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LDP paralyzed as opposition threat grows

Key takeaways

- The Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) swept all three by-elections, including the head-to-head contest with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Shimane.
- The LDP and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio face a worsening crisis of public confidence with no easy solution – and now have to contend with an energized opposition.
- A snap election is unlikely before September, setting both ruling and opposition parties up for months of battling for advantage ahead of a general election likely to be called after the LDP's leadership election.

The 28 April by-elections in Shimane-1, Tokyo-15, and Nagasaki-3 went as well as possible for the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), which not only swept the three races but won by convincing margins in the head-to-head races against the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Shimane and Ishin no Kai in Nagasaki. The LDP had low expectations heading into the elections – not least because it was only able to field a candidate in Shimane and failed to find a candidate to endorse in Tokyo – but the party's poor performance will still deepen the sense of crisis within the LDP and imperil the premiership of Kishida Fumio in the months leading up to the party leadership election in September.

The LDP in crisis

The issue is that the Kishida and the LDP are increasingly at an impasse, which will only deepen following the by-elections. Kishida has by no means signaled that he is thinking of bowing out of the leadership contest, and has continued to search for ways to reverse the decline in his public standing, whether through economic policy (wage

increases and the tax cut that will take effect on 1 June), foreign policy (his official visit to the United States), or political reform (removing Abe faction members from his government, punishing the leaders of the Abe faction). He has made little secret of his determination to call a snap election before September if possible, since, if the LDP were to outperform expectations, a snap election could cement Kishida's chances of winning another leadership term. A snap election – or the threat of a snap election – is also a useful tool for keeping LDP backbenchers in line, particularly as Kishida tries to convince reluctant party members to embrace a more expansive proposal for political finance reform.

The LDP, however, is unenthusiastic about the prospects of contesting a general election under Kishida's leadership – a feeling reinforced by the Shimane-1 by-election, which suggested that the prime minister's brand is as much a problem as the party's. At the same time, the LDP has by no means coalesced around an alternative to the prime minister, making it harder for the party to mobilize to replace him. Former prime minister Suga Yoshihide may want to push Kishida out – perhaps getting revenge for the role Kishida played in unseating him in 2021 – but has not yet identified a standard bearer who could step in to the leadership. Asō Tarō, former prime minister, LDP vice president, and leader of its only surviving faction, may be the closest thing to a kingmaker remaining in the party, but he has not signaled that he is prepared to abandon Kishida. LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu may aspire to the leadership, but his stature has also been severely weakened by the kickbacks scandal. It is entirely unclear who the nearly 100 members of the former Abe faction will support for the leadership. Or, for that matter, how the 141 LDP members of the lower house who have been elected four times or fewer – generally regarded as more vulnerable than more established incumbents – are thinking about the party's leadership. There may be an unspoken preference within the party for an open race in September from which a choice broadly acceptable to both the LDP's supporters and the broader public can emerge.

The CDP rises

Of course, following the by-elections, even Kishida is unlikely to be enthusiastic about a general election without clear signs that the public is warming to his leadership again. Before Sunday's vote, Kihara Seiji, an acting LDP secretary-general and key adviser to the prime minister, warned that the idea of a change of ruling party was “not absurd” in the present circumstances. The by-elections showed that the LDP's scandals – including both the kickbacks scandal and the Unification Church scandal – have led voters, particularly independent voters, to reconsider their hostility to the center-left opposition, resulting in the CDP's performing particularly well among unaffiliated voters in the Shimane-1 by-election. The CDP's victories over Ishin no Kai candidates in Nagasaki and Tokyo also suggest that the CDP is still the leading nationwide opposition party. Although Ishin no Kai has stated that its goal is to supplant the CDP as the largest opposition group, the party clearly still struggles to recruit quality candidates and

compete in single-member constituencies outside of its stronghold in Osaka and the broader Kansai region.

