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Ishiba's situation increasingly desperate as party vote nears

Key takeaways

- There are growing signs that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is poised to vote on 8 September in favor of an early leadership election.
- With few lawmakers rallying to his side, Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru is running out of options; his threat to call a snap election looks increasingly empty.
- The question is whether Ishiba decides to contest the leadership vote or whether he takes it as a rebuke and bows out, perhaps even before Monday if the likely outcome looks lopsided.

With fewer than three days until Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers and prefectural chapters vote on Monday, 8 September on whether to hold an early leadership election, it appears to be increasingly certain that the motion will pass. This vote would effectively serve as a vote of no-confidence in Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's leadership of the party and would force him to either step down, contest the leadership contest in the hope of winning a new mandate, or, less likely, calling a snap election in a desperate bid to impose discipline on the LDP.

As the struggle heads into its final weekend, Ishiba's situation appears increasingly desperate, with one senior LDP lawmaker suggesting in a television appearance on Friday, 5 September that it remains possible – though perhaps unlikely – that the prime minister could announce his resignation over the weekend, before the vote. While there is no definitive survey of how LDP electors will vote, all surveys are pointing to a sizable advantage for the “yes” camp. A *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey published Friday found 149 votes in favor of a recall – 134 Diet members, 15 prefectural chapters – compared with only 43 votes against, which would leave the “yes” camp needing only 23 more votes, suggesting that the chances of the “no” camp pulling off an upset are fading. If *Yomiuri*'s

numbers are accurate, the yes camp would need to secure only 15% of the remaining votes.

As [expected](#), the meeting of LDP lawmakers on Tuesday to discuss the party's electoral defeat essentially opened the floodgates of opposition to Ishiba's staying in office. Asō Tarō, LDP senior advisor and leader of the party's last remaining faction, told a meeting of his faction on Wednesday, 3 September that he would be voting in favor of an early election and urged members of his faction to do the same, but he said he would not tell the more than forty members of his faction how to vote (though of course their votes will be public). Meanwhile, in addition to the at least ten junior members of the Ishiba government who have called for an early election, one cabinet minister – Justice Minister Suzuki Keisuke – has also declared his support for the motion, a significant milestone in the anti-Ishiba campaign. Perhaps even more notably, Agriculture Minister Koizumi Shinjirō, who will be a strong contender to succeed Ishiba, has not called for an early election but has defended the junior members of the government and shared his concerns about the state of the LDP, a conspicuous statement of neutrality even as Ishiba's leading allies have closed ranks around him.

Koizumi's ambivalence may be a sign that what had initially seemed like a movement led by the former Abe faction and the LDP right more broadly has widened across the party, particularly among younger backbenchers who are eager for not only leadership change but more thorough reforms to modernize a party that the post-mortem portrayed as out of touch with much of the electorate. It is possible that many of the remaining undecideds could be waiting to see how their prefectural chapters will vote. While roughly a dozen prefectural chapters have expressed their support for an early election and a half dozen are opposed, the majority are still deliberating on the issue.

As the battle heads into its final weekend, both Ishiba and his rivals will work to round up votes, but this week has made clear that the prime minister has had little success either persuading or threatening LDP members to vote against an early leadership election. No major party figure not already in his camp has spoken out against the recall motion, while Ishiba's threat to dissolve the Diet and call a snap election to pressure LDP backbenchers may well have backfired, with Koizumi Shinjirō – perhaps taking issue with his father's advice to Ishiba – pushed back against this threat as corrosive to party unity, which he called the “most important thing.” Ishiba could try to call a snap election even if the recall motion passes, but he would face strenuous opposition from within the party, which is not eager to contest a general election during a party crisis under an embattled leader who has already lost two national elections. If Ishiba were to take this step, he would likely face a rebellion within his cabinet – every cabinet minister would have to sign on to a parliamentary dissolution, and, while Ishiba could dismiss and temporarily act in the place of ousted ministers, the more ministers oppose him, the more absurd this response would be – and even friendly backbenchers would strongly urge Ishiba not to take a step that could break the LDP and drive it from power. (Kōmeitō, facing its own electoral struggles, could also resist a move toward a snap election.)

If Ishiba does not try to call a snap election in a desperate bid to save his premiership, the question becomes whether Ishiba would remain defiant if the recall motion passes and seek to run in the leadership election or whether he will take motion's passage as a measure of the party's loss of confidence in his leadership and arrange for an orderly exit from the LDP leadership and the premiership. At this point, Ishiba has given no indications that he is quitting in any fashion, though the situation could change quickly once the votes are tallied on Monday. An overwhelming victory for the recall motion could make it all but impossible for Ishiba to stand in the leadership election.

At this stage, it bears watching signs from LDP politicians over the weekend, as members of both camps press their arguments in the media and in private consultations across the party. Of course, it may also be worth watching for signs that Ishiba is preparing to resign before the vote is held. If the vote proceeds, LDP electors will need to deliver their votes to party headquarters by 3pm local time on Monday, 8 September, after which the LDP's election administration committee will begin verifying and tabulating the votes, with the results expected later in the day on Monday. If the motion passes, there is discussion that the party could move quickly to call a leadership election for early October, and, with the party determined to restore public confidence, is looking to hold a "full spectrum" leadership election – i.e. including votes by dues-paying supporters – instead of holding a more truncated election that would be dominated by lawmakers.

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