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Move by PM acknowledges impact of funds scandal

LDP turmoil continues with faction breakup

ERIC JOHNSTON
AND GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITERS

Questions about the future of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's powerful faction system grew stronger Friday after the fallout from Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's surprise announcement Thursday that he was thinking about disbanding his own faction. Meanwhile, another faction, the LDP's largest, met on Friday to discuss its own future amid calls by its members for it to be abolished.

"In order to restore trust in politics, I've said the Kochikai will be abolished," Kishida clarified Friday morning, referring to the faction he chaired until last month.

The 47-member Kishida faction, officially known as the Kochi Seisaku Kenkyukai, is the LDP's fourth-largest faction and the party's oldest. It was founded in 1957 by former Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda.

Former members include other previous prime ministers such as Masayoshi Ohira,

Zenko Suzuki and Kiichi Miyazawa. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi and Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa are some of the sitting members of the Cabinet currently affiliated with the group.

Kishida's sudden announcement came after his faction became caught up in a slush funds scandal that continues to shake his administration and the LDP.

Kazuo Sasaki, the former treasurer of the Kishida faction who resigned last month, was indicted Friday for false statements in violation of the Political Funds Control Law. Prosecutors believe that ¥30 million was not detailed in the faction's political fund balance reports over a three-year period to 2020.

Tokyo prosecutors are investigating several LDP factions amid allegations they failed to report revenue from sales of tickets for fundraising parties that was kicked back to members who sold more than a faction-determined quota.

Kishida has described what happened as an administrative oversight. He said Thursday that he had notified the internal affairs

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's sudden announcement on Thursday regarding the dissolution of his Liberal Democratic Party faction came after the group became caught up in a slush funds scandal that continues to shake his administration and the party. KYODO

ministry, which is in charge of political funds reports, of the discrepancy.

The prime minister has not offered a timeline as to when his faction might be abolished. Jiji Press, citing a senior faction member, said it could happen after the government's political reform panel releases an interim report about the slush funds scandal on Thursday.

While the Kishida faction is involved in the scandal, the main focus of the investigation by prosecutors has been the nearly 100-member faction of the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, officially known as the Seiwai Seisaku Kenkyukai.

The group's meeting on Friday came as anger and dissension appeared to be growing among its members, especially junior ones, over the way senior leaders have handled the political funds scandal.

Junior members of the Abe faction, under

Slower inflation supports case for BOJ to wait on negative rates

MIA GLASS AND TORU FUJIOKA
BLOOMBERG

Japan's latest inflation report gives the Bank of Japan another reason to wait beyond next week's meeting before ending its negative rate policy, while also adding to the case for a hike in coming months.

Growth in consumer prices excluding fresh food slowed to 2.3% in December from a year earlier, matching consensus, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications reported Friday. Steeper drops in electricity and gas prices and a slower pace of gains for processed food weighed on the index.

For a second month, prices for services rose 2.3%, the fastest pace in three decades, excluding periods distorted by sales tax hikes.

The data supports the view that there's no pressing need for the BOJ to rush into making its first rate hike since 2007 at its January meeting, with April touted by many economists as the most likely month.

Friday's data is the latest indication that cost-push inflationary pressure in Japan is easing, in line with what the BOJ has predicted would happen. Previous data showed that the December producer price index was flat versus a year earlier, the weakest showing in almost three years. Consumer price gains in Tokyo the same month eased to the slowest in over a year.

"Cost-push inflation has eased a bit, but whether this will transfer into demand-pull inflation can't yet be confirmed," said Yuichi Kodama, chief economist at Meiji Yasuda Research Institute.

The price data isn't expected to push the BOJ from its path toward eventually normalizing policy. The 2.3% rise in service prices is an indication that underlying inflation may be moving beyond temporary cost-push factors.

"The ongoing deceleration in inflation doesn't mean that BOJ's normalization is off the table," said Taro Saito, head of economic research at NLI Research Institute.

