

10 June 2026

Takaichi's denials do little to stem growing political scandal

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae faces allegations that her staff was involved in the creation and dissemination of defamatory videos during the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election in 2025 and the general election in 2026.
- Takaichi has repeatedly denied the allegations, despite new evidence that contradicts her denials.
- While it is too soon to determine the ultimate impact of the scandal, Takaichi is increasingly likely to pay some cost for both the alleged misconduct and her defiant response to the allegations.

Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae has repeatedly denied a report that her staff was involved in the creation and dissemination of AI-generated videos defaming Koizumi Shinjirō and other rivals for the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) leadership last year as well as defamatory videos for candidates during the February general election. However, this story – once confined to the tabloids like the weekly *Shūkan Bunshun*, which broke the story – is increasingly attracting mainstream attention after the magazine shared an audio recording of a Zoom call between Matsui Ken, an IT professional who admitted to making the defamatory videos and a man who reportedly was one of Takaichi's secretaries. As more evidence pointing to communication between her office and Matsui emerges, notwithstanding her categorical denials that she and her staff had any acquaintance with him, it appears that Takaichi is now facing the first significant political scandal of her administration.

For the moment, Takaichi has continued to deny that there was any communication, responded indignantly to questions about the scandal in Diet proceedings, and insisted that negative campaigning – generally viewed as off limits in party elections in particular – is “not her style.” The nature of her denials has shifted somewhat, from having “no

acquaintance” with Matsui to “not having met” him, leaving open an admission that there was online communication. Nevertheless, she has sought to cast doubt on the veracity of the recording, implying that it might have been manipulated and may not even be her secretary’s voice. She has also sought to impugn the news outlets covering the story, which may have been easier to do when it was only tabloid fodder and not attracting scrutiny from mainstream outlets (and her attacks on the mainstream media may make these outlets more determined to investigate the story). She may not be helped by Democratic Party for the People (DPFP) leader Tamaki Yūichirō admitting on Wednesday, 10 June that he knows Matsui and that his party commissioned videos from a company recommended by him, strengthening the plausibility of claims that Takaichi’s office would have been in communication with him. It also does not help Takaichi that Matsui was involved in the other potential scandal swirling around her, the issue of whether her staff was involved with the creation of a Takaichi-themed memecoin.

At this point, the scandal will continue to receive significant attention in the political press and from opposition lawmakers in parliamentary questioning. But Takaichi has not yet paid a significant political price. Her approval ratings have declined marginally but still remain overwhelmingly positive. This scandal may be a test of the “construction” of political scandals in Japan’s new, more fractured media environment. Whereas in the past newspapers and television networks could essentially create a feeding frenzy around a scandal, competing to break a story open, the precipitous decline in newspaper readership and television viewership among younger Japanese means that a significant constituency – one that is vital for the prime minister – does not consume political information in traditional formats. While there is considerable interest in the story online, at least some of that interest reflects Takaichi’s online supporters backing the prime minister and accusing mainstream outlets of engaging in an influence operation against her. News outlets have not yet included questions about this scandal in their opinion polls but that may change in the coming weeks, which could provide insight into how the public is processing the allegations.

The public, however, is not the only audience that matters. The scandal could also test Takaichi’s relationship with the LDP, not least since the initial allegations were of misconduct in a party election. While senior LDP leaders have backed Takaichi – stating that there is no need for the Diet to call witnesses for questioning on this matter – there have been reports of dissatisfaction from LDP lawmakers about Takaichi’s response to the allegations. If the prime minister continues to face allegations of misconduct that contradict her denials and if polls begin showing public dissatisfaction with her response, the prime minister’s intra-party opponents could become more vocal not only on her response to this scandal but on other divisive issues, including the consumption tax cut, defense spending, and the prime minister’s broader fiscal ambitions.

It would be premature to treat this scandal as an existential risk for the prime minister. However, her strategy of making categorical denials even in the face of new evidence could result in significant damage, particularly if further evidence of misconduct emerges, as she would pay for both the misconduct and her attempts at a cover-up.

Furthermore, her position is worse insofar as this scandal directly involves her political staff; it is not a secondhand scandal involving misconduct by a cabinet minister or party official that could be at least partially defused by axing the offender. The upshot could be significant blows to both her public standing and her command of the LDP, the two major pillars of her government. It could also mean more scrutiny of her political operation, her decision-making and communication styles, and the dark side of her reliance on social media, all of which could undermine her government.

Tobias Harris

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