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## Opposition merger talks show Takaichi is not the only risk taker

### Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae has set the wheels for a snap election in motion, but the prospect of an opposition merger could make the contest more competitive.
- While combining opposition parties could face significant obstacles, the willingness of the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and Kōmeitō to discuss a merger points to a fluid environment ahead of the election.
- The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) itself, in proposing that its victory line is preserving the status quo of an LDP-Ishin no Kai majority, has suggested it does not necessarily share the prime minister's confidence about the outcome.

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Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae formally informed the leaders of the LDP and Ishin no Kai on 14 January that she [will](#) dissolve the Diet on 23 January and hold a general election in February. Wednesday's most significant development, however, was the response of opposition parties to the imminent election.

The CDP and Kōmeitō had already begun discussing electoral cooperation but may be thinking more ambitiously. The two parties are reportedly in talks to merge and form a new party, with a meeting between CDP leader Noda Yoshihiko and Kōmeitō leader Saitō Tetsuo expected on Thursday, 15 January.

If realized, this merger would have significant implications for the general election. First, it would dash whatever hopes some LDP lawmakers had of retaining the support of Kōmeitō in their constituencies. Kōmeitō's electoral machine, while diminished, would be fully at the disposal of the new party, potentially adding an average of 20,000 votes to the opposition vote in constituencies. Second, it would bolster Noda's efforts to shift

the leading opposition party to the center; as a firmly centrist or even center-right party, Kōmeitō would balance the CDP's more left-wing factions. Joining forces with the LDP's longtime coalition partner could inoculate the new party from longstanding LDP accusations that the CDP was a kind of "Trojan horse" for Japanese Communist Party (JCP) influence. Third, and relatedly, a more ideologically balanced large opposition party could entice the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) to join, perhaps creating an opportunity for DPFP leader Tamaki Yūichirō, who is more popular than Noda, to become the face of the new grouping. The DPFP has struggled to reach its target of 100 candidates and could see some value in a merger. The CDP and Kōmeitō together have 172 seats; with the DPFP, they would enter the campaign with 199 seats, the same as the LDP. In a stroke, a shotgun wedding between the CDP, Kōmeitō, and the DPFP could transform Takaichi's effort to bolster her government into a genuine contest for power.

To be sure, a CDP-Kōmeitō merger, let alone a CDP-Kōmeitō-DPFP merger, is hardly a done deal. The two parties are weighing their options, which could also include remaining as separate parties but fielding a unified proportional representation list with Kōmeitō pulling its candidates out of single-member constituencies and backing CDP candidates while benefiting from a larger pool of voters in PR voting. Meanwhile, the DPFP may not be interested in joining. When asked about the CDP-Kōmeitō talks, Tamaki responded skeptically, questioning whether "it sends a clear message to voters for parties with different principles and position to join forces only for elections." This hastily arranged combination would undoubtedly have internal tensions that could be difficult to manage – and, like the LDP, it would not have a majority in the House of Councillors.

But if a new combination were to hold, it could mark a shift back towards two-party competition after fifteen years in which the LDP essentially faced no party capable of contending with it for control of the government. In the immediate term, it shows that while Takaichi thought she was in control of events when she decided to risk a snap election in February, the other actors in the system also have agency and, in the compressed timetable leading up to the general election, could be willing to take risks of their own that could complicate the outlook for the election. (Ishin no Kai, Takaichi's partner in government, could be taking a risk of its own with a scheme to have the Ishin-affiliated governor and mayor of Osaka resign to trigger by-elections coinciding with the general election, a bid to boost turnout that could backfire.)

As such, while the most likely outcome for the general election is still that the governing parties gain at least some seats, a CDP-Kōmeitō merger alone could make it more difficult for the LDP to win the thirty-four or more seats needed for an absolute majority of its own – the kind of victory that might dramatically shift the balance of power in Takaichi's favor – and could even make it possible for the opposition to flip some marginal constituencies. It may signal the LDP's own doubts about the election that LDP Secretary-General Suzuki Shunichi said Wednesday that the "victory line" for the LDP and Ishin no Kai will be a simple majority in the House of Representatives, i.e. as long as the two parties do not lose any seats, they will consider it a victory. While the LDP

often lowballs its targets, overt questioning of Takaichi's decision from senior LDP lawmakers suggest that the party fears she may have short coattails and that the election is not certain to be a landslide for the government. Accordingly, even if Takaichi and the LDP win by their own modest yardstick, Takaichi could still emerge from the election at the head of a fractious coalition with Ishin no Kai that lacks a majority in the upper house and may be facing a more unified opposition than before the election.

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