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Japan finance minister wins key backing for PM post

TOKYO: Japan's finance minister emerged on Thursday as the sole strong candidate for the country's leadership after winning support from key cabinet colleagues tipped as potential rivals.

Naoto Kan, 63, was widely expected to succeed Yukio Hatoyama on Friday – first as president of the centre-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and then, after a parliamentary vote, as prime minister of Asia's biggest economy.

Support has built quickly for Kan, a former grassroots civic activist who achieved popularity in the mid-1990s when as health minister he admitted government culpability in a scandal over HIV-tainted blood products.

Kan took over as finance minister in January and has since advocated a weak yen and pushed for spending cuts and tax increases to contain Japan's ballooning public debt, which is nearing 200 percent of GDP.

Tokyo stocks rose more than three percent on Thursday, driv-

en in part by news Kan was likely to take over as premier, brokers said.

Kan, who also serves as deputy prime minister, met Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, who had been seen as his most serious potential rival, and afterward received his public backing.

Okada said he wanted the next premier to tackle the DPJ's problems with money politics and exercise strong party leadership, and added: "Provided these two points are met, I told him, I support Mr Kan."

Okada said he would want to stay on in his post, telling reporters: "I am dedicating myself to my duties as foreign minister."

Transport Minister Seiji Maehara, a telegenic and am-

bitious young cabinet member who had been seen as another contender for the premiership, said "I will support Mr Kan", Jiji Press news agency reported shortly after.

"Kan is a suitable candidate for a number of DPJ lawmakers as his succession won't cause extra confusion in the party," said Hidekazu Kawai, honorary politics professor at Tokyo's

Gakushuin University.

"DPJ members don't want to take unnecessary risks now. As Kan is a deputy prime minister, a smooth transition is expected. No matter who will become the next prime minister, very difficult tasks are waiting. That's why other potential candidates have hesitated to follow suit."

The only other declared candidate was a little-known lawmaker without a ministerial rank, Shinji Tarutoko, chairman of the party's environment committee in the lower house.

The mass-circulation Yomiuri Shimbun reported earlier that backing for Kan was widening in the ruling party, while the Tokyo Shimbun daily said Kan's victory was certain and may be decided without contest.

Hatoyama quit Wednesday after just eight months in office, ending a term that started with a stunning election victory last August in which his party ended an almost unbroken half-century of conservative rule.

His support plummeted after he backtracked on a promise to

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move an unpopular US airbase off the southern island of Okinawa, enraging people there as well as the pacifist Social Democrats, who quit the ruling coalition.

The departure of the small party weakened the government in the parliament's upper house ahead of elections for the chamber slated for July 11.

The DPJ's most influential figure, secretary general Ichiro Ozawa, also quit on Wednesday after Hatoyama asked him to step down. Both men have been embroiled in political funding scandals.

But Ozawa, described as the "Shadow Shogun" for his power behind the throne, still maintains considerable influence as he controls the biggest faction in the party, including scores of newcomers elected last year.

"Ozawa's influence remains huge in the party despite his resignation," said Kawai of Gakushuin University. "He will lower his profile for now, but there will be no surprise in seeing Ozawa come back anytime after the election." — AFP

Japan's revolving door premiership

Four prime ministers have been and gone in less than four years

			
<p>Shinzo Abe Sept. 2006-Sept. 2007</p>	<p>Yasuo Fukuda Sept. 2007-Sept. 2008</p>	<p>Taro Aso Sept. 2008-Sept. 2009</p>	<p>Yukio Hatoyama Sept. 2009-June 2, 2010</p>
<p>▶ Resigned after massive defeat in upper house election</p>	<p>▶ Abruptly resigned as he faced deadlocked parliament and dwindling popularity</p>	<p>▶ Stepped down after massive election defeat</p>	<p>▶ Resigned after row over the relocation of a US base, political funding scandals</p>

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