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The significance of 2 September

Key takeaways

- The Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) lawmakers will meet on 2 September to discuss a report on the party's upper house election defeat.
- The release of the report is a critical turning point for Ishiba's future, breaking the party's stalemate as lawmakers and local officials assess whether Ishiba is capable of leading the LDP through a severe crisis.
- Ishiba has preemptively made the case for his leadership – and threatened possible dissenters – but it is unclear whether he can sway undecideds.

The Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) stalemated debate over whether Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru should continue as party leader faces a turning point on Tuesday, 2 September when the party's committee tasked with analyzing the LDP's upper house defeat delivers its report to a meeting of upper and lower house lawmakers.

The report, whose preparation has been delayed by several weeks, could be a critical turning point for three related reasons. Together, they suggest that **it remains likely that the LDP will decide to hold an early leadership election to replace Ishiba.**

First, if the report apportions some blame to party leadership – whether for tactical reasons (for example, its poor use of social media) or policy reasons (its commitment to cash payments for fiscal stimulus despite their overwhelming unpopularity) – **it could result in an immediate leadership shakeup.** LDP Secretary-General Moriyama Hiroshi, who already said he would decide whether to quit after the preparation of the report, has already suggested that he feels responsible for the defeat. Other members of the party executive could quit with him. In this case, even if as preliminary reports suggest the analysis does not single Ishiba out for blame, Ishiba could not only find

himself without Moriyama, a key ally, but will also have to answer the question of why Moriyama and other party leaders should take responsibility but not Ishiba himself.

Second and relatedly, **undecided LDP lawmakers will use the delivery of the election post-mortem and the party executive's response to make their decisions** about the pending question of whether to hold an early leadership election that would effectively recall Ishiba from the leadership. The upshot is that after weeks of stalemate, with no marked shift in either a pro- or anti-Ishiba direction within the LDP, the party's mood could break quickly in one direction or the other in the aftermath of Tuesday's meeting and ahead of the expected 8 September deadline for submitting votes on the recall election. It is unclear just how close the anti-Ishiba bloc is to securing the 172 votes necessary for approval of the recall motion. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* found 128 votes in favor of an early leadership election to only 33 against, with more than half of the party's electors either undecided or unwilling to commit publicly. Those numbers could change quickly, however, and, if *Yomiuri*'s survey is accurate – it is consistent with the number of signatories to various petitions calling for leadership change – the anti-Ishiba bloc would need only 25% of the uncommitted votes to force a recall election.

Meanwhile, **the 2 September meeting could also deliver a blow to Ishiba if it leads members of the Ishiba government who support the recall vote to quit**, signaling a loss of confidence in the prime minister from within his own administration. Several younger lawmakers in sub-cabinet posts have already indicated their support for the recall motion and said that they would resign if asked. Perhaps in recognition that forcing political appointees out could backfire against the prime minister, Agriculture Minister Koizumi Shinjirō dissented from some of Ishiba's advisers, saying Monday that the priority should be bringing the party together, not punishing dissidents. If political appointees resign in the coming days, it would contribute to a feeling that the party is preparing to move on from Ishiba.

The case for Ishiba?

Five weeks after the LDP's defeat in the upper house elections, the mood in the party – the feeling that it faces a profound crisis amidst the ongoing loss of public confidence – appears unchanged. Ishiba still faces an uphill battle to convince enough of the party's electors that he is still the leader to guide the LDP through this crisis despite having led the party to two national election defeats (as well as a defeat in the Tokyo metropolitan assembly election) that cost the government its majorities in both houses.

It is unclear whether any of Ishiba's arguments have landed with the undecided electors. **His strongest argument may be his rising approval ratings**, but since this shift has been driven by rising support from supporters of other parties and older voters already backing the LDP but not younger voters, independents, or former LDP voters who have embraced the new parties of the right, **it will do little to ease anxieties among both the parliamentary party or the prefectoral parties**, which have continued to see their candidates lose local elections. The fact that the Ishiba government's support has risen even as the LDP's approval ratings have stagnated

could work against Ishiba to the extent that it leads the party to conclude that he has short coattails that will do little to help the party itself.

Meanwhile, **Ishiba and other members of his government have warned of the dangers of a leadership vacuum if the party proceeds with a recall election.** However, they have made this argument since the upper house defeat and it has done little to convince the anti-Ishiba movement to relent – and **Ishiba's opponents could retort that Ishiba himself has created the leadership vacuum** by resisting calls to resign instead of taking responsibility for the defeat.

Finally, **Ishiba and his allies have threatened the anti-Ishiba forces.** They have suggested that political appointees who vote for recall could be dismissed, demanded that electors' votes be made public, and ostentatiously used a meeting with Koizumi Junichirō to warn that Ishiba could take a page from the elder Koizumi to call a snap election to drive out intra-LDP dissidents. However, **it is possible that these heavy-handed methods could backfire, leading moderates to conclude that Ishiba is prioritizing his survival over the party's future.** It is already apparent that some younger political appointees are undaunted by the threat of dismissal; other lawmakers could feel inclined to call Ishiba's bluff about a snap election, questioning whether he would be willing and able to act like Koizumi by withholding the party's nomination from his opponents and nominating loyal alternates (not least since an early general election could be disastrous for both Ishiba and the LDP).

Tobias Harris

Founder and Principal
Japan Foresight LLC
tobias@japanforesight.com
+1.847.738.4048
