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All party heavyweights largely unscathed

LDP political funds probe nears an end

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A week ahead of the opening of what is set to be a particularly heated session of parliament, an ongoing investigation into a slush funds scandal entangling the upper echelons of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party is drawing to a close, with all party heavyweights largely unscathed.

Apprehension in the political center of Nagatacho since the investigation started late last year is likely to dissipate following the indictment of clerical staff, as prosecutors seem unable to prove any criminal conspiracy between lawmakers and their staffers.

The Asahi Shimbun reported on Thursday that prosecutors are building a case against the former accountant of the LDP faction that until recently was led by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, for underreporting ¥30 million in political funds from 2018 to 2020.

According to the Asahi, the former accountant will be indicted Friday. He admitted that he didn't include the revenue from fundraising parties in the political funds report and that he used the money to cover the group's running expenses.

Last month, suspicions emerged that the group, whose presidency remains vacant at the moment after Kishida stepped down last month, had been underreporting the revenue collected through fundraising parties, but no allegations of underreported kickbacks to single lawmakers have been made.

After initial reports emerged, the faction said it soon made corrections to the reports. The underreported sum in question was relatively low compared with those of other groups.

Questioned about his own involvement, Kishida refused to directly comment on the reports, on the grounds that the investigation is still ongoing.

"I am aware of some discrepancies in administrative procedures, but nothing more," he told reporters, referring to the underreporting as "a series of administrative errors" and adding

that the group was going to make necessary amendments on Thursday.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi, a senior member of the faction, said he was informed about the submission of the amendments to the funds reports on Wednesday, but wasn't aware of it beforehand.

"If necessary, I'll provide further explanation myself," he told a news conference, without adding any details on how he intended to do so.

Additionally, prosecutors are reportedly mulling the indictment of an aide of former LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai as they question suspects over the underreporting of around ¥30 million raised from fundraising parties in the last five years.

The sum was missing from the report submitted by the office of Nikai, who himself was questioned over his involvement in the scandal earlier this year.

The accountant of the faction he leads will reportedly face indictment without arrest for underreporting roughly ¥200 million between 2018 and 2022.

The reports come two days after it became clear that seven senior members of the faction previously led by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe would not face charges over their alleged involvement in the scandal and only the faction's accountant would be prosecuted.

So far, the investigation has only resulted in one high-profile arrest. Lower House lawmaker Yoshitaka Ikeda was arrested earlier this month for allegedly receiving ¥48.26 million in slush funds from the Abe faction.

But time is running out for investigators.

The Constitution sets out that lawmakers can't be arrested during a session of parliament. The assembly convenes Jan. 26 and draws to a close five months later on June 23.

The Political Funds Control law designates the accountant of a political group as the person in charge of the group's finances and the only one liable in case of a breach. Unless there is clear proof of criminal conspiracy, it is hard for prosecutors to indict lawmakers who occupy senior positions in the faction.



An image of what a permanent base on the moon might look like. JAXA's SLIM lander will transform how space agencies explore celestial bodies that have gravity, allowing landers to touch down on even rugged terrain, the agency says. JAXA / VIA KYODO

Japan's SLIM readies for moon landing

TOMOKO OTAKE
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Amid an international space race, anticipation is building as the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency's lunar lander gears up for Saturday's touchdown on the moon's surface, putting the agency's pinpoint landing technology to the test in a mission that could accelerate international space exploration.

Nicknamed "Moon Sniper," JAXA's Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) is on its way to the lunar surface, having successfully entered lunar orbit in late December and begun its preparation for a landing earlier this week. It will be lowered to 15 kilometers above the lunar surface on Friday.

The spacecraft will then begin its final descent early Saturday morning at midnight. The plan is for it to perform a two-step stable touchdown on the sloped grounds near the Shioli crater, to the west of Mare Nectaris on the near side of the moon. It is scheduled to land at 12:20 a.m.

