

Politics Watch

Further headwinds for LDP from local elections over weekend; snap general election still far away

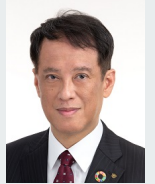
- Harsh public scrutiny of ruling LDP after fundraising scandal, evident in Kyoto, Maebashi mayoral elections
- PM Kishida needs higher approval ratings before holding snap election; opportunities to boost his standing include response to scandal, state visit to US, wage hikes outpacing inflation
- Snap election likely at end of ordinary Diet session in Jun if approval rating improves; re-election of Kishida as LDP president challenging if approval rating does not rise

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Over the past weekend, mayoral elections were held in the cities of Maebashi and Kyoto. The results clearly indicate that the public holds quite a harsh view of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has been shaken by a political fundraising scandal.

In order for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to dissolve the Diet and hold a snap general election, the approval rating for his administration would first need to climb higher. How Kishida responds to his party's fundraising scandal could provide the first opportunity to boost support of his administration. However, the prevailing mood is such that realizing a satisfactory resolution in the eyes of the public could be difficult. The second opportunity will be Kishida's state visit to the US in April. The next opportunity after that could be the realization of income tax cuts and wage hikes that outpace inflation, led by Kishida, whose policies are entirely focused on the economy

If the Kishida administration's approval rating improves, a snap general election could be held at around the end of the ordinary Diet session in June. Conversely, if this approval rating does not increase, his reelection as LDP president in September could be in jeopardy. If a new LDP president is elected and party support is boosted by heightened expectations among the electorate, autumn 2024 would likely present the next opportunity for a general election.

Major headwinds for LDP from local elections over past weekend

On 4 February, the Maebashi mayoral election was held in Gunma Prefecture, where the LDP has a strong base of support. In general, it is said that incumbents have an overwhelming advantage in mayoral elections. However, the incumbent candidate backed by the ruling LDP and Komeito coalition was defeated by a new candidate supported by opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan.

A poll published by *Jomo Shinbun* on 30 January showed that the incumbent candidate had a slight lead. However, just five days later a new candidate came from behind to win the election.

An NHK exit poll indicated that the new candidate solidified support from those that typically vote for opposition parties, while also capturing votes from those with no party affiliation (independents). She seems to have even captured some support from those who typically vote for the LDP, as well.

The Kyoto mayoral election was also held on 4 February. A candidate, essentially viewed as the outgoing mayor's successor, won the election, defeating a candidate supported by the Communist Party and other opposition parties. The newly elected mayor received support from the ruling LDP, its coalition partner, Komeito, the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, and the Democratic Party for the People. However, according to a *Nikkei* exit poll, only 60% of LDP supporters voted for the LDP-backed candidate. The winning candidate was asked about the impact of the political fundraising scandal at a press conference after the election results were announced. He said the voter response was harsh (5 Feb *Nikkei*).

Snap election seems difficult if Kishida administration's approval rating does not recover

Opinion polls conducted by various news outlets in January showed a decline in support for the LDP, but no particular increase in support for the opposition parties. As such, opposition parties are failing to replace the LDP.

However, even if the Kishida administration were to call for a snap general election with no changes to its current standing, it would lose a significant number of seats in the Diet and the prime minister would be forced to step down. Last weekend's local elections confirmed that independent voters are currently not choosing the LDP and are likely to vote for opposition parties through a process of elimination.

According to a poll released by *Nikkei* on 29 January, the most popular option for voters among political parties at the next Lower House election was the LDP at 30%. This was a 3-point increase from the previous survey.

Meanwhile, regarding Kishida's tenure in office, 25% of survey respondents said that Kishida should be replaced immediately, while 22% said he should remain in office until the budget bill is passed this spring. So, a combined 47% want Kishida to resign before his term in office expires. This suggests that the current public mindset is "I may vote for the LDP, but I will not vote for Kishida's LDP." In order to hold a snap election, either Kishida will need to resign or the Kishida administration's approval rating will need to recover.

How Kishida responds to the political fundraising scandal could present an opportunity to boost his administration's approval rating. However, the mood is such that wrapping up this scandal in a manner that satisfies the general public will be very difficult at this juncture. We want to cover this point in a separate report.

The next chance to shore up his administration's approval rating will come when Kishida makes a state visit to the US in April. However, the real trump card for Kishida, whose policies are entirely focused on the economy, could be the realization of income tax cuts and wage hikes that outpace inflation.

If the administration can boost its approval rating by around April, dissolving the Diet for a snap general election around the end of the ordinary Diet session in June would become a realistic possibility. Conversely, if the approval rating continues to languish as of June, Kishida could struggle to win re-election when the LDP chooses its leader in September. If support for the administration rises due to high hopes for a new LDP president (= new prime minister), the party would likely consider a snap general election in the fall.

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