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LDP race still up in the air as Koizumi stumbles

Key takeaways

- Koizumi Shinjirō is on the defensive after his campaign's communications director quit amidst accusations that she violated party rules.
- This scandal comes after a poll showed Koizumi's support sliding with Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rank-and-file supporters, suggesting that with a week left in the campaign, the race could still shift.
- A runoff between Koizumi and Takaichi Sanae remains the most likely outcome, but the possibility of Koizumi again finishing outside of the top two is climbing.

On Friday, 26 September, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [frontrunner](#) Koizumi Shinjirō apologized after a tabloid reported that lawmaker Makishima Karen, who was running communications for his campaign, urged Koizumi's supporters to offer positive comments about Koizumi on an online streaming program – and, in violation of party rules, offered some examples that included negative comments about other candidates. Makishima has quit and Koizumi has promised that this kind of incident will not be repeated, but it is possible that this incident could swing the momentum of the LDP leadership race against the agriculture minister.

The problem for Koizumi is that his campaign already appeared to be struggling to pick up momentum if not actually stalling. Even before the tabloid story broke, a new poll of dues-paying LDP members eligible to vote in the leadership election showed a ten-point swing in favor of Takaichi Sanae, who moved past Koizumi to become the top choice of LDP voters. This poll movement even before the scandal broke suggests that, like in the 2024 leadership election, Koizumi could be struggling to connect with rank-and-file members, albeit for entirely different reasons. Unlike last year, when Koizumi's support fell after some poorly received comments about labor market reform, the forty-four-year-old lawmaker has this year been running a “safe driving” campaign, avoiding taking any

controversial positions and staying on message, to the point that some observers have noted that he is relying on notes too much during public appearances.

With one week until the voting closes – rank-and-file members must submit their votes by Friday, 3 October, before the 4 October party meeting – Koizumi may not have much time to stabilize the situation, particularly if polls that will likely be conducted over the weekend show his support dropping. While his support among LDP lawmakers gives him a cushion – he is the most popular choice among those who have signaled their intentions, with more than 20% of lawmakers supporting him according to one survey – last year's leadership race showed that if he cannot finish in the top two in rank-and-file voting, it could be difficult to make the second round. If Koizumi does slip, the biggest beneficiary will likely be Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa, who is already solidly in third place, has received public support from more lawmakers than Takaichi, and would be the obvious choice for Ishiba voters looking for a candidate to build on the Ishiba government's work.

To be sure, it may be premature to dismiss Koizumi's chances. Takaichi may be facing problems of her own, with some LDP lawmakers questioning her decision to open her campaign by talking of tourists kicking the famous deer in her home prefecture of Nara, as well as her non-committal response to a debate question about whether she would worship at Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's war dead, as prime minister. While the most likely outcome remains a Koizumi-Takaichi runoff, the race appears to be increasingly fluid with one week remaining and roughly a quarter of the LDP's 295 lawmakers having not indicated who they will support in the first round. That said, all of the candidates may be grappling with a bigger problem: public response to the leadership contest has been tepid, with reportedly lighter-than-typical turnout at the candidates' rally in central Tokyo Wednesday and polls showing that voters have low expectations that the LDP's leadership change will deliver effective results.

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