

Political scene unpredictable as probe continues

Fund scandal deepens as Diet term nears end

GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITER

Parliament may be wrapping up its current session Wednesday, but the investigation into a Liberal Democratic Party funds scandal looks likely to deepen in the coming days, making the political scene increasingly unpredictable.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had to reckon with his own involvement in the scandal for the first time, even though he was initially untouched by the allegations that several government and party officials had received tens of millions of yen in unreported funds.

Public broadcaster NHK reported that the LDP faction formerly led by Kishida — who resigned from the faction last week — was suspected of underreporting political funds.

News on the mishandling of funding records first surfaced in late November, but the issue seemed under control after the faction made a correction to the reports.

A special squad of the Tokyo Public Prosecutor's Office will continue to scrutinize the faction's flow of funds and balance records, NHK said. As of Tuesday, no allegations of kickbacks to lawmakers belonging to the faction formerly led by Kishida have surfaced.

Hours after the faction released a statement saying it is taking "appropriate measures to verify the facts," Kishida said he had instructed the group to take action and make necessary changes.

"I believe that the specifics will be reported to me when it's time. Once I have received further information, I will let them explain appropriately," he added.

Meanwhile, the faction formerly led by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seems to have found no respite.

All the members of its steering committee have been unable to provide an explanation in response to claims they received money

from unreported income collected through fundraising parties — and new figures came to light Tuesday.

Roughly half of the lawmakers belonging to the group — it currently has 99 in total — allegedly pocketed funds for a total of ¥500 million. But there is also a chance that the total amount of both unreported income and expenses could be double this sum, reaching a staggering ¥1 billion, the Asahi Shimbun reported.

While the amount received differs based on the lawmaker, over 10 members reportedly pocketed funds amounting to over ¥10 million.

Among them, the most prominent name remains Seiko Hashimoto — an Upper House lawmaker and former Olympics minister — who has been accused of appropriating ¥20 million over five years, including the period she served in the Cabinet. Yasutada Ohno, an Upper House lawmaker hailing from Gifu Prefecture, is believed to have pocketed ¥50 million, the highest sum so far.

The leadership committee of the faction formerly led by Abe remains caught in the eye of the storm.

On Tuesday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, former secretary-general of the faction formerly led by Abe, became the target of a no-confidence motion submitted by the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), over allegations he received over ¥10 million.

"It is unacceptable for a politician to make decisions that increases the burden on the public, while at the same time they're pocketing slush funds for themselves," CDP Lower House lawmaker Shuji Inatomi told the assembly, alluding to the debated tax hike needed to cover an increase in defense outlays.

In what has recently been a rare sight, all the opposition forces voted in favor of the motion. But as widely expected, the Lower House rejected it.

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Seihan Mori, chief priest of Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto, writes "zei" (taxes), which was chosen on Tuesday as the kanji of the year. 川井

Taxes spur choice for kanji of year

Decision marks second time that the character is chosen

YUKANA INOUE
STAFF WRITER

The kanji "zei" (税), which means taxes, was selected Tuesday as the character that best represents 2023, the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation announced.

According to the foundation, the public chose the kanji due to tax hikes and cuts being heavily covered in the news and discussed among policymakers, with many feeling anxious about the increasing prices of gas and everyday goods.

Others noted how the start of a new

invoice system and debates surrounding *furusato nozei* — a program that allows people to make tax payments to a municipality of their choice in return for gifts — put taxation on their minds.

It is the second time that the character for *zei*, which can also be read as "sei" or "mitsugi" was chosen as kanji of the year. The first time was in 2014, when the nation's consumption tax was raised to 8% from 5%.

Zei received 5,976 votes out of the 147,878 cast. Coming in at a close second, with a difference of only 405 votes, was "sho" (暑), referring to the record-breaking heat the nation experienced this summer.

Other words that made the top 10 included characters referring to the many victories Japan experienced this year, especially in sports. "Tora" (虎), which means tiger, was chosen to mark the first Japan Series victory by the Hanshin Tigers in 38 years, while "shou" (勝), meaning to win, also got the nod.

The foundation has announced the top kanji for each year since 1995. It polls the public to determine what the nation views as being the kanji that best represents the year and announces the top 20 in December at Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto.

