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Kishida faces headwinds in bid to set example

PM's gambit: dissolving his LDP faction

Focus

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has taken the risky gamble of dissolving his Liberal Democratic Party faction in a bid to shore up rock-bottom public support for his Cabinet amid a political funds scandal.

Kishida's unilateral decision to dissolve the faction, known as Kochikai and established in 1957, led two other factions, including the one once headed by the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, to also decide to disband.

Meanwhile, voices of protests have risen from among members of two other factions, led respectively by LDP Vice President Taro Aso and Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi. If the two revolt, the Kishida administration's foundations will be shaken.

"Whoever suggests first should start first," said Kishida, who had led Kochikai for about 11 years until he quit as its head last month. He made the remarks to members of the LDP's Youth Division on Friday.

Before he announced the dissolution of the faction, Kishida conveyed his intention to Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi, a key faction member, on Thursday. He also informed other senior faction members, including deputy chief Cabinet secretaries and former ministers, beforehand.

"The Kishida faction must take the lead," a source close to the prime minister said, concerned about growing public criticism of LDP factions at the center of the scandal.

Starting sometime ago, Kishida occasionally told those around him that he believed he could abolish factions. He had since been mulling over the idea of dissolving his own faction.

His decision on the matter is likely to have been accelerated by Thursday's news reports that prosecutors were poised to establish a criminal case against a former chief accountant of his faction.

Kishida's decision has thrown the LDP into

turmoil after he did not inform party executives, such as Aso and Motegi, of his decision in advance.

The prime minister announced the decision while discussions were underway at the party's political reform headquarters over what to do with factions.

"Some rejected the idea of dissolving factions, so he took the lead himself," one LDP lawmaker explained.

As Kishida had intended, the Abe faction and the faction led by former Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai followed the Kishida faction and decided on Friday to dissolve themselves.

"If we miss this opportunity, our image would be damaged," said a veteran member of the Abe faction. Meanwhile, a former Cabinet member said, "We had no choice but to follow the Kishida faction."

"The factions made their own decisions," Kishida told reporters.

While people related to the Abe, Nikai and Kishida factions were slapped with criminal charges, no case has been established against the Aso or Motegi factions.

Members of those factions are therefore eager to maintain their groups. Executives of both have rejected Kishida's dissolution policy.

"There is no reason for us to dissolve our faction," one Motegi faction member said.

Another faction, led by General Council Chairman Hiroshi Moriyama, is taking a wait-and-see approach. It is unclear whether all LDP factions will be abolished.

Although Kishida is the LDP's president, he has no direct command over factions other than his, since they are organizations independent of the party.

There is a possibility that Aso and Motegi, who have supported the administration so far, will rebel against Kishida for what can be called a heavy-handed approach.

Some observers speculate that Kishida tried to win support from former Prime

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A screen shows JAXA officials in the mission control room at the space agency's campus in Sagami-hara, Kanagawa Prefecture, on Saturday. KYODO

SLIM moon landing makes history

Japan becomes just the fifth nation to land on the moon

TOMOKO OTAKE AND JOEL TANSEY
STAFF WRITERS

Japan's lunar lander completed a successful touchdown on the moon's surface just after midnight on Saturday, but a technical issue related to the craft's ability to use solar power has made it uncertain whether the mission will achieve all of its goals.

With the landing, Japan becomes just the fifth country to land a craft on the moon, after the U.S., Russia, China and India.

Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) officials said they have good reason to believe that the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) spacecraft made a soft landing and achieved its goal of a high-precision landing, though they said they will need more time to confirm whether the lander achieved the goal of landing within 100 meters of its target site.

"The data are continually being sent to the Earth now after landing, which is evidence that our goal of a soft landing has been achieved," JAXA President Hiroshi Yamanaka told a news conference at the agency's campus in Sagami-hara, Kanagawa Prefecture, in the wee hours of Saturday morning.

JAXA officials, however, said that the solar panels on the lander were not generating power and the lander was being powered by its onboard battery, which would have only lasted for several hours.

They added that the lack of electricity from solar panels may limit the duration of the lander's activities, but said they would do their best to accomplish as much as they can with the power they have. The end of battery power does not mean the end of the mission, the officials stressed.

Officials do not believe the solar panels were damaged during the landing given that the rest of the spacecraft is intact, and noted that as the angle of the sun changes in the weeks ahead, the panels may start generating electricity.

