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Kishida on the ballot as by-election campaigns start

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's survival may depend on the outcome of a single by-election as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will contest only one of three on 28 April.
- The Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and Ishin no Kai will face off in two races as they battle over who will be the top opposition party.

The official campaign period for three by-elections that will be held on Sunday, 28 April began on Tuesday, 16 April. With Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's approval ratings still at their record lows, members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have already signaled that the by-elections are a critical test of the prime minister's staying power. But the reality is that the test is not three by-elections but one. The LDP was unable to select nominees for two of the three races, meaning that Kishida's fate could come down to a single race, the by-election in Shimane-1.

The fact that the LDP was unable to nominate candidates in two of three races – and that the nominating process in the high-profile Tokyo by-election was such a fiasco – is already a sign that Kishida's control of the party may already be slipping. This process will only accelerate if the LDP cannot prevail in Shimane. LDP members have already warned that if the LDP cannot win in Shimane, the prime minister may not only find it difficult to seek a new term as LDP leader in September but could also face pressure to resign beforehand. It could also make it virtually impossible for Kishida to play the snap election card before the LDP leadership election, as the ruling coalition would rebel at the prospect of following Kishida into a national campaign.

The by-elections could also have implications for the future of the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP). CDP leader Izumi Kenta's term also ends in September, and if the leading opposition party, which has sought to capitalize on the LDP's scandal to gain in the polls, cannot win at least two by-elections, Izumi's position could be vulnerable.

The outlook for the three by-elections follows below.

Shimane-1

In Shimane, the LDP and Kōmeitō have nominated **Nishikori Norimasa**, a former finance ministry official for the seat vacated by the death of Hosoda Hiroyuki, who was a leader of the scandal-plagued Seiwa-kai before the late Abe Shinzō. Nishikori will face off against the Constitutional Democratic Party's (CDP) **Kamei Akiko**, a former member of the lower house, daughter of former lawmaker and cabinet minister Kamei Hisaoki and descendant of a political family stretching back into the nineteenth century.

On the one hand, during the late Hosoda's career, the LDP won Shimane-1 in every election since the district was created following the 1994 electoral reform. On the other hand, Nishikori began the campaign having to apologize for the corruption scandal that has rocked the LDP.

The campaign will not necessarily be simply a referendum on Kishida and the LDP; local considerations, including the possible restart of the no. 2 reactor at the Shimane Nuclear Power Plant, could also influence the race. Nevertheless, as the only race featuring a head-to-head contest between the ruling parties and the leading opposition party, it will be the focal point for high-profile politicians and media attention over the next ten days.

Nagasaki-3

The stakes in the Nagasaki-3 by-election may not be as high as in Shimane-1, but it is not without broader national implications, as it pits the CDP's **Yamada Katsuhiko** against Ishin no Kai's **Inoue Shōichirō**. The conservative populist Ishin no Kai is determined to supplant the CDP as the largest opposition party and demonstrate that it can compete outside of its stronghold in the Kansai region of Honshu. Yamada has the advantage of incumbency: in 2021 he lost by less than two percentage points to Tanigawa Yaichi, the LDP lawmaker who vacated the constituency after he was indicted in January for his part in the Abe faction's kickback scheme, a strong enough performance to be revived through proportional representation. While it is unclear how LDP supporters will break in the constituency, Yamada likely enters the race as the favorite. If Ishin no Kai cannot pick up Nagasaki-3, it could lead to questioning regarding the party's ability to broaden its support nationally in a general election.

Tokyo-15

The Tokyo-15 by-election is the most chaotic of the three races. The LDP and Kōmeitō are not only not fielding a candidate, they also abandoned plans to endorse author and journalist **Ototake Hirotada**, an independent running with the support of Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko and her Tokyoites First Party. Ototake is one of nine candidates running for the seat, including local assemblywoman **Sakai Natsumi** (CDP); **Akimoto Tsukasa**, a former LDP lawmaker arrested for taking bribes from a Chinese gambling operator who is running as an independent; **Sudō Genki**, a former mixed martial artist elected to the upper house as a CDP candidate in 2019 now serving (and running) as an independent; **Kanazawa Yui**, an Ishin no Kai candidate who finished a distant third in the district in the 2021 general election; and **Yoshikawa Rina**, a nurse running as a candidate for the right-wing populist Sanseitō. The race also features three other minor independent candidates. The large field and the absence of a formal ruling coalition candidate make this race especially difficult to predict; the district also has a history of alternating between the LDP and non-LDP candidates. With Koike's backing Ototake – whose candidacy has been dogged by his history of marital infidelity – it will be a test of her electoral clout ahead of the Tokyo gubernatorial election in July. Meanwhile, if the CDP's Sakai were to prevail despite the crowded field it would be a sign of the party's strength coming out of the by-elections, which could also influence the LDP's snap election calculus.

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