

Corruption scandal threatens the stability of Japanese government

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida have become embroiled in a corruption scandal over the past month. Kishida's approval rating has plummeted, potentially impacting his ability to stay in power.

On Tuesday, investigators from the Tokyo Public Prosecutors Office raided the offices of two LDP factions, Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyukai and Shisuikai. The former is the largest parliamentary faction and is associated with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe while the latter is led by Toshihiro Nikai, a former LDP secretary-general.

According to investigators, the factions are believed to have created slush funds for their members by failing to report income from political fundraising events over a five-year period running through 2022. While all five of the LDP's major factions have been implicated in the scandal, the Abe and Nikai factions allegedly created the largest slush funds, totaling 500 million yen (\$US3.5 million) and 100 million yen respectively.

The LDP is comprised of parliamentary factions that operate as virtual parties within a party, though 78 members of the National Diet claim to have no factional affiliation. Younger or lower ranking Diet members give their support to faction leaders who operate as political bosses behind the scenes. They in turn provide funding, opportunities for advancement within the party, and access to influential figures in big business circles.

According to the Political Fund Control Law, factions must report the names and amounts raised if any individual or company purchases tickets to a fundraising event worth more than 200,000 yen. However, LDP faction members would be given quotas on the number of tickets they were expected to sell for these parties. Then, any money brought in that

exceeded the quota would go unreported and placed in the slush fund, hidden from public view, and returned to members as kickbacks.

The five-year period under investigation ensures that potential prosecutions can proceed and not be blocked by the statute of limitations for transgressions. The practice has almost certainly been going on for considerably longer. Junji Suzuki, a member of the Abe faction, stated, "While it might sound strange to say so, in this world there was the recognition that it was almost like a culture." Suzuki resigned as internal affairs minister in Kishida's cabinet on December 14.

Suzuki's resignation was part of a broader shake-up as Kishida attempted to stem criticism by replacing four cabinet-level officials from the Abe faction within his administration. This included Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno who was replaced by former Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.

At a press conference on December 19, current LDP Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi downplayed the allegations, saying, "We deeply regret that the situation has reached such a stage." He continued, "We take it seriously and will take necessary measures while keeping a close eye on future investigations." Both the Abe and Nikai factions similarly released formal apologies that downplayed the corruption allegations.

On November 18, sources familiar with the investigation publicly revealed that a criminal complaint had been filed against five of the factions within the LDP. The initial allegations was that the party had not reported more than 40 million yen in income from political fundraising events, a figure that has grown substantially since. The complaint was filed by Hiroshi Kamiwaki, a professor at Kobe Gakuin University who has a history of making similar complaints.

Since then, Kishida's approval rating has tumbled. A Jiji Press poll released on the evening of December 14 found that support for Kishida's cabinet had fallen as low as 17.1 percent, the worst for an LDP government since 2009.

That the scandal has exploded rather than being swept under the rug is an indication of the growing tensions within the Japanese ruling class. It has been seized upon by Kishida's rivals within the LDP to potentially challenge him for party leadership and therefore as prime minister. This includes Shigeru Ishiba, a former LDP secretary-general and defense minister.

Ishiba postures as an opponent of factions within the party, though he has led his own in the past. He holds a great deal of influence over parliamentarians considered factionless. He stated on December 11 that Kishida could resign early next year, possibly in exchange for passing his government's budget for fiscal year 2024: "It could be an option for [Kishida] to resign after the budget passes. Dissolving [the lower house of parliament] is also a way to take responsibility." The next general election is currently scheduled for October 2025.

Ishiba is a far-right politician who has been a member of a parliament since 1986. He has previously criticized LDP governments for not pursuing remilitarization at a fast enough pace while also demanding deeper cuts to social spending. He has called for Tokyo to possess the ability to produce its own nuclear weapons while allowing the United States to base its own nuclear weapons in Japan.

Furthermore, as the focus of the investigation has been centered on the Abe faction, this could potentially lead to the break-up of the grouping, as it has largely been leaderless since Abe's assassination in July 2022. Kentaro Yamamoto, a professor of political science at Hokkai-Gakuen University in Sapporo, stated, "The drifting of the Abe faction will force Kishida to establish a stronger relationship with the Aso and Motegi factions."

This would almost certainly push Japan further along the course towards war with China. A former prime minister and current LDP vice-president, Taro Aso is a vocal anti-China hawk, particularly over Taiwan. He provocatively visited the island in August for talks with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and other officials. In November, he spoke before the Australian Institute

of International Affairs Gala Dinner in Canberra, calling for Japan to be included as a member of the AUKUS pact of the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia that is leading the war drive against China.

It is also noteworthy that the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) has failed to gain support as a result of the scandal, polling at an abysmal 5 percent approval rating. The CDP, which has no fundamental differences with the government, has offered little more than empty statements about eliminating corruption. As the Democrats have nothing to offer the working class or youth, the public rightly views these remarks with distrust.

No doubt this factors into the calculations of LDP figures maneuvering inside the party as the power struggle unfolds, with leadership challengers believing there is nothing to fear from the so-called political opposition.



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