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The Liberal Democratic Party faces a deepening crisis

Key takeaways

- With Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru refusing to resign from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership and the premiership, he faces a growing movement to remove him from office.
- While Ishiba could still quit voluntarily in the coming days, his defiance means that the LDP could invoke emergency measures for removing a leader for the first time.
- The longer that Ishiba stays as intra-party criticism grows, the greater the likelihood that this crisis triggers an extreme outcome, whether fracturing the party or prompting a no-confidence motion or snap election that produces a change of government.

In our pre-election decision tree laying out the possible scenarios that could follow the upper house election, we [identified](#) a low probability but high-impact scenario in which the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Kōmeitō coalition loses its upper house majority but Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru refuses to resign to take responsibility for the defeat. We described this scenario as “Japan faces a major political crisis as Ishiba likely faces intra-party rebellion, threat of no-confidence motion.”

With Ishiba heading into the weekend defiantly [refusing](#) to step down from the LDP’s leadership and the premiership, **it appears that the political crisis has arrived.**

The LDP is in the unusual situation of having a leader who has suffered a major electoral defeat but is losing the confidence of the party and is refusing to quit voluntarily. The party is approaching a critical moment. On Monday, 28 July, the party’s 297 lawmakers will hold a discussion session to analyze the ruling coalition’s electoral defeat, giving Ishiba’s critics an opportunity to confront him directly and press for him to

resign, though the meeting will not have any decision-making authority to vote directly on his position.

If he does not, **he faces an increasingly organized and vocal rebellion against his staying in power.** Most importantly, they have taken significant steps forward to invoking the first of two party mechanisms for removing a leader, namely one third of the lawmakers can call for a plenary meeting of lawmakers that can make binding decisions on emergency resolutions with a simple majority vote. **An effort organized by younger lawmakers from the former Motegi faction has cleared the 99 votes it would need to call for a plenary session,** and is working to assemble a majority, which would signal that Ishiba could not survive a plenary session. The party would have to convene a plenary meeting of lawmakers within seven days of the submission of a petition calling for a meeting, which could consider a resolution to remove Ishiba as party leader. Technically Ishiba could continue to serve as prime minister even if he were ousted as party leader, though it is unthinkable that Ishiba would try to hold on to the premiership in defiance of his party.

The anti-Ishiba movement can use a separate mechanism – introduced after Mori Yoshirō's refusal to resign in 2001 – that allows a majority of lawmakers plus representatives of the 47 prefectural chapters to force an early leadership election, essentially a recall vote for the sitting party leader. **Notably, the party has never had to use either method of removing a leader, demonstrating the degree to which the party is in uncharted territory** with a rebellious movement having secured enough votes to force a meeting to consider the party leader's fate.

Beyond the petition to convene a plenary meeting, the signs of rebellion are widespread. Eight prefectural chapters have formally petitioned for Ishiba's removal, as have the youth divisions of two more prefectural chapters and the national party's youth division, representing lawmakers under 45. Ishiba is not entirely friendless – a hashtag "Don't resign Ishiba" has trended on social media and demonstrators rallied outside the prime minister's residence in support of Ishiba on 25 July, largely because they fear that if Ishiba leaves the LDP will move rightward – but the prime minister's support has been more conspicuous outside the party than inside it. Indeed, opposition party leaders have voiced their opposition to replacing Ishiba, which has not gone unnoticed by some of Ishiba's conservative opponents.

What happens next

There is not a perfect analogue for this situation. For example, Abe Shinzō defied calls to resign in 2007 but ultimately resigned due to poor health. The better analogue might be Mori's exit in 2001, which came only after surviving an intra-party rebellion, an external crisis with the United States, and his approval ratings falling below 10%. But the party that faced the Mori crisis was a different party, with strong factions that structured and channeled intra-party competition and conflict.

