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Despite punishments, Kishida is still at risk

Key takeaways

- The LDP disciplined 39 lawmakers in the ongoing kickback scandal.
- The punishments have done little to change public attitudes and discontent within the LDP is growing.
- The 28 April by-elections may be Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's last chance to change the narrative.

On Thursday, 4 April, the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) disciplinary committee, after a lengthy review, **handed down punishments to 39 lawmakers** implicated in schemes managed mainly by the former Abe and Nikai factions to skim off excess donations and pass it to lawmakers off the books. By punishing lawmakers – including seven former leaders of the Abe faction – Prime Minister Kishida Fumio is **hoping move beyond a scandal** that has roiled the party and damaged both the prime minister's and the LDP's public support for four months.

But the punishments mark the **transition to a new phase of the scandal instead of signaling the beginning of the end**. Whereas the first phase – which began with reports in December that LDP factions were under investigation – was focused primarily on uncovering the facts of the factional kickback schemes and apportioning blame, the next phase will **focus attention on how Kishida has responded** and whether his political reform initiatives can introduce genuine change.

The upshot is that **Kishida's position remains highly tenuous**. His approval ratings are unlikely to recover; he still faces a crucial test in the 28 April by-elections (only one of which is being contested by an LDP candidate); and there is significant resistance to his calling a snap election, his most powerful weapon for resetting his situation. The

likelihood that Kishida will face a contested leadership election in September – or pressure to not seek a new term – remains high.

Growing discontent inside and outside the LDP

The immediate impact of the disciplinary actions has been to create new sources of conflict. Both lawmakers and the media have questioned the timing of the punishments, the process, and the outcome, which seem particularly opportunistic for the prime minister.

The LDP delivers its punishments

How the Abe faction fared

Recommendation to leave

Less than expulsion, but party will withhold nomination, remove access to PR list



Shionoya Ryū
Abe faction chairman



Sekō Hiroshige
Abe faction upper house chairman

Party membership suspended

Third-most severe: not allowed to run or vote in party elections, would have to run without party endorsement if general election were held



Shimomura Hakubun
Former education minister (1yr)



Nishimura Yasutoshi
Former METI minister (1yr)



Takagi Tsuyoshi
Former reconstruction minister (6 mos)

Suspension from party offices

Sixth-most severe; anywhere from 6 months to 1 year; 17 members – 14 from the Abe faction – received this punishment, including leading Abe faction figures:



Hagluda Kōichi
Former LDP policy chief



Matsuno Hirokazu
Former chief cabinet secretary

Formal reprimand

The second-least severe punishment; 17 members total all from the Abe faction



Most importantly for Kishida, the public seems underwhelmed by the punishments. The first major polling conducted after the decisions suggests that sizable majorities were dissatisfied the disciplinary committee's decisions, including its decision to excuse Kishida himself. Meanwhile, Kishida's approval and disapproval ratings remain at record levels, and the LDP's support is below 30%.

Against this backdrop, Kishida also must contend with discontent within the party. Not surprisingly, the former Abe faction – five former leaders of which received among the most severe punishments levied – is most aggrieved. Shionoya Ryū, former faction

chairman, responded to the committee's decision to advise him to leave the party – the second-most severe punishment it could issue – by calling the process as “dictatorial” and unfair, by questioning why Kishida escaped punishment despite his own faction's being under investigation, and by considering a request for a re-investigation by the committee. Sekō Hiroshige, the chairman of the Abe faction and its upper house chairman respectively, was also asked to leave the party and complied but may be weighing a switch from his upper house seat in Wakayama prefecture to a lower house,

which could complicate the party's plans to replace the retiring Nikai Toshihirō (who escaped punishment by announcing his plans to retire).

Ultimately the Abe faction is responsible for what has befallen it and its leaders. At the same time, however, the former faction's membership numbered nearly 100 and its support was integral to Kishida's victory in 2021. It may no longer be able to elect one of its own as party leader – though a younger member, Fukuda Tatsuo, could be dark horse candidate – but its former members may nevertheless still be able to influence events. The party's choice of punishments may fuel their sense of anger towards Kishida and could be a factor if he tries to move towards a snap election before the LDP leadership election.

The battle over political reform

Meanwhile, the scandal will continue to influence Kishida's outlook because the Diet will now take up the question of political fundraising reform to deter lawmakers from engaging in similar practices in the future. The ruling and opposition parties have agreed to stand up special committees on political reform in both houses, which will eventually take up a bill that will be drafted by the LDP and its junior coalition partner Kōmeitō.

But this process will not only give the opposition parties ample opportunities to question Kishida's handling of the scandal. It could also produce friction between the LDP and Kōmeitō. The junior partner has been highly critical of the LDP and has repeatedly pressed the LDP to take more active measures to regain public trust, without which it will oppose a snap election. There are gaps between the parties on reform legislation – although Kishida may be leaning more to Kōmeitō's position – which could frustrate efforts to convince the public that the LDP is truly committed to reform.

What's next

The situation will be on hold while Kishida is in the United States on a state visit. When he returns on 14 April, the focus will shift to the three by-elections that will be held on 28 April. LDP lawmakers have already suggested that if the LDP loses – and the party itself is only contesting one of the three, in Shimane prefecture's first district – it could trigger a movement to unseat Kishida in the coming months.

At the very least, it will make it difficult for Kishida to make a credible threat to call a snap election before the party election in September. On 5 April, Kishida hinted that he might be thinking about an election when, in response to parliamentary questioning, he said it

would be up to the people to determine his responsibility for the scandal. But if he cannot show that the people are with him, few members of the ruling coalition will be eager to go the public.

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