

Izumi faces daunting task to win over voters

Can the CDP capitalize on LDP woes?

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In a country where the ruling party has been in power for 64 of the last 68 years, leading the largest opposition party is not a job for the fainthearted.

Since the Liberal Democratic Party regained control of the levers of power 11 years ago, many opposition lawmakers have tried their hand at the daunting task of convincing the public that there is a credible alternative — yet, for various reasons, they all failed to deliver.

Now that the LDP finds itself in the middle of its deepest crisis in over a decade — a funding scandal that has plunged Cabinet approval ratings to their lowest in 10 years — a golden opportunity has unexpectedly presented itself.

But is the opposition ready to seize it, or will it let the chance slip through its fingers?

Kenta Izumi has been the face of Japan's largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), for the last two years. His role demands a leadership that he hasn't been able to fully manifest for several reasons, including the lack of unity within his political party, meaning the CDP has so far failed to give the impression that it could form a government anytime soon.

He took the reins of the party in November 2021, one month after a national election in which a CDP-led united opposition front failed to break through against the ruling coalition. It was an uphill battle, he said.

Amid an internal reckoning over the CDP's relationship with the Japanese Communist Party, Izumi, who hails from the more centrist wing of the party, was seen as a better choice for leader by his fellow CDP members.

Asked about the current LDP scandal, Izumi said that he did not want to jump

to any hasty conclusions when the investigation was still in its preliminary stages.

"I hope it can turn out to be beneficial for us, but it's the people who decide that," Izumi said in an interview with The Japan Times. "We want the people to choose clean, instead of corrupt, politics."

In 1993, the year that Japan witnessed its first change in government in 38 years, Izumi, now a veteran with over 20 years of experience in the political center of Nagatocho, had just started his law studies at Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University.

Amid rampant corruption and soaring public scrutiny of collusion between political and business circles, the first non-LDP government in over three decades set out to reduce the influence of money in politics and establish a system that would enable a healthy alternation between parties in power.

Thirty years later, the situation has barely changed.

Fighting the LDP and its ties to the bureaucracy has been the cornerstone of Izumi's political creed since the time when he, as a fresh graduate in 1998, took his first steps in politics, working as the personal secretary to Upper House lawmaker Tetsumo Fukuyama.

Fast-forward 25 years, and Fukuyama is still in the Upper House while Izumi has become his direct chief. It hasn't been an easy road so far.

The party's lackluster performance in the Upper House election of July 2022, the first test under his leadership, forced him to make a swift change in direction. In an attempt to revamp the party, he replaced left-leaning Secretary-General Chinami Nishimura with Katsuya Okada, a more moderate former deputy prime minister and opposition leader.

This year's regional elections offered a mixed picture of the state of the party. While the CDP pushed the LDP right to the edge in traditionally conservative



As president of Japan's largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Kenta Izumi has the unenviable task of mounting a challenge against the ruling coalition led by the Liberal Democratic Party. LOUISE CLAIRE WAGNER

constituencies, it still seemed to lack the momentum needed to challenge the ruling coalition.

In a bold move that prompted a skeptical reaction from many, Izumi earlier this year announced his intention to resign if the party doesn't finish with 150 seats at the next general election, up from its current total of 97.

While his determination to put an end to the LDP dominance remains unwavering, the CDP faces a core problem, Izumi said. At the moment, it doesn't have enough candidates to take power on its own.

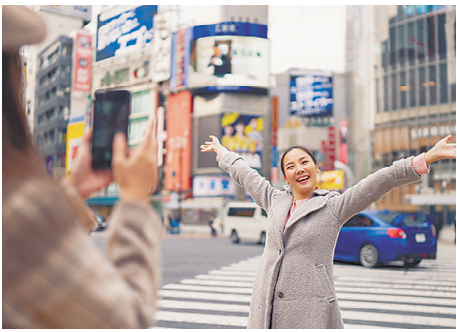
"I, like other party members, can talk about ideals — those are the same for everyone — but there's a difference between reality and ideals," Izumi cautiously asserted.

