

History made: Tokyo elects Yuriko Koike as its first woman Governor

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Veteran politician Yuriko Koike, a former defense minister and environment minister of Japan, was on Sunday elected the first woman Governor of Tokyo.

Yuriko Koike

The 64-year-old former TV anchorwoman defeated her nearest rival Hiroya Masuda, who was backed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), by over 70,000 votes.

Shortly after she was declared the winner, Koike addressed supporters in the sprawling metropolis of 13.6 million people.

“I will lead Tokyo politics in an unprecedented manner, a Tokyo you have never seen,” Koike, who ran as an independent candidate, said.

The election, contested by a record field of 21 candidates, was called after previous Governor Yoichi Masuzoe resigned over a financial scandal.

Playing down her achievement of becoming the capital’s first woman Governor in a male-dominated society, she said, “I will push female-friendly policies so that both women and men can shine in Tokyo – the largest city in the world.”

A key task for Koike will be smoothing the city’s troubled road to the 2020 Olympics, hit by a series of embarrassing scandals and soaring costs.

Koike’s four-year term will extend until just after the Summer Games start and her performance in the run-up will be closely watched.

Despite the high number of candidates, the Tokyo race was seen as a three-way contest between Koike and two men -- former prefectural Governor Hiroya Masuda and prominent television journalist Shuntaro Torigoe.

Koike, long a fixture in Japanese media and politics, speaks fluent English and Arabic. She graduated from Cairo University in 1976 in sociology and worked as an Arabic interpreter before going into journalism. In 1978, she interviewed then-Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and Palestine Liberation Organisation chairman Yasser Arafat for a Japanese broadcaster.

She has compared herself to Hillary Clinton and was once seen as having the best chance to be Japan’s first female prime minister. But she was defeated when running in 2008 for leadership of the LDP.