

Japan Gets New Prime Minister, Veteran of the Governing Party

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TOKYO — Taro Aso, a veteran politician who fought for years to win [Japan's](#) top political post, was officially named prime minister on Wednesday by the lower house of Parliament, becoming the country's fourth premier in two years.

In his first news conference as prime minister, Mr. Aso, 68, said his priority was to revive the economy, which economists believe may have already slipped into a recession. He also pledged to renew an unpopular naval refueling mission in the Indian Ocean in support of the American-led war in Afghanistan.

But Mr. Aso avoided answering the question that has loomed over all other issues since his predecessor, [Yasuo Fukuda](#), resigned abruptly three weeks ago: When will the new prime minister call a general election?

Depending on the answer, Mr. Aso's administration could prove even more short-lived than those of his two predecessors, each of which lasted only a year.

Mr. Aso's party, the Liberal Democrats, who have held power for more than half a century but whose popularity has plummeted because of a series of scandals and episodes of mismanagement in the last two years, must dissolve the lower house of Parliament and hold a general election by next September. But they are expected to call elections early, possibly as early as November, in order to take advantage of the traditional bounce in the approval ratings following the start of a new administration.

Opinion polls by Japan's major newspapers will provide a hint in the next few days as to whether that bounce will be enough to head off a victory by the main opposition Democratic Party, which seized the less powerful upper house of Parliament last year.

Even if Mr. Aso's party clings to power, a significant loss of seats may force him to step down as both prime minister and party president.

In his new role, Mr. Aso formed a cabinet geared toward an election by appointing allies and familiar faces from his governing Liberal Democratic Party.

"Basically, I'll fight in the election with these members," Mr. Aso said. "If you ask me how we'll fight, we'll fight fairly and squarely."

Ideologically, Mr. Aso's cabinet is further to the right of Mr. Fukuda's, and includes several members who, like the new prime minister himself, stem from the Liberal Democratic Party's right wing. It also includes politicians who, like Mr. Aso, are

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considered less committed to fiscal discipline and reforms, and more open to the traditional pork that won the party support, especially in rural areas.

Shoichi Nakagawa, 55, a former trade minister who favors increased government spending, was selected as finance minister. Hirofumi Nakasone, 62, the son of a former prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, was appointed foreign minister; though not known for his foreign affairs expertise, Mr. Nakasone leads legislative friendship associations with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Japan has maintained refueling ships in the Indian Ocean to support American and other vessels involved in the war in Afghanistan. The future of the Afghan mission has been in question, however, as the law authorizing it comes up for renewal in January, and the opposition Democratic Party is against renewal.

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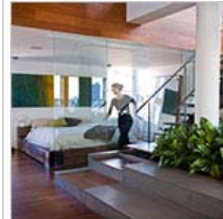
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