"I would like to ask those who mix up feelings and reality, and only express their ideals, to please think rationally," he added in a not-so-veiled reference to those — such as veteran Ichiro Ozawa — who chided him for his cautious tone when he hinted that the party's goal in the next general election should be to lay the foundation for broadening its support.

Such long-standing obstacles naturally prompt a discussion on the nature of the CDP's relationship with other opposition parties, from Nippon Ishin no Kai to the



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Lawmaker Kakizawa arrested over vote-buying

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Tokyo prosecutors on Thursday arrested former Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Mito Kakizawa for allegedly giving bribes to assembly members in Tokyo's Koto Ward to garner support for a candidate in the Koto mayoral election.

Four secretaries of Kakizawa, 52, were also arrested for their involvement in the bribery case. Namely, Masaki Ito, 52; Naruto Yuruki, 64; Shu Goto, 38; and Naoki Morikawa, 34.

Investigators suspect Kakizawa handed a total of ¥1.8 million in cash to LDP assembly members before the election in hopes of getting Yayoi Kimura elected. He is also suspected of offering ¥800,000 to a former assembly member involved in the election campaign for Kimura as an "advisory fee."

Kakizawa has reportedly denied the charges, saying he did not intend to bribe the assembly members with the cash. But some of those who received the money have told investigators that they thought it was bribery.

Kimura, 58, the mayoral candidate backed by Kakizawa, won the election in April, but she resigned in November amid allegations that she and her campaign staff posted a paid advertisement on YouTube for about ¥380,000, calling for people to vote for her, in violation of the election law.

Kakizawa is suspected of proposing the YouTube ad to Kimura and her staff in the first place. As investigators looked into the case, allegations that Kakizawa was also involved in bribery began to surface. Kakizawa was also arrested Thursday over the alleged YouTube ad post.

The Lower House member resigned as deputy justice minister in October over the YouTube ad. Kakizawa also left the LDP earlier this month after prosecutors raided his office in the Nagatocho district of Tokyo, but he remains a lawmaker.

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Information from Kyodo and Jiji added



Mito Kakizawa
KYODO

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U.S. issues final military aid package for Ukraine

WASHINGTON
AFP-JJI

The U.S. government on Wednesday announced what it said was the last remaining package of weapons available for Ukraine under existing authorization, with Congress now needing to decide whether to keep supporting Kyiv's battle against Russia's invasion.

"The year's final package" includes air-defense and artillery munitions, the State Department said in a statement. It added that Congress, where Republicans are split on supporting Ukraine, should "act swiftly" to renew the flow.

U.S. President Joe Biden has made backing Ukraine a priority and U.S. weapons and financial assistance have been crucial in helping the pro-Western country battle against a far larger attacking Russian force.

However, right-wing Republicans have led a push to halt the effort, refusing to authorize new budget outlays if the Democrats don't first agree to sweeping, tough new measures against illegal migration over the U.S. southern border.



The final tranche of aid is worth up to \$250 million and includes "air-defense munitions, other air-defense system components, additional ammunition for high mobility artillery rocket systems, 155mm and 105mm artillery ammunition, anti-armor munitions, and over 15 million rounds of ammunition," the State Department said.

The statement underlined the U.S.-led coalition helping Ukraine, noting that "more than 50 countries" are involved.

"It is imperative that Congress act swiftly,

U.S. military aid is unloaded from a plane near Kyiv in 2022 as part of Washington's defense support for Ukraine. REUTERS

as soon as possible, to advance our national security interests by helping Ukraine defend itself and secure its future," it said.

In Kyiv, Ukrainian presidential aide Andriy Yermak welcomed the aid.

"Thank you for your help. We will win," Yermak wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

A week ago, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby made clear that the upcoming drawdown of U.S. military aid would be the last available, leaving "no more replenishment authority."

"We're going to need Congress to act without delay," he said.

Democrats in the Senate, where they hold a narrow majority, tried to push Republicans in December for a last-minute deal, but with little progress the two parties left for the end-of-year holidays.

Congress reconvenes on Jan. 8.

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