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Japan leadership battle kicks off

TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his rival, powerbroker Ichiro Ozawa, kicked off a leadership battle Wednesday that threatens to divide the ruling party only a year after it took power.

Their contest to run the governing centre-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) comes as its economic recovery is slowing, Japan's debt mountain is growing and exports are threatened by the yen trading near a 15-year high.

The rivals, who both formally declared their candidacy for the September 14 party election, represent the two different wings of the party which a year ago ousted the conservatives after more than half a century in power.

Ozawa, 68, is a veteran powerbroker who years ago defected from the conservative Liberal Democrats and has earned nicknames like "Shadow Shogun" and the "Destroyer" for his record of creating and splitting minor parties.

If Ozawa wins, he will become the nation's sixth premier in four years. Kan, 63, started his political life as a left-wing grassroots activist and shot to fame when, during a brief stint as health minister, he uncovered official culpability in a HIV-tainted blood scandal. – AFP