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Kishida could drop Abe faction amid turmoil

Cabinet revamp likely in wake of fund scandal

GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITER

Amid allegations that key government and Liberal Democratic Party officials received tens of millions of yen in unreported funds, the spotlight has now turned to the possibility of a full-fledged Cabinet overhaul.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is reportedly mulling over removing from government and party leadership posts, including from junior positions, all members of the faction formerly led by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

At the moment, 15 of the faction's members are in government — four ministers, five deputy ministers and six political officers — while three are on the LDP executive: policy chief Koichi Hagiuda, Upper House Secretary-General Hiroshige Seko and parliamentary affairs chief Tsuyoshi Takagi.

Kishida evaded questions on the matter Monday, while still emphasizing his sense of urgency in addressing the scandal over the unreported money generated by factions' fundraising parties.

"It's all about taking an appropriate response at an appropriate time, with the aim of restoring the public's trust and avoiding causing delays (to the workings) of the administration," Kishida said, answering questions from the opposition in the Upper House.

The financial scandal has hit the government at its core and eroded Kishida's political capital even further at a time when his approval ratings were already dwindling.

On Friday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, who served as secretary-general of the Abe faction for two years from 2019 to 2021, was hit by allegations that he had received over ¥10 million in unreported funds from the faction.

The daily Yomiuri Shimbun reported Saturday that Kishida had made clear his intention to dismiss Matsuno with the aim of avoiding a political vacuum at a critical time for the administration.

The opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) submitted a nonbinding censure motion against Matsuno on Monday, on the grounds that having him in the chief cabinet secretary position "is detrimental to the national interest," the party's parliamentary affairs chief Jun Azumi told reporters. The motion is expected to be rejected by the legislature Tuesday.

In the wake of the allegations, Matsuno stuck to his lines Monday, avoiding any direct comment on the matter and adding that his faction is currently confirming the facts.

"I am committed to fulfilling the responsibilities of my position," Matsuno said.

Besides acting as the administration's spokesperson — holding two daily news conferences — the chief cabinet secretary is tasked with policy coordination and liaising with ministries. Matsuno, a former education minister, has been serving in the role since the start of the Kishida administration in October 2021.

Other ministers and senior party executives who have served as secretary-general of the Abe faction have been engulfed in the scandal, with the faction reportedly gaining hundreds of millions of yen in the period from 2018 to 2022.

Takagi and Seko also allegedly received over ¥10 million, while Hagiuda and the chair of the Abe faction's leadership committee, Ryu Shionoya, received smaller amounts that were still in the millions yen, the Asahi Shimbun reported Saturday.

"Although any decision on personnel matters is the prerogative of the prime minister, I would like to take my own decision on whether or not to leave office," Hagiuda said Monday, hinting at his responsibility as policy chief.

Economy minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, a former secretary-general of the Abe

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Shohei Ohtani in Cleveland, Ohio, in May. Ohtani has broken records with a 10-year, $700 million deal to sign with the Los Angeles Dodgers. KYODO

Ohtani makes deal with Dodgers

Two-way star signs for reported $700 million contract over 10 years

JASON COSKREY
STAFF WRITER

Shohei Ohtani is keeping his talents in Southern California — but he will be doing it in Dodger Blue.

Ohtani ended the most high-profile free agency in North American sports since NBA star LeBron James' famous decision in 2010 by announcing Saturday he will sign with the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Ohtani, who spent his first six MLB seasons with the Los Angeles Angels, where he won two American League MVP awards, announced his decision in an Instagram post.

"To all the fans and everyone involved in the baseball world, I apologize for taking so long to come to a decision," Ohtani wrote. "I have decided to choose the Dodgers as my next team." According to MLB.com, Ohtani's agent, Nez Balelo, said the Japanese star will sign a 10-year deal worth $700 million — the largest in North American sports history.

"This is a unique, historic contract for a unique, historic player," Balelo, from CAA Sports, said in a statement.

After never getting a chance to play in the postseason with the Angels in the American League, Ohtani is moving to a perennial contender in the National League. The Dodgers have reached the playoffs in 11 straight seasons and have three World Series appearances — including a win in 2020 — over that span.

"To all Dodgers fans, I pledge to always do what's best for the team and always continue to give it my all to be the best version of myself," Ohtani said. "Until the last day of my playing career, I want to continue to strive forward not only for the Dodgers but for the baseball world."

Ohtani's agreement with the Dodgers brings down the curtain on a free agency unlike anything MLB has experienced. The process was shrouded in secrecy — with reports that even speaking about meeting with Ohtani's team could hurt a club's chances — which only ramped up the intrigue.

