
EXPLAINER: HOW DOES A LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE TO A CONSERVATIVE UK PRIME MINISTER WORK?

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LONDON (Reuters) - Prime Minister Theresa Mays position as leader of the Conservative Party - and consequently her premiership - is under threat after Brexit minister Dominic Raab resigned in protest at her proposed exit deal with the European Union.

Below is an explanation of how May could face a leadership challenge under Conservative Party rules:

- WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN FOR THERE TO BE A LEADERSHIP CONTEST?

A challenge is triggered if 15 percent of the Conservative members of parliament (MPs) write letters demanding a confidence vote to the chairman of the party's 1922 Committee, which represents those lawmakers who have no government jobs.

The Conservatives have 315 MPs, so 48 would need to write such letters for a vote to be called.

- COULD THIS HAPPEN TO MAY?

Some eurosceptic MPs have publicly said they have submitted such letters in protest at her Brexit negotiating strategy. The number voicing concern rose after the publication of a draft withdrawal agreement on Wednesday and Raabs resignation on Thursday.

However, the 1922 Committees chairman, Graham Brady, is the only person who knows how many have actually submitted letters, including those who have written to him confidentially.

Last month, Brady was reported as saying that some MPs claim to have submitted letters when, in fact, they have not.

- WHAT HAPPENS DURING A CONFIDENCE VOTE?

All Conservative MPs can vote for or against their leader. If May wins, she remains in office and cannot be challenged again for 12 months. If she loses, she must resign and is barred from standing in the leadership election that follows.

- HOW QUICKLY CAN A VOTE TAKE PLACE?

Under Conservative rules, the vote is held as soon as possible, on a date decided by the 1922 Committee chairman in consultation with the party leader.

The last no-confidence vote against a Conservative leader, when the party was in opposition in 2003, was held the day after the Committee chairman announced he had received enough letters.

- WHAT HAPPENS IF MAY LOSES?

There will be a leadership contest to decide her replacement. Her replacement will become prime minister, but a general election will not automatically be triggered.

If several candidates come forward, a secret vote is held among Conservative MPs to whittle down the field. The candidate with the fewest votes is removed and Conservative lawmakers vote again. The process is repeated, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, until only two candidates remain.

These two candidates are then put to a postal ballot of the wider Conservative Party membership. Participants need to have been party members for more than three months.

When David Cameron decided to step down as prime minister and Conservative leader after the EU referendum in 2016, five candidates came forward. The field was narrowed to May and then-junior minister Andrea Leadsom, but she pulled out before members voted, leaving May to become leader unopposed.

The list of possible replacements is long, but there is no clear frontrunner. Many of those expected to run used the Conservative Party's annual conference last month to set out their platform and priorities for any leadership bid.

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