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Kishida increasingly isolated even as reform bill passes

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Kishida Fumio achieved an important goal with the passage of the LDP's political reform legislation, but it is unlikely to improve his position.
- The prime minister has seen his support among the general public, the parliamentary Liberal Democratic Party, and the LDP's grassroots supporters erode, reducing the likelihood of a second term as party leader.

The House of Councillors passed legislation revising the Political Funds Control Act on Wednesday, 19 June, ensuring that Prime Minister Kishida Fumio accomplished his most urgent political goal before the parliamentary session was scheduled to end on 23 June. But the legislation's passage has been overshadowed by growing mobilization among possible opponents to Kishida, threatening his chances of securing a second term at the head of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). As a result, the political reform bill, which was supposed to be critical for restoring public trust in the LDP and Kishida,

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will do little to change the narrative that, as Ishin no Kai leader Baba Nobuyuki said in a party leaders' debate Wednesday, the Kishida government is a "spent force."

Kishida's support has eroded on every leg of the "tripod" that sustains a prime minister. After a brief period when it appeared that **his government's approval ratings** had at least stabilized, they have once again fallen in virtually every opinion poll, with his government's disapproval continuing to climb. Perhaps even more seriously, the LDP's approval ratings have continued to plunge, falling below 20% in the *Asahi Shimbun's* latest poll for the first time dating back to 2001, excluding the party's time in opposition from 2009-2012. The same poll found that the LDP has only a five-point lead over the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) in voting intentions for the proportional representation ballot in the next general election. The public is virtually unanimous in its beliefs that Kishida has mishandled the response to the kickbacks scandal and that the LDP is unreformed.

The LDP's declining support – as well as the party's defeats in national by-elections and local elections – has fueled anti-Kishida activities among **LDP lawmakers**, as the party seeks to move on from a leader who they fear will be unable to prevail in a general election. The rift between Kishida and Asō Tarō, previously mentioned [here](#), has widened, with Asō openly criticizing the prime minister's handling of the scandal at a fundraiser for Asō faction member Saitō Hiroaki (who in his own remarks suggested that it might be time for a leadership change). Although Kishida dined with Asō on 18 June, it is too soon to say that Kishida can still rely on his backing in the leadership election. As the head of the last remaining faction, Asō will wield tremendous power in an election that will otherwise feature more fluid voting blocs. Meanwhile, some of the most likely contenders to run in a leadership election have been jockeying for position within the party and with the public. Ishiba Shigeru, a possible reformist candidate, has been a fixture in the media and has been gathering allies to him through a study group, which held its most recent meeting on Wednesday. LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu has met with Asō several times and on Wednesday met with former prime minister Suga Yoshihide, an informal leader of anti-Kishida forces.

Growing opposition to Kishida from the **LDP's local chapters** has likely also encouraged lawmakers to prepare for a post-Kishida leadership contest. There have been vocal calls for Kishida to take responsibility for the party's crisis at local party conventions and meetings between national party officials and grassroots supporters in recent weeks, which suggests that the party's dues-paying members, whose votes will determine the distribution of half the votes in the first round of the leadership election, have soured on the prime minister.

The end of the parliamentary session is unlikely to give much relief to Kishida. Instead, as lawmakers return to their constituencies, they will likely hear more of the electorate's anger with Kishida's leadership, which could result in louder and steadier calls for Kishida to bow out from the leadership race and clear the way for an open contest –

which the would-be contenders will be quick to exploit. The upshot is that whereas it once seemed that Kishida might be protected by the lack of an obvious alternative to his leadership, neither LDP supporters nor the public as a whole seem bothered by the prospect of an open, contested leadership contest. There is a growing appetite for change at the most basic level – tossing out an unpopular incumbent – and then giving other players an opportunity to fix the LDP's crisis.

Whether a leadership change will be sufficient to regain the public's trust is another question, one that will be central to the shadow leadership campaign that will unfold during the months leading up to the LDP's vote.