

WORLD

Japanese PM defeats rival's challenge

Naoto Kan survives dramatic struggle that almost ushered in 7th PM in four years

TOKYO—Prime Minister Naoto Kan won a hard-fought vote within Japan's governing party on Tuesday to stay on as prime minister, surviving a challenge by the party's power broker, Ichiro Ozawa.

In the end, Kan won by a comfortable margin of 721 points to Ozawa's 491 points, under a counting system that assigns different weights to votes by lawmakers, local officials and rank-and-file party members.

The final tally failed to capture the drama of a contest that had appeared too close to call. Among Democratic members of parliament, who cast their ballots in a ballroom of a hotel in central Tokyo, Kan garnered 206 votes, barely besting the 200 votes for Ozawa. But the votes of the rank-and-file went overwhelmingly for Kan, giving him his final margin of victory.

Before the vote, both men made impassioned final speeches to cap a two-week contest that was unusually open and heated by the standards of Japan's usually staid democracy.



Defeated Ichiro Ozawa, left, of Japan's ruling Democratic Party bows to Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Tuesday.

KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"I have a dream," said Kan, 63, who took office three months ago. "That is to break the 20 years of blockage, to point a new way for Japan, to revive Japan and to pass a vibrant Japan on to the next generation."

The result spared the nation yet another change in leadership as it grapples with a soaring yen, which has contributed to its two-decade-long economic decline, and a diplomatic standoff over a Chinese boat

seized near disputed islands in the East China Sea, among other problems. If Ozawa had won, he would have been the seventh prime minister in four years.

The outcome also promises to

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PM NAOTO KAN

calm Tokyo's recently rocky relationship with Washington, its longtime ally and protector. After the victory, Kan repeated his promise to honour a May agreement to relocate a Marine air base on Okinawa, which Ozawa had pledged to renegotiate because of intense opposition on the island.

Political experts called the contest a battle of political style rather than policy substance. Ozawa, a skilled strategist who engineered the Democrats' historic election victory last year, vowed to be a stronger and more assertive prime minister, echoing the public perception that Kan had failed to show decisive leadership.

For his part, Kan hammered at Ozawa's image as an old-school backroom operator, saying it was time for Japan to create a cleaner and more open political system.

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