

Mori succeeds Obuchi as Japanese Prime Minister

Mori Yoshiro was sworn in as Japan's 85th prime minister on April 5 three days after a stroke cut short the political career of his predecessor Obuchi Keizo.

Mori, 62-year-old secretary general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), gained comfortable majorities in balloting for a new prime minister at both houses of the Diet with the support of the LDP's coalition partners - the New Komeito and the newly launched Conservative Party. Earlier in the day, he was elected president of the LDP unopposed at a party parliamentary caucus.

The Obuchi cabinet resigned en masse a day earlier to pave the way for his election, but Mori immediately reappointed all cabinet ministers, including Foreign Minister Kono Yohei and Finance Minister Miyazawa Kiichi, in order to maintain continuity with Obuchi's administration.

The Obuchi cabinet stood down as Obuchi was incapacitated with no prospect of recovery. The move was based on Article 70 of the Constitution, which states that when there is a vacancy in the post of prime minister, all ministers must resign.

Obuchi was rushed to a private Tokyo hospital from his official residence early on the morning of April 2 after feeling unwell with fatigue. He fell into a coma that evening, with his illness diagnosed as a cerebral infarction. Chief Cabinet Secretary Aoki Mikio told a press conference that the prime minister was in a serious condition and incapable of understanding questions or expressing his will. Aoki regarded such a condition as tantamount to "a vacancy in the post of prime minister" referred to in Article 70 of the Constitution.

Aoki was temporarily named acting prime minister following Obuchi's hospitalization, but after Obuchi was found to be incapable of continuing his duties and unlikely to recover in the near future, the cabinet decided to resign.

It marked the first time in postwar Japan for a prime minister to be solely replaced without a cabinet reshuffle, an extraordinary measure necessitated by an emergency arising from the prime minister's physical incapacitation.

The mass cabinet resignation under Article 70 of the Constitution was the first since the Cabinet of Ohira Masayoshi, which did so in June 1980 following the sudden death of the prime minister.



Japan's new Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro

Mori's assumption of the premiership put an end to Obuchi's administration a year and eight months after its inauguration in July 1998.

Mori pledged to continue and develop Obuchi's policy line, focusing on economic recovery, educational reform and a restructuring of the police system tarnished by a series of scandals.

The only difference was that Mori called for "breathing new life into Japan," while Obuchi had been pushing for "a rebirth of the Japanese economy."

The immediate task Mori faces is preparing for the Group of Eight summit in Okinawa in July, at which his leadership as host will be at stake. But the situation is fluid as there are growing calls within the LDP to dissolve the Diet for a snap general election before the Okinawa summit. The timing of the election is the immediate focus of the political situation.

Opposition parties regard Mori's administration as a caretaker government until the next general election which must be called by mid-October, because of his weak power base.

Mori studied at Tokyo's Waseda University, the alma mater of former Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru and Obuchi. He had political ambitions in his student days, and belonged to the university's debating club, just as Takeshita and Obuchi did.

Mori briefly worked as a journalist after graduating from university. He then served as a secretary of a Diet member before being elected to the House of Representatives from his native Ishikawa Prefecture for the first time in 1969 at the age of 32.

He became a cabinet minister for the first time at the age of 46 when he was appointed education minister in Nakasone Yasuhiro's cabinet. He was the second youngest education minister in Japanese history.

Though he projects a hawkish image, he has flexibility as evidenced by the fact that he maintained dialogue with the leftist-controlled Japan Teachers Union while serving as education minister.

He has also served as construction minister and minister of international trade and industry, and held top LDP executive posts.

The new prime minister has a robust physical build, standing 175 centimeters tall and weighing almost 100 kilograms.

Because of his bulk, he was once mistaken for a police guard while dealing with a throng of journalists trying to talk to Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo, when he was a deputy chief cabinet secretary in the Fukuda cabinet. In contrast to his build, Mori's personality is said to be rather timid. One political commentator described him as having "a heart as small as a flea's." His friends say that when he plays golf, his favorite pastime, he is better in approaches than hitting long shots.

Mori's motto is "selfless devotion," a value he learned from his father, who served as mayor of his native town for nine consecutive terms,

having being elected unopposed in every election.