If successful, SLIM would make Japan only the fifth country to land a craft on the moon



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WAR OR NO WAR, MANY OLDER UKRAINIANS AIM TO STAY PUT
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For first time, 'specified juvenile' given death sentence

YUKANA INOUE
AND KANAKO TAKAHARA
STAFF WRITERS

A 21-year-old man was sentenced to death on Thursday over a 2021 murder-arson case, marking the first time a defendant age 18 or 19 at the time of a crime has been given the death penalty following the lowering of the age of adulthood from 20 to 18 in 2022.

The Kofu District Court in Yamanashi Prefecture gave Yuki Endo the death penalty for killing the parents of a girl he went to high school with and setting their home on fire.

Presiding Judge Jun Mikami said that the defendant had "the full ability to take responsibility for the crime" and that "his age is not a reason to avoid the death penalty."

In October 2021, Endo, then 19 years old, went to the home of a teenage girl he had a crush on, stabbed her parents to death, hit her younger sister with a machete and set the house on fire, according to prosecutors. The teenage girl did not sustain any injuries.

Endo later turned himself in, submitting a letter saying he held a grudge against the fellow student because she rejected his romantic advances.

The focus of the trial was on Endo's mental state and whether he was criminally liable for his acts at the time of the incident. Prosecutors, who sought the death penalty, said that he was and that he killed the girl's parents to hurt her.

The defense lawyers, meanwhile, said he should not be held accountable, argued that Endo was mentally deficient at the time.

According to the ruling, it was judged that Endo was liable for his actions and that there was little prospect of him being rehabilitated, which lead to the sentence of capital punishment.

Endo nodded in court when given the sentence. But he placed his hands on his face when the judge told him at the end of the trial to "not to give up thinking." Even after the court was dismissed, he stayed in his seat looking straight ahead.

It is the first time since the juvenile law was revised that a death penalty has been

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A first for the JCP
Political party picks its first-ever female leader | **NATIONAL, PAGE 2**

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For many in China, it feels like a recession

CASEY HALL
SHANGHAI
REUTERS

The night before China's civil service exam, Melody Zhang anxiously paced up and down the corridor of her dormitory, rehearsing her answers. Only when she got back to her room did she realize she had been crying the whole time.

Zhang was hoping to start a career in state propaganda after more than 100 unsuccessful job applications in the media industry. With a record 2.6 million people going for 39,600 government jobs amid a youth unemployment crisis, she didn't get through.

"We were born in the wrong era," said the 24-year-old graduate from China's top Renmin University.

"No one cares about their dreams and ambitions anymore in an economic downturn. The endless job hunting is a torture."

A crisis of confidence in the economy is deterring consumers from spending and businesses from hiring and investing, in what could become a self-feeding mechanism that erodes China's long-term economic potential.



China's economy grew 5.2% last year, more than most major economies. But for the unemployed graduates, the property owners who feel poorer as their flats lose value and the workers earning less than the year before, the world's second-largest economy feels like it's shrinking.

Zhu Tian, an economics professor at the China Europe International Business School in Shanghai, says the textbook definition of a

China's economy grew 5.2% last year, more than most major economies. But for many in the country, the world's second-largest economy feels like it's shrinking.
BLOOMBERG

recession — two consecutive quarters of economic contraction — should not apply to a developing country investing roughly 40% of its output annually, twice the level of the United States.

"We're in a recession," Zhu said. "If you talk to 10 people, seven will say we've had a bad year."

"I don't think the government can afford that. This cannot go on forever," he said, urging more stimulus measures to break out of what could be a vicious cycle of low confidence that will affect young people entering the job market in particular.

More than 1 in 4 of the roughly 100 million Chinese age 16-24 were unemployed in June, the last data point before officials suspended the series. China resumed publication of the data on Wednesday, excluding college students from it, to put youth unemployment at 14.9% in December.

China's Generation Z is the most pessimistic of all age groups, surveys show.

Those who find jobs earn less than they expect as businesses cut costs in response to poor domestic demand. Recruiter Zhaopin

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