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The clock is ticking on Ishiba's premiership

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru is secure for the moment, but the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) could be looking to replace him in 2025, before upper house elections.
- The prime minister's position is vulnerable in large part because he lacks all of the sources of power that have bolstered previous prime ministers.

During my week in Tokyo, the question of how long Ishiba Shigeru will survive as prime minister was persistently discussed. Despite having maneuvered around the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) defeat in the 27 October general election, the future of the Ishiba government is an open question.

The main driver is the House of Councillors elections that will be held in the summer of 2025. The LDP and Kōmeitō currently hold 140 seats in the 248-seat chamber; with half of the house up for reelection next year, the ruling parties will have to win at least 51 seats to add to their 74 seats not up for reelection to preserve a majority. If they fail, the government would lack a majority in both houses, a dramatic blow to its ability to manage the legislative process.

At this point, the main question is whether the LDP replaces Ishiba before the upper house elections – to improve the ruling coalition's chances of preserving their majority – or whether Ishiba stays on to lead the LDP's campaign, with his survival depending on whether the ruling coalition can stave off defeat. With Ishiba having to manage [negotiations](#) with the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) and shepherd both a supplemental budget and the FY2025 budget through the House of Representatives between now and the end of March – as well as oversee another political reform debate

within the LDP as well as with Kōmeitō, the DPFP, and other parties – there appears to be little desire within the LDP to unseat Ishiba before these tasks are accomplished.

However, once the second half of the ordinary session of the Diet begins in April and as the upper house elections (and Tokyo metropolitan assembly elections) draw closer, Ishiba could face heightened pressure to step down and allow the LDP to select a new leader to head up the party's upper house campaign. Several interlocutors recalled the replacement of the highly unpopular Mori Yoshirō with Koizumi Junichirō in 2001 as an example of how this might unfold, though it may be difficult for the party to improve its electoral fortunes merely by changing leaders.