The cloak-and-dagger operation — which according to ESPN's Buster Olney extended to Ohtani not even revealing the name of his dog — led to grumbles from some corners, and whirlwind reports on Friday of a private plane flying from Southern California to Toronto that was supposedly carrying Ohtani to the Toronto Blue Jays, who were reportedly a strong contender until the end. Even dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster got in on the fun, posting on X, formerly known as Twitter, that "We can confirm that Shohei Ohtani is not in the Merriam-Webster Citation Archives."

In the end, the three-time All-Star chose the Dodgers.

While a tear to the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, suffered in August, will prevent him from pitching in 2024, Ohtani, a two-time Silver Slugger Award winner, will add his prodigious bat to a

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China 'not fearful' of war over Senkakus: military officer

BEIJING
KYODO, REUTERS

A senior Chinese military officer said in a recent interview with Kyodo News that Beijing did not want a war over the Tokyo-controlled Senkaku Islands claimed by China in the East China Sea, but it was also "not fearful" of armed conflict either.

Lt. Gen. He Lei, a former vice president of the People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Sciences, also indicated the possibility that China would target the Senkakus, which it calls Diaoyu, as well if it attempted to capture Taiwan, a self-ruled democratic island, through the use of force.

The rare reference by a senior Chinese military officer to a possible war over the Senkaku Islands suggests Beijing's determination to gain control of the territory that Japan brought under state control in 2012.

The academy makes policy proposals to the PLA. He criticized Tokyo for purchasing the islands from Japanese private hands, stressing that Beijing would "firmly protect its national territory, sovereignty and maritime interests" if the Japanese side continues its "provocations."

Tokyo should not underestimate the Chinese military's "strong will, resolve and power" to safeguard national sovereignty, safety and territorial integrity, he warned.

The general said he believed issues surrounding Taiwan, which Beijing regards as its own, were one factor destabilizing Sino-Japanese relations and it was "impermissible to interfere with China's core interests," calling matters related to the island "a purely domestic issue" of the country.

Beijing claims the Senkakus are part of its Taiwan province. Asked whether China could launch an offensive to simultaneously target the seizure of Taiwan and the islets, He said such a scenario was in line with the mainland's "principle."

Mainland China and Taiwan have been governed separately since they split in 1949 as a result of a civil war. Beijing seeks to unify the two sides, by force if necessary.

Meanwhile, He pointed out the two Asian neighbors had put aside the territorial row, referring to the famous words of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978, suggesting to leave the issue to "the wisdom of

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Manila summons Chinese envoy amid sea tensions

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Manila said Monday it had filed a diplomatic complaint with Beijing after Philippine and Chinese government ships faced off in the disputed South China Sea over the weekend in some of the most tense confrontations in recent months.

The Philippines said it had also summoned Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian for the complaint, with Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Teresita Daza telling a news conference that Manila should "seriously consider" declaring him persona non grata.

The moves came after the Philippines said its vessels were "directly targeted" on Sunday by a China Coast Guard ship with a water cannon — severely damaging and disabling one boat — during a supply mission to the Second Thomas Shoal. Philippine authorities said another resupply boat was also rammed by a China Coast Guard ship near the shoal, where Manila has troops stationed on a grounded warship 193 kilometers west of the Philippines' Palawan Island.

Philippine armed forces chief Romeo Brawner Jr., who was aboard the resupply boat that was rammed by the China Coast Guard vessel, said witnessing the incident firsthand had left him "furious," local media reported. Brawner later became the country's first sitting military chief to set foot on the Sierra Madre — the rusty, World War II-era ship run aground on Second Thomas Shoal in 1999.

In a separate incident Saturday, Manila said Chinese ships had also employed water cannons multiple times against Philippine fishing vessels near the flash point Scarborough Shoal, some 230 km from the Philippine coast, while also deploying acoustic devices to incapacitate the fishing boats.

Jonathan Malaya, assistant director general of the Philippine National Security Council, told the same news conference Monday that China's moves represented a "serious escalation" of its tactics.

Later Monday, China's Foreign Ministry said its actions were "professional" and "restrained," adding that it had "lodged stern representations" with Manila.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the China Coast Guard "took necessary measures against the Philippine ships in accordance with domestic and international law."

The remarks came hours after the United States slammed China for what it said were "dangerous and unlawful actions" that "reflect not only reckless disregard for the safety and livelihoods of Filipinos, but also for international law."

"The United States stands with our Philippine allies in the face of these dangerous and

Continued on page 6 →

A China Coast Guard vessel allegedly rams a Philippine supply boat in the disputed South China Sea on Sunday in this image taken from video. PHILIPPINE COAST GUARD / VIA AFP-JIJI