overnight treatment facilities, which had been a concern hitherto. Then came the fifth wave and the spread of the Delta strain, leading to a collapse of the medical system, with patients forced to stay at home without proper treatment.

Leading a country is not easy, even in peacetime. The Prime Minister had a hectic schedule and was under intense time pressure. Added to this was the unprecedented battle of the pandemic, making team play important not only within the Prime Minister’s Office, but also with the LDP as well as ministries and agencies. As well as a lack of public communication, Suga’s weakness was an inability to engage in teamwork.

One of the most remarkable examples of Prime Minister Suga’s independent decision-making occurred in December 2020, when Suga talked directly with Komeito representative Yamaguchi Natsuo to determine the eligibility range for the increase in out-of-pocket medical expenses for the late-stage elderly (over 75 in the medical system). This was a matter that should have been left to the policy chiefs of the LDP and Komeito, but Suga was unable to do that. It so happened that I had a chance to meet Yamaguchi right after that, and heard that he told Suga, “A prime minister who makes decisions on his own to this extent will soon burn out.” The problem with Suga was that he was unable to manage the organization from a broad perspective.

## **COVID-19 measures left unresolved**

During the 12 months of the Suga administration, it was criticized for lagging behind with COVID-19 measures. The administration stuck steadfastly to the Go To Travel campaign despite the fact that case numbers had been increasing since the fall of 2020. And during the fifth wave from the summer of 2021, the administration was perceived as being slow to request eating establishments to close.

The trade-off between the suppression of COVID-19 and economic activity is a tough challenge facing every country in the world. However, failure to change direction to control the virus at the stage when infection is spreading rapidly damages economic activity. It would seem that Suga’s delay in applying the brakes to curb infection rates stemmed from a strong desire to do something to protect the economy, but his wishful thinking about the infection situation had an adverse effect.

A year and a half has already passed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. One month after the inauguration of the Suga administration, [the COVID-19 Independent Investigation Commission](#), headed by Funabashi Yoichi, Chairman of the Asia Pacific Initiative, issued the Investigation Report, defining the “Japan model” of crisis management that relies on the voluntary cooperation of the people, and pointing out its limitations. In February 2021, the Act on Special Measures Concerning COVID-19 was amended, limiting the imposition of penalties to cases where businesses do not comply with orders to close or reduce business hours. Japanese politicians are hesitant to impose lockdowns such as issuing orders to refrain from going out, since it would be a restriction of private rights. However, the Japanese Constitution has a “public welfare” provision that merits careful consideration.

The review of the healthcare system requires the cooperation of the Japan Medical Association (JMA) in addition to the creation of a legal framework. The JMA is LDP-friendly, so it is odd that they are not aligned. Many LDP affiliates assert that the election of the JMA president at the end of June 2020 was influenced by the defeat of the incumbent president, Yokokura Yoshitake, who had strong ties to the LDP. Further, the pipeline between the LDP and industry groups is no longer fully functional as a result of a political system led by the Prime Minister’s Office. This is demonstrated by the flood of criticism that met the government’s call for liquor wholesalers to cease doing business with eating establishments that serve liquor.

In any event, investigations should be carried out in future, beginning with the Investigation Commission. When a certain point has been reached, an investigative committee should be established by the government and the Diet, as was done in the case of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. Based on the outcome of that investigation, it is important to devise legislative and other measures to prepare for the next pandemic.

### **Political reform demands greater test of prime minister’s skills**

Political reform in the Heisei era produced a system in which policy came to be directed from the Prime Minister’s Office. Having served as Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Abe administration, Suga inherited the structure of the Abe administration intact, including Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro and LDP Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro. Compared to Abe, however, Suga was not skillful at getting people in the Prime Minister’s Office to do what he wanted. This is despite the fact that the Prime Minister’s Office employs the same mechanisms as it did when Abe was in office, such as the Chief and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretaries meeting and the Personnel Review Council.