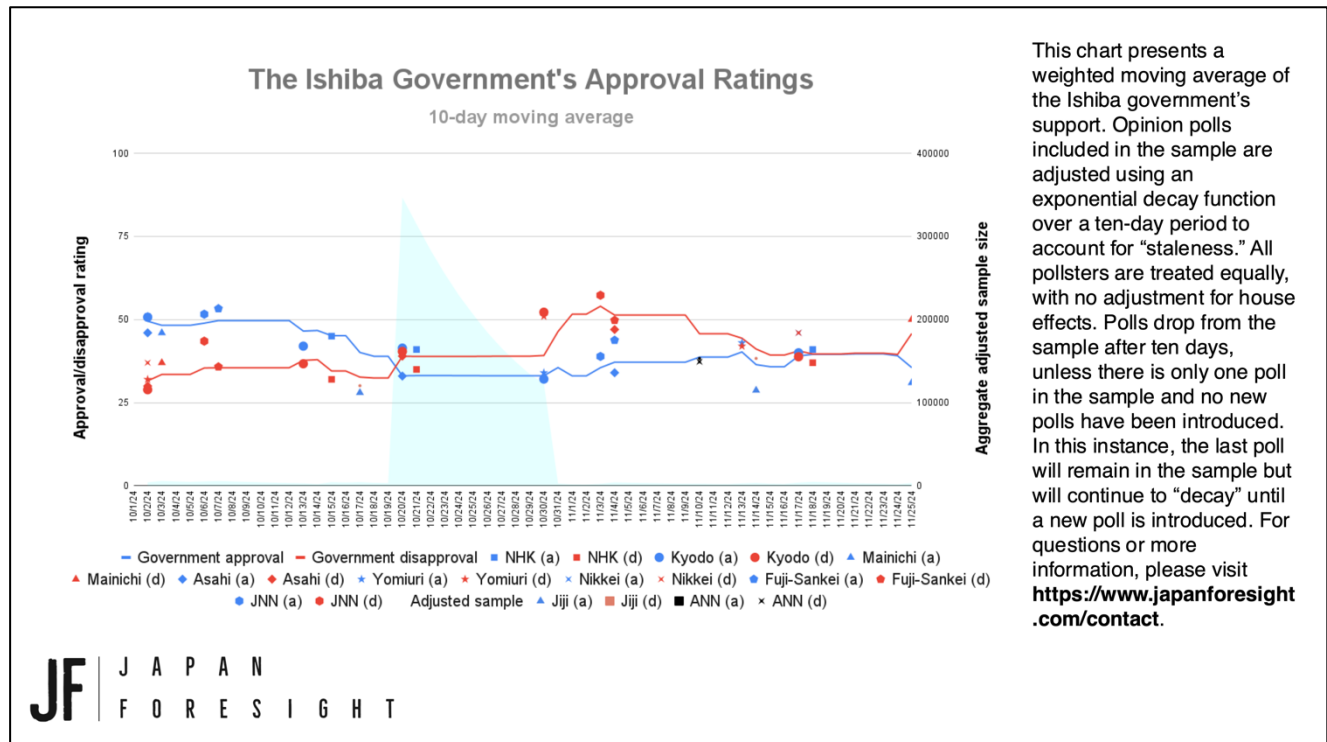
Ishiba's weak position

Ishiba's fundamental problem is that he has none of the sources of power that his predecessors have used to extend their tenures, starting with a **parliamentary majority** that enables him to control the budget and legislative processes. The absence of a parliamentary majority could also leave Ishiba vulnerable to a no-confidence motion at a time of Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) leader Noda Yoshihiko's choosing. While negotiations with the DPFP have been effective thus far, there remain issues between the ruling parties and the DPFP and the latter, if dissatisfied with the Ishiba government and pressured by its organized labor backers, could cooperate with the CDP on a no-confidence motion in 2025. While prime ministers have benefited from a **weak, divided opposition** in the past, the opposition, while still divided, is more popular and more institutionally powerful – between the DPFP's role as a "swing vote" and the CDP's control of the lower house budget committee and other committees – than before, at Ishiba's expense.

Meanwhile, having won the LDP's leadership in September by a slender margin in part due to an anti-Takaichi vote, he lacks a **broad base of support** within the party itself. While he may continue to enjoy the support of his most powerful backers – former prime ministers Kishida Fumio and Suga Yoshihide and their supporters – he could lose some of his more marginal supporters. It would take only 104 LDP lawmakers to call for a meeting of all lawmakers that could oust him, a potential threat hanging over the prime minister. For now, his rival Takaichi Sanae and others have signaled that they are putting party unity first, but they are unlikely to maintain this stance indefinitely. It is not obvious who would replace Ishiba if he were unseated, though in that event party leaders may try to dampen potential conflict.

Third, Ishiba has continued to struggle to win **public support**. Although the Ishiba government's approval ratings improved slightly in November, its net average approval was at best zero and after a new poll it has fallen to -10 percentage points. Not only is the Ishiba government's support low, but the LDP's support also remains below historic norms, while both the CDP and the DPFP have enjoyed higher support. Although the public does not necessarily want Ishiba removed – polls suggest that pluralities prefer

that he stay on – without the public behind his government, it will be easier for anti-Ishiba forces to organize a bid to oust him. In JAPAN FORESIGHT’s ten-day moving average, as of 25 November, the Ishiba government’s approval is at 35.54 percent and its disapproval is at 45.78 percent.



Finally, Ishiba has thus far failed to demonstrate **international leadership**. While foreign policy may not be the deciding factor in elections, it can strengthen a prime minister’s position within the ruling coalition and with the public more broadly. However, Ishiba has struggled to find his footing. Viral videos of Ishiba’s conduct at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Peru – he was recorded failing to stand while shaking hands with other leaders and looking at his phone while other leaders talked – and his absence from the APEC leaders group photo have contributed to a popular narrative that the prime minister is not up to the job. More seriously, his inability to secure a meeting with US President-elect Donald Trump – a request Trump’s team denied, citing the Logan Act, although the president-elect has met with Argentine President Javier Milei and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary-General Mark Rutte – has drawn unfavorable comparisons with the late Abe Shinzō from the LDP’s right. The right-wing press has also characterized Ishiba’s South America trip as “national humiliation diplomacy.”

The potential for more turbulence

As suggested above, if Ishiba is unable to stabilize his government, his premiership will be vulnerable to challenges from within the party as well as from the House of Representatives in the form of a no-confidence motion. If the opposition were to pass a

no-confidence motion during the ordinary session of the Diet in 2025, it could result in a chaotic double (simultaneous lower and upper house) or triple (lower and upper house as well as the Tokyo metropolitan assembly) elections in July.

Even without a snap election timed to coincide with the upper house elections, if the LDP and Kōmeitō lose their majority, it would surely end Ishiba's government – if he survives until the campaign – but could also be a mortal blow to his successor. With the ruling parties lacking majorities in both houses, it could give a new impetus to efforts to forge a coalition government that could command majorities in both houses, perhaps led by Noda or DPFP leader Tamaki Yūichirō.

There is a final factor in the LDP's uneasiness. In the weeks since the general election, established parties have been stunned by the success of social media-fueled campaigns in local elections, most notably in the gubernatorial election in Hyōgo prefecture, where former governor Saitō Motohiko, who resigned the governorship after the prefectural legislature unanimously passed a no-confidence motion amidst troubling reports of Saitō's bullying of civil servants, took back the governorship thanks to a surge of young voters. LDP lawmakers suggest that this trend, which started with Tokyo's gubernatorial [election](#) in July and has contributed to the DPFP's surging popularity, could augur a major defeat for the LDP in upper house elections, elections that voters have historically used to punish the ruling party. The fear of a social media-driven backlash to the LDP could grow in the coming months, contributing to a feeling of desperation that leads the party to replace its leader.

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