In 2022, "sen" (戦), meaning war, battle or match, took first place, representing a year of conflict and violence with events such as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The 2021 winner was "kin" (金), meaning gold or money, referring to the gold medals Japan won in the the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, which were held that year.

Guilty verdicts in SDF sexual assault case

KYOKO HASEGAWA
FUKUSHIMA
AFP-Jiji

The Fukushima District Court on Tuesday found three ex-soldiers guilty of sexually assaulting a female colleague and gave them suspended jail terms, bringing to a close a rare case for a country where victims rarely come forward to speak out against abuse.

The court sentenced Shutaro Shibuya, Akito Sekine and Yusuke Kimezawa to two years in prison, but suspended for four years, for their "forced indecency" on Rina Gonoï during a military drill in 2021.

In a socially conservative country where the #MeToo movement failed to gain much ground, Gonoï, 24, took to YouTube last year to share her account after an internal military probe was dropped for lack of evidence.

The public attention from the viral video and a petition signed by more than 100,000 people forced the Defense Ministry to acknowledge the assault and apologize.

This March, prosecutors reversed an earlier decision and charged the three men, who have been dismissed from the SDF.

Gonoï, who was in court on Tuesday for the verdict, told AFP in an interview in February that her decision to go public was "desperate rather than brave."

She said that after fulfilling a childhood dream and enlisting in 2020, she experienced daily harassment.

"When walking down the hallway, someone slaps you on your hip, or holds you from behind," she said. "I was kissed on the cheek, and my breasts were grabbed."

Then, during a drill in 2021, she says three colleagues pressed her to the ground, forced her legs apart and each repeatedly pressed their crotch against her while others watched and laughed.

Women rarely hold positions in the upper echelons of Japanese politics, business, government and armed forces. The country's gender pay gap is the worst among advanced economies.

Prominent cases such as Gonoï's — and a handful of others such as that of journalist Shiori Ito, who accused a prominent TV reporter of rape — are rare.

"In Japan, suffering sexual violence brings

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COP28 enters overtime to shape new draft deal

REUTERS, BLOOMBERG

COP28 Director-General Majid Al Suwaidi said on Tuesday the summit's presidency wanted to include a "historic" mention on the future of fossil fuels in the next draft text for a possible deal, but that it was up to the almost 200 nations at the talks.

The climate talks ran into overtime after an initial draft agreement for countering planet-warming pollution fell short of expectations for many.

"At this COP we are trying to do something that has never been done before, something historic.... Part of this is to include fossil fuels in the text. If we can, that would be historic," he told reporters.

The grouping was working to put these views "into the text in a way that everybody can be happy with," Al Suwaidi added. "The point is to get a consensus."

A 21-page document released Monday pitched a cut in consumption and production of fossil fuels as host United Arab Emirates tried to craft a compromise. A new draft was expected later Tuesday as the U.S. and European Union were among those



that opposed the previous version, saying it didn't go far enough with a phase out of polluting energy, and instead allows nations loopholes and opt-outs.

A broad coalition wants stronger language calling for the phase out of fossil fuels, but that's adamantly opposed by Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ nations.

The first text proposed a "just" and "orderly" reduction of fossil fuel use — adjectives designed to appease more cautious countries. But it presented those reductions, along with boosting efficiency and renew-

Activists protest at COP28 in Dubai on Monday. The climate talks have run into overtime after an initial draft agreement fell short of expectations for many. REUTERS

able power, as merely options.

In a meeting of lead negotiators late Monday, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry said the proposed text doesn't meet the moment. A State Department spokesperson said the fossil fuel language needed to be "substantially strengthened." EU climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra said that days of talks could remain in order to make the phase-out language stronger to keep alive the goal of keeping warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

"We have made progress, but we still have a lot to do," Sultan Al Jaber, the UAE oil executive running COP28, told a plenary session of the summit after the first draft was published Monday. "You know what remains to be agreed, and you know I want you to develop the highest ambition on all items, including on fossil fuel language."

The new draft deal was set to arrive some time after the summit's scheduled 11 a.m. close. Negotiators were expected to scrutinize every word — likely through the night — in an attempt to reach a consensus.

Visit www.japantimes.co.jp for the latest updates on the COP28 summit.



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