Had the solar panels been working properly, the lander would have been able to operate for "several days," before the panels suffered damage from the moon's daytime temperatures, which can rise to about 100 degrees Celsius, the officials said.

JAXA had planned to have the lander analyze the mineral olivine on the lunar surface, which could reveal key information about the origin of the moon. But because of the power issue, the mission will prioritize sending data back to Earth to determine whether the craft achieved a pinpoint landing, and there is a possibility the mineral survey will not proceed as planned.

Tension rose at midnight Saturday as the spacecraft began its final descent, dubbed the "20 minutes of terror," in the closely watched last stage of the spacecraft's four-month journey to the moon.

At around 12:20 a.m., as people watched from around the world, the spacecraft nicknamed "Moon Sniper" successfully landed on the lunar surface.

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U.S. pursuing 'least bad' option in the Red Sea

IAIN MARLOW
BLOOMBERG

U.S. officials acknowledge that airstrikes against Houthi militants in Yemen won't deter the group from attacks that have roiled commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Yet that doesn't mean the military campaign will stop anytime soon.

U.S. President Joe Biden candidly described the dilemma Thursday when he was asked about the efforts to weaken Houthi capabilities after the Iran-backed group's series of drone and missile strikes disrupted shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital trade waterway.

"Are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes," Biden told reporters in comments that fit his long habit of saying the quiet part out loud.

Analysts and outside critics — not to mention the Houthis themselves — have said the aerial military campaign won't prevent them from firing on more ships, especially if the U.S. refuses to target the group's main backer, Iran. Yet in the absence of any better options for now, the Biden administration may have no choice.

"I think that they don't have any great expectations that this is going to succeed in deterring or degrading or defeating the Houthis," said Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen, who's now at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "Basically, they came to the conclusion that this was the least bad of the bad options that they had."

The comments only further exposed the difficult balancing act Biden faces. He must confront the chaos in the Red Sea caused by the Houthis, who insist they'll keep up their attacks until Israel halts its bombing campaign on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. But he doesn't want to go to war with Iran or pull in even more participants into the conflict. And he's rejected calls at home and abroad to press for a cease-fire in Gaza — an idea Israel won't agree to anyway.

The urgency is only increasing. The Houthi attacks, which the group says are motivated by Israel's war against Hamas, and the U.S. and U.K. response have driven down shipments through a waterway that previously handled 12% of global seaborne trade.

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Manila gets tough in the South China Sea

Analysis

GABRIEL DOMINGUEZ
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While Taiwan has long been considered a potential flashpoint between the U.S. and China, another geopolitical storm may be brewing in the South China Sea — one that could force Washington to make some difficult choices.

From laser pointers blinding Philippine sailors to collisions at sea near key military outposts, tensions are rapidly surging between Manila and Beijing in these strategically and economically important waters, where the two have overlapping claims.

By bolstering the country's defense capabilities as well as deepening defense ties with the U.S. and like-minded countries such as Japan and Australia, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has taken a tough stance on territorial disputes with China — and he is backing this up with bold moves.

Earlier this month, Manila announced that more partners would join naval patrols in the disputed waters, while revealing plans



to develop Philippine-controlled islands and reefs in the Spratly Island chain, with the country's military now tasked with coming up with "innovative" ways to handle the issue.

Manila's newfound assertiveness has likely been emboldened by assurances from the U.S. that the countries' 1951 mutual defense treaty applies to "armed attacks on either nation's armed forces or public vessels anywhere in the South China Sea."

But while the moves are intended to deter

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. attends a session of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting at the Hotel Okura in Tokyo last December. POOL/VIA REUTERS

Beijing, they are also increasing the chances of an incident exploding into a wider conflict, experts say, with some viewing the steps as indications that the window for diplomacy may be closing.

Beijing claims a large chunk of the resource-rich South China Sea but rejects any involvement by nonclaimant states in the territorial dispute, including the U.S., Canada, Australia and Japan.

Tensions have been rising so fast in recent months that senior Chinese and Philippine officials agreed last week to "further improve maritime communication and properly manage their differences through consultation ... to better deal with urgent situations at sea, especially manage the situation at Renai Reef (the Chinese name for Second Thomas Shoal)."

The shoal has been at the center of simmering tensions, as Chinese ships continue to harass resupply vessels near a Philippine garrison atop the aging Sierra Madre warship, which was deliberately grounded there in 1999 to assert Philippine sovereignty claims.

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