

11 March 2026

## Numbers versus norms

### Key takeaways

- The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is still pushing to pass the FY2026 budget in the lower house by 13 March over the resistance of opposition parties.
- The government's push to move the budget through the lower house is driven by the awareness that it is running out of time to pass the budget before the end of the fiscal year, but it could backfire in that the opposition, which has a majority in the upper house, could be more inclined to resist a speedy debate in the House of Councillors.
- The debate over the budget's passage reveals the tension between Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae's parliamentary strength and longstanding norms of Japanese democracy, a tension that will be a factor in subsequent debates.

---

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) faces a dilemma as it nears the cutoff for passing the FY2026 budget before the start of the fiscal year on 1 April.

While the LDP's supermajority in the lower house enables it to bypass the upper house if necessary, bypassing the upper house takes time. According to the constitution, it takes thirty days with the upper house failing to act on a budget passed by the lower house for it to become, and sixty days for regular legislation. With only twenty days remaining in the fiscal year, the upper house must approve the budget if Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae is to realize her ambition of passing the budget before the new fiscal year.

The problem is that in her haste to pass the budget, she has defied precedent in the lower house and in the process angered opposition parties, which still hold a majority of the seats in the House of Councillors. The government has been fixated on 13 March as a target for passing the budget, which means that the budget committee could end up

debating the budget for less than 60 hours, considerably less than the typical total of approximately 70-80 hours as well as the 66.5 hours spent on the budget in 2007, currently the shortest amount of time spent debating the budget. Even the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), which is not opposed to the substance of the budget, has warned that the government's racing through the lower house's procedural hurdles threatens "fiscal democracy," the principle that the Diet has a constitutional obligation to "administer national finances."

The risk for Takaichi is that in pressing ahead with passing the budget, she will provoke an adverse reaction from opposition parties in the upper house, where their greater numbers give them more power to slow the budget's passage. They have already warned that if the government proceeds with a vote in the lower house on Friday, 13 March, they could prevent the upper house from beginning its deliberations before 17 March at the earliest. Upper house deliberations could also be impacted by Takaichi's travel to the United States for her 19 March summit with US President Donald Trump, reducing the number of days available to reach the 70+ hours of debate the opposition will expect in the upper house before a vote. If debate were not to begin until 17 March, it could mean only eight or nine days for upper house deliberations before 31 March – losing 19 March for Takaichi's trip and 20 March for a national holiday – which is unlikely to satisfy opposition parties. Opposition parties are also unlikely to approve weekend sessions after having prevented the LDP for calling a weekend session of the lower house's budget committee. They want to maximize the amount of time they have to question Takaichi directly, and will use the leverage they have in the upper house to get it.

The DPFP has offered a way out to the government, suggesting that it will support the budget if the government holds off on a vote in the lower house until 16 March, enabling an additional day of deliberations to satisfy the prevailing norms of fiscal democracy. Assuming that the DPFP's offer is sincere, it is difficult to see how the LDP – which has been seeking a commitment from the DPFP to back the budget – does not take this deal, seeing as how it would ensure that the government would have enough votes to pass the budget in the upper house. That said, the DPFP, which is working with the Centrist Reform Alliance on a bill that would require annual legislation approving the issuance of deficit bonds instead of the five years in the government's bill, could seek additional concessions from the government on this issue – increasing parliamentary oversight of fiscal policy – though party leaders have said that they do not want to engage in US debt ceiling-style brinkmanship over the debt issuance bill, which has to pass before 1 April. If the LDP rejects the DPFP's proposal, it is difficult to see how it will pass the budget before 31 March. This would be an embarrassing climbdown for the prime minister on the heels of [other](#) political setbacks and would invite vocal criticism from within the LDP, since LDP backbenchers had warned that rushing the budget through the Diet on an accelerated timetable could backfire.

Even if the Takaichi government ultimately gets its way on the timing of the budget's passage, this debate has highlighted a latent risk from Takaichi's landslide electoral victory. While the victory gave the LDP overwhelming numerical strength in the lower

house, Japan's democracy rests on a set of informal norms – such as the amount of time expected for budgetary deliberations – intended to safeguard the rights of the minority and prevent “elective dictatorship.” The LDP, for all its dominance of Japanese politics, has often sought to forge consensus with opposition parties and manage parliamentary conflict. To be sure, Japan's democracy is more majoritarian than it had once been, as it has become increasingly centered on a strengthened executive. But these norms have persisted both among politicians and the broader public, and there may be a political price for defying them. For example, recent polls show that the public is at best mildly in favor of moving the budget through the Diet before the end of the fiscal year, suggesting that a not-inconsiderable number of the prime minister's own supporters are uneasy with the prime minister's determination to flex her numerical strength. It is possible that Takaichi could be in a no-win situation, in that if the budget passes before 31 March, she may be punished for her aggressiveness – and if it does not pass, she may be punished both for her aggressiveness and for her inability to deliver.

This tension between norms and numbers is likely to be a recurring feature of life under the Takaichi government, especially since the government's strength is overwhelming in one house and short of a majority in the other. As the prime minister seeks to implement what could be controversial policies, she will have to find a way to balance her parliamentary strength with deference to the informal norms and practices of Japanese democracy. How she manages this balance will go a long way to determining the prime minister's true political strength.

---

## **Tobias Harris**

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

---