The Koizumi Junichiro administration was the first to use the fruits of political reform to create a political system led by the Prime Minister’s Office. Every administration since then, however, has been short-lived, with the exception of the second Abe administration. The optimistic notion that strengthening the power of the prime minister through institutional reform will automatically guarantee political leadership no longer holds true. The system has come full circle, with the human element becoming important once again.

Bolstered by a series of political reforms, the Prime Minister’s Office can be likened to a racing car equipped with a high horsepower engine. The higher the speed, the more difficult driving becomes. The skill of the driver is now greatly put to the test. It is also important for the driver to be in sync with the pit crew during the race.

In this respect, Abe was a great team player. Like-minded people united by conservative principles gathered together. A relationship of trust enabled many to speak to Abe without reserve. Among the politicians working in the Prime Minister's Office alongside Suga were the talented Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu, Seko Hiroshige, Hagiuda Koichi, and Nishimura Yasutoshi. Abe was also a member of the Seiwa Political Analysis Council (Seiwa kai), the largest faction.

Suga, on the other hand, did not belong to any faction. The factionless Suga group lacked cohesion and was composed of only young members, while experienced members were forced to rely on their elected contemporaries. Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu may be competent, but he is not Suga's confidant. And a question mark surrounds the competence of Kato's closest aide, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Sakai Manabu.

Abe was also very adept at judging situations from a broad perspective and leaving it to others to get across the details. Then Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga's comment on Prime Minister Abe in the November 2014 issue of *Chuokoron* illustrates this very well. "To be the No. 1, it is important to show the big picture and assign people who can do what needs to be done within it. I don't have that patience. I think the Prime Minister is remarkable," he said. Without going as far as to join him in singing Abe's praises, it would seem that this difference has indeed been revealed.

## **LDP and the challenges of the new Prime Minister**

By the time this issue of *Chuokoron* is published in November, the new President of the LDP and the Prime Minister will have been decided. The Lower House election will be held shortly thereafter. The Upper House election will also be held in the summer of 2022. In my view, the LDP is now at a critical juncture. If the LDP can innovate here, it may be able to establish a long-term government, albeit not perhaps as long as the 1955 System. If it fails, it may revert to a short-lived government like the one that followed the first Abe administration and may lose power. The key question is whether the pluralism within the LDP, which was lost under the former Abe administration, known as "*ikkyo*" (the political dominance), can be restored.

During the 15th to 16th centuries (from the Sengoku to the Azuchi-Momoyama period), Japan was one of the greatest military powers in the world. This was followed by a time of peace in the Edo period, so that by the arrival of the Black Ships, Japan had lost its military capability to be able to stand up to the Western great powers. Likewise, in the "time of peace" of the second Abe administration, competition within the LDP weakened and sensitivity to the will of the people diminished. Cabinet approval ratings dropped, and the Suga administration narrowly escaped the same fate after losing a series of elections.

Suga's decision to step down resulted in two male and two female candidates, Kono Taro, Kishida Fumio, Takaichi Sanae, and Noda Seiko, running for the LDP presidential election, presenting an excellent opportunity for the LDP to regain its pluralism and further promote generational change.

If, however, the focus remains solely on the Lower House election, seeking only an "election figurehead," the LDP may not last until the Upper House election in 2022. If a lesson can be learned from the Suga administration and the LDP elects a president who can demonstrate team player capabilities and survive both the Lower House election 2021 and the Upper House election in the summer of 2022, then as long as the opposition parties such as the Constitutional Democratic Party

of Japan (CDPJ) and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) remain in their current form, the LDP-Komeito government is likely to last longer.

Meanwhile, the next President and Prime Minister must seize the favorable legacy of the Suga administration. Decarbonization and digitalization are important challenges that Japan cannot avoid. Along with COVID-19 measures, it is important to promote these measures and link them to innovation in the Japanese economy.

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