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How the quake information apparatus springs into action

ELIZABETH BEATTIE AND KARIN KANEKO
TOKYO/NANAO, ISHIKAWA PREF.
STAFF WRITERS

When a natural disaster or significant trauma occurs, the effect is often to freeze a moment in time and magnify it. For 66-year old Nanao resident Yoshiko Oyachi, when the Noto Peninsula earthquake struck on New Year's Day, she was sitting in her car beside her husband.

"I held hands with my husband until the shaking stopped," she said. "It was shaking so much, I didn't have a choice but to stay still." But Oyachi couldn't stay still for long. Living near the sea, she knew where to go when her phone began blasting earthquake warnings and speakers broadcast warnings of a tsunami.

"The residents around here always evacuate to Komaruyama Park, a high location, whenever there is a tsunami threat," Oyachi

said. "As everyone has experienced evacuations before, everyone headed toward the park."

When the powerful 7.6 magnitude quake hit the Noto region, Japan's well-oiled emergency broadcast system J-Alert sent phones wailing, while loudspeakers began blaring warnings and instructions. At the same time, presenters on NHK were impassionately yelling for people to evacuate their homes, get to higher ground and not give up.

When a major earthquake strikes Japan, each element of the country's earthquake and natural disaster information apparatus swings into action.

"For the earthquake, I had the alarm on my mobile phone. For the tsunami, there was TV, social media and outdoor broadcasts, so I didn't feel like there was a lack of information," Oyachi said.

As an employee at the community center in Nanao's Misogi district, which is designated as

a shelter in times of need, Oyachi also played a critical role in the city's earthquake response — after she was alerted, her first priority was to unlock the door to the center for those stranded. When the tsunami warning came, she then evacuated to higher ground herself.

Even with the protocols and clear information in place, the death toll from the quake stood at 232, including 14 disaster-related deaths, as of Friday afternoon.

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Mayor in Ishikawa Prefecture says chat app was vital following quake | **NATIONAL, PAGE 2**

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Forget fear-mongering, focus on the more immediate problems of 2024 | **OPINION, PAGE 9**

Fight for Pacific ties
China's diplomatic wins in region force U.S. to confront painful reality | **ASIA, PAGE 4**

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Debate grows over expo funding in wake of quake

Focus
ERIC JOHNSTON
STAFF WRITER

As recovery efforts continue following the New Year's Day earthquake on Ishikawa Prefecture's Noto Peninsula, a debate is growing about whether it would be better to postpone, or even cancel, the troubled 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo and use the money, labor and construction materials for quake-hit communities instead.

The debate comes as parliament prepares to convene on Jan. 26 to approve the fiscal 2024 budget, which will include money for quake relief and rebuilding as well as for the expo, which kicks off in April of next year.

Masakazu Tokura, chair of the powerful business lobby Keidanren as well as chairman and representative director of the expo, paid a visit Thursday to the expo site on Osaka's Yumeshima, an artificial island in Osaka bay. Speaking to reporters afterward, he said both quake relief efforts and expo construction should continue to be carried out.

"Some overseas pavilions are behind

Keidanren Chair Masakazu Tokura (center) visits the 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo site on Thursday. KYODO

schedule, but the people involved (with their construction) are taking into account the circumstances of each country and responding accordingly," he said.

When asked about the possibility of postponing the expo in order to give priority to the restoration of the areas affected by the Noto Peninsula earthquake, Tokura said: "It is only natural to give top priority to quake relief, rescue efforts, victim assistance and to

restoring the lives of people to normalcy. We want to proceed with these tasks in tandem with completing expo construction."

However, Takeshi Niinami, chair of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai), previously gave a different answer.

"I don't think we should decide which should have first priority when we still don't know the extent of the damage. However, if it's true (that extensive damage occurred), we should make a firm decision by putting human lives first, and I think the world would understand," Niinami told reporters on Jan. 5.

"I'm not of the opinion that the expo should be canceled, but rather that the start of the expo will be delayed (due to the earthquake response). I still think the expo needs to be held," he added.

The debate over whether to cancel or delay the expo comes less than 500 days before the six-month event is due to open on April 13, 2025. At the same time, construction of foreign country pavilions is way behind schedule. Last month, Italy finally became the first country to break ground for its pavilion.

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