The CDP is not without problems, which could limit its ability to win an outright victory in a general election. If Ishin no Kai does not reconsider its strategy after the by-elections, CDP candidates could be running against Ishin no Kai as well as ruling party candidates in otherwise winnable constituencies, making it more difficult for the CDP to win a majority. The party will also have to determine the extent of its coordination with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which can similarly affect the degree to which the opposition vote is divided in marginal seats. Every candidate the CDP can convince the JCP to withdraw improves its chances of picking up seats, but if the center-left party coordinates too closely with the JCP it can trigger backlash from other partners, including organized labor and center or center-right opposition parties like Ishin no Kai or the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), which resent the JCP. CDP leader Izumi Kenta will still have to juggle these competing imperatives during the run-up to a general election.

It is also unclear whether the CDP will be able to convince more voters to show up to vote against the LDP in a general election. The LDP has profited from historically low turnout to win in general elections since 2012, since low turnout amplified the organized votes of the LDP and its coalition partner Kōmeitō. For the opposition to threaten the ruling coalition's majority, it needs to convince voters dissatisfied with the LDP to turn out to vote for opposition candidates. Record-low turnout in the three by-elections does not necessarily mean that voters will also stay home for a general election – with no ruling party candidates in two of the three races and a confusing nine-candidate field in Tokyo it may not be surprising that turnout was low – but the CDP still has to mobilize independent voters to an extent that the Democratic Party of Japan and its successor parties (including the CDP) have been unable to do since 2009.

The by-elections suggest that the LDP may also face a nascent threat to its right. The Tokyo-15 by-election was the first to feature a candidate from the Conservative Party of Japan (CPJ), a newly formed right-wing party headed by author Hyakuta Naoki, which aims to appeal to conservatives disaffected with the post-Abe LDP. CPJ candidate Iiyama Akari finished a distant fourth, but she managed to surpass Ototake Hirotsugu, the hand-picked candidate of Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko, who the LDP had considered endorsing. In a close general election, the presence of a right-wing party seeking to peel off disgruntled LDP voters could complicate the LDP's position.

What next

The Japanese political system will be paused for the next week as the country marks the Golden Week holidays and Kishida travels to France, Brazil, and Paraguay. But when he returns, the temperature will be turned up in the debate over political reform legislation, as the LDP and Kōmeitō debate the provisions of legislation that Kishida has

said he wants to pass before the parliamentary session ends on 23 June. Whether the prime minister can convince his party to take the legislation more seriously – the party stalled to produce a proposal of its own, and its initial proposal is considerably more modest than both Kishida and Kōmeitō are seeking – will be a substantial measure of Kishida's authority following the by-elections; it may entail extending the Diet session to show his resolve. Demonstrating the government's seriousness on political reform is a necessary (albeit insufficient) first step for Kishida to reverse his fortunes.

Meanwhile, opposition parties will continue to turn up the pressure on the kickbacks scandal, pressing for more accountability regarding the facts of the scheme as well as pushing for more ambitious political finance reform legislation than either member of the ruling coalition is considering at this time. Both CDP and Ishin no Kai leaders have said that the time for a general election is approaching and have publicly speculated about the timing of a no-confidence motion in the lower house, which, if approved, would dissolve the chamber and force an election. The opposition may try to convince ruling party lawmakers to abstain or absent themselves from a no-confidence vote, but it is unlikely that they will be able to find the roughly 115 ruling party lawmakers needed to pass (or allow the opposition to pass) a no-confidence motion.

Therefore, barring a snap election in June, both government and opposition parties will likely face a long summer of shadow campaigning. The LDP's would-be leaders will jockey for position with party bosses and nervous backbenchers; Kishida will try to demonstrate his fitness to govern compared with any of the possible alternatives; and Izumi, facing a party leadership election of his own in September, will try to continue to rouse public anger, keep his party unified, and find a way to reduce competition among opposition candidates in the eventual general election. Once the LDP leadership contest is concluded, however, it is highly likely that the prime minister – whether Kishida or a successor – will seek a new mandate from the public in the final months of the year.

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