With that motto, he loyally served under successive prime ministers, which propelled him to his present position. According to his parliamentary colleagues, he sticks to his political style of "wait until the time is ripe."

Ota elected Osaka Governor, the first Japanese woman to hold gubernatorial post

Japan's first female governor was born with the election of Ota Fusae as governor of Osaka Prefecture, the second largest Japanese local entity after Tokyo. In a February 6 gubernatorial election, Ota, a 48-year-old former senior official of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, beat two rivals by a wide margin.

Ota, an independent supported by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partners as well as the opposition Democratic Party, defeated Ajisaka Makoto, a 66-year-old university professor backed by the Communist Party, and Hiraoka Tatsuto, the 59-year-old managing director of a private school, supported by the Osaka prefectural chapter of the LDP. Ota won 1,380,000 votes against 1,020,000 votes for Ajisaka. Ajisaka's votes represented a considerable increase from the number of votes cast for the Communist Party in the Osaka gubernatorial election last year.

The election was called after former Governor Yokoyama Knock, elected for the second term only last year, resigned in the wake of sexual harassment allegations. The turnout for the election was 44.58 percent, the lowest ever recorded in an Osaka gubernatorial election.

Ota was a MITI councillor when she ran for the election. Previously she had held such MITI posts as director of the Housing Industry Division and the Consumer Affairs Division of the Industrial Policy Bureau. She also served as deputy governor of Okayama Prefecture for two years until July 1997.

During the election campaign, she was criticized by her opponents for being a bureaucrat parachuted in from the central government. She countered the charge by emphasizing her administrative capability acquired through her experience with MITI and Okayama Prefecture.

Her election campaign was hardly affected by internal rifts between the LDP headquarters and the LDP Osaka chapter and by parliamentary standoffs between the LDP-led coalition and the Democratic Party, thanks to strong support extended by the Kansai business sector and labor unions.

She is the third prefectural governor with a MITI background. The two others are the governors of Oita and Fukuoka prefectures.

Ota told a press conference after she was pronounced the victor that she would do her best to rescue the embattled small businesses in the region by capitalizing her administrative experiences. She expressed her firm determination to see tax money never wasted in the prefecture.

With Osaka in the worst financial crisis among the nation's 47 prefectures, Ota faces the daunting tasks of replenishing the prefecture's empty fiscal coffers and turning the faltering regional economy around.

The rapid growth of i-mode cellular phones

The growth of cellular phones using i-mode technology has been explosive, particularly among young people craving instant and easily accessible information.

The special handsets have a wide variety of uses beyond voice communication. Anywhere and at anytime, i-mode subscribers can use their mobile phones to make travel reservations, conduct financial transactions, exchange e-mail and receive news and consumer information.

I-mode is an information-based service of NTT Mobile Communications Network Inc., better known as NTT DoCoMo.

Japan's largest provider of cell phone services, NTT DoCoMo, has seen skyrocketing growth in subscribers, and a significant part of the popularity is credited to i-mode. Of the 28.06 million NTT DoCoMo handsets in existence, about one in seven are i-mode compatible.

The interactive service offers a whole new world of multimedia information for cell phone users, who until now have used their handsets in the same manner as their land-line phones - for spoken conversation.

I-mode subscribers can view their bank balances, make concert and hotel reservations and send and receive e-mail on their handsets' relatively large screens.

There are a variety of other services too. "Timer mail," for instance, uses a secret code known only among a group of i-mode users allowing them to communicate even when their handsets' regular e-mail functions are shut off.

The service attracting the most attention is "mobile banking." This allows subscribers to use their i-mode-equipped phones to make transactions with applicable bank accounts. Not only can DoCoMo users inquire their bank balances on their phones, but they can also make deposits, withdrawals and transfers.

As for online reservations, airplane tickets, hotels, concerts, and sports events can be booked through the handsets. The overwhelming majority of subscribers using these services are concentrated in Tokyo, Osaka and other major cities.

Users can also refer to train schedules or go to an "i-anime" site, allowing them to put cartoon images on their phones' color screens while their phones are in resting mode.

One telecommunications expert believes that cellular phones are set to rival personal computers (PCs) in the information revolution.

"In Japan, the spread of PCs is happening rapidly. But in the future, there is a good chance we could see cellular phones overtaking PCs as information terminals," he said.