What makes the current crisis unique is that it is occurring in a post-factional landscape. The factions are not entirely gone – Asō Tarō still sits at the head of a his 43-member-strong faction, and the party's other dismantled factions still have some gravitational pull on their former members – but they no longer have the power to contain and channel discontent or organize leadership challenges. Without the factions, party elders no longer have the same capacity to impose order on the LDP. It is revealing that the message coming out of Ishiba's 23 July meeting with Asō and former prime ministers Kishida Fumio and Suga Yoshihide was the importance of party unity, a message that was promptly ignored by Ishiba and his opponents, with the former restating his determination to stay in office and the latter stepping up efforts to gather support for invoking the party's mechanisms for removing a leader.

At this point, **the most benign outcome for the LDP is that following Monday's meeting, Ishiba decides that he will leave in an orderly fashion**, clearing the way for a leadership election in the coming weeks. The precise timing is somewhat complicated by the political calendar in August; the LDP may not want Ishiba to quit before the extraordinary session of the Diet that will open on 1 August to elect officers for the upper house and will likely sit through 5 August, since the opposition parties could try to remove Ishiba from the premiership if he has already announced his intention to resign but the LDP has not selected a successor. As noted earlier this week, Ishiba may also want to stay on for the memorial ceremonies marking the eightieth anniversaries of the atomic bombings and the end of World War II, as well as to host the Tokyo International Conference on African Development from 20-22 August. Nevertheless, despite this calendar, Ishiba could still signal – as initially reported – that he will resign sometime in August.

It is possible, however, that Ishiba could remain defiant even after the meeting, determined to call his opponents' bluff and force them to secure the votes needed to remove him. If the anti-Ishiba movement does have the votes – and the more Ishiba digs in, the easier it might be for the rebels to secure support – Ishiba would just be delaying the inevitable, and the party would move to a leadership election.

The bigger risk is if the rebels do not have the votes or if Ishiba, LDP Secretary-General Moriyama Hiroshi, and other allies are able to frustrate their efforts – perhaps warning that since there remains considerable uncertainty around the US-Japan trade deal, it would be a mistake to oust Ishiba – **the party could be at risk of fracturing**. The anti-Ishiba forces, organized around the groups that backed Takaichi Sanae in her run-off against Ishiba last year, have been deeply and increasingly frustrated with Ishiba's leadership and believe that Ishiba – and his predecessor and ally Kishida – are responsible for a liberal turn that alienated conservative LDP supporters, leading to the party's electoral losses. It is impossible to rule out the possibility that, if the anti-Ishiba rebellion fails, some portion of the LDP right could leave and either form a new party or join with one of the existing right-wing parties in a direct challenge to the Ishiba-led LDP. That could in turn lead to more dramatic changes. These scenarios could include:

- a no-confidence motion that overturns the Ishiba government but leads to some alternate coalition;
- a no-confidence motion leading to a snap election in which the LDP – as in 2005, the last time a prime minister faced an intra-party rebellion – recruits “assassins” to run against rebellious lawmakers, an uncertain proposition given the emergence of new parties on the right;
- a straight-forward change of ruling party in a snap election.

Of course, **if the rebellion fails but the party does not split, Ishiba would remain at the head of a deeply divided party** – much of which has rejected his leadership – that would be waiting for an opportunity to oust him, perhaps by supporting an opposition-submitted no-confidence motion later in the Diet session. Ishiba could try to mollify his critics with a cabinet and LDP leadership reshuffle in the aftermath of the crisis, though it is unlikely that his most vocal critics would agree to join a government that would extend his political life.

Ultimately, while Ishiba has already decided that if he leaves, it will only be after he has fought for his job, it is increasingly apparent that his choice now is not only about his own political future but about the future of the LDP more broadly. The LDP is already badly wounded after losing the past two national elections and control of both houses of the Diet. Ishiba’s defiance of his party has exposed the degree to which the party is fractured and perhaps even ungovernable. Whether the party has a chance to try to reassert control over the Diet and heal its divisions in the three years until the next national elections or whether it is consumed by internal conflict is ultimately in the prime minister’s hands.

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