

Japan in 2023

Signature Policies Are Reigned In without Electoral Pressures

ABSTRACT

This year saw efforts by Japan's government, led by prime minister Fumio Kishida, to tackle problems such as the need to arrest the declining birthrate, increase defense spending, deepen security ties with the US and other nations, and safeguard the rights of sexual minorities. Yet despite being in an enviable position domestically, with no national election looming, a decimated opposition, and a coalition partner with the votes to underwrite his administration, Kishida was unable to rally the public behind a tax hike to fund defense spending. Japan's prime ministers remain sensitive to public opinion, likely due to the precariousness of their position as leader of the Liberal Democratic Party rather than electoral considerations.

KEYWORDS: LDP-Komeito coalition; opposition weakness; Kishida Fumio; US-Japan relations; Japan-South Korea relations; My Number; LGBTQ; money politics

ACCORDING TO LAST YEAR'S year-end review (Rhyu 2023), Japan "continued as usual without major changes" in 2022, even as it experienced a shocking event—the use of a homemade gun to kill a former prime minister, Abe Shinzo, on the campaign trail—and its aftermath, the unveiling of connections between Abe's party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the Unification Church.¹ In domestic politics, the LDP–Komeito ruling coalition maintained its majority, relegating opposition parties to the sidelines. In foreign security policy, the government continued its strategy of

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1. Also known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

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strengthening security cooperation with the United States, broadening the capabilities permissible under its “defense-oriented defense policy”, and expanding training and co-investment with like-minded countries, such as Australia. On the economic front, the government continued its easy monetary policy, in which low interest rates and fiscal stimulus were expected to bring about “healthy” inflation rates of 2% per annum.

If 2022 was about continuity, 2023 saw serious efforts by the government of prime minister Kishida Fumio to tackle problems facing Japan, including the need to arrest the declining birthrate, increase defense spending, cultivate relations with like-minded countries in the region and beyond, improve administrative efficiency, safeguard the rights of sexual minorities, and continue cleaning up in the wake of the 2011 nuclear reactor disaster. While some of those efforts were successful, others were not. What hampered more decisive efforts was Kishida’s sensitivity to public opinion, particularly on taxes,² and reluctance to pursue policies unsupported by a majority. This year saw Kishida propose solutions he thought the public would rally behind, only to withdraw them at the first sign of dissatisfaction.

POLITICS

Kishida’s sensitivity to public opinion is interesting because the ruling LDP–Komeito coalition is in one of the strongest positions it has ever had. At the beginning of 2023, Kishida’s coalition controlled 63% of the seats in the lower house, and 59% in the upper house. Lower house members’ four-year terms would not be up until October 2025, and upper house members’ six-year terms until July 2025 and July 2028, respectively. Going into 2023, a national election would not have to be held in either chamber for at least two and a half years. And while Kishida is also LDP president, and LDP presidents are required to recontest their seat every three years, he still had almost two years on his clock.

Weakness of the Opposition

Of course, ruling parties can be in an enviable position but also have a strong opposition party waiting in the wings, ready to capitalize on any mistake they

2. In early December, the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation named “tax” (税) the *kanji* of the year.

might make. In 2023, however, this was *not* the LDP's situation. There are four main opposition parties: the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), Nippon Ishin no Kai (Ishin), Democratic Party for the People (DPP), and Japanese Communist Party (JCP). The highest support rate commanded by any of them in 2023 was 7.4% (recorded by the CDP in December).³ In contrast, the LDP's support rate fluctuated between 38.9% (in January) and 29.5% (in December). Numerically, LDP supporters outnumber the supporters of each of the opposition parties by a factor of at least five (and up to ten). The possibility that the LDP loses the next lower house election to a single opposition party is nearly zero.

Could a *group* of opposition parties campaigning separately win enough seats between them to form a coalition government? What militates against this scenario is their ideological differences, with the CDP and JCP to the left of the LDP, and Ishin and the DPP closer to the LDP or to the right on some issues (Miwa and Taniguchi 2017; Taniguchi 2020). Not only would these divisions make governing difficult, but they also make it difficult for each opposition party to win more seats. This is because two-thirds of lower house members are elected in single-seat districts, in which the LDP–Komeito coalition coalesces around a single candidate. Whenever multiple opposition parties field candidates, it is difficult for any of them to win, but their ideological differences make it hard for deals to be struck such that parties stand down.

Last year's year-in-review said, "the possibility of the opposition's taking power is lower than ever" (Rhyu 2023). The same is true in 2023. When given the opportunity, opposition leaders voice criticism of Kishida and the LDP (Ninivaggi 2023). However, they have not been able to turn crises for Kishida or the LDP into opportunities for themselves. Over the past year and a half, we have had the unraveling of the LDP's connections to the Unification Church, an entity the government eventually determined was causing so much harm that it had to be disbanded, and key figures in the Kishida administration have hidden their ties with the church. We have had problematic behavior by key figures in Kishida's government, problems with the rollout of policies, and then, in December 2023, the biggest money politics scandal in 35 years. While these episodes preceded dips in Cabinet

3. Support rates from NHK (<https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu>).

(and usually LDP) support, there was usually little change in support for the opposition. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that Japanese politics exists in a curious state of no (serious) opposition.⁴

Strength of the LDP–Komeito Coalition

The LDP does not govern by itself, but in a coalition with Komeito. This year confirmed the extent to which these two parties are in lockstep. The reason is simple: each needs what the other can provide and cannot get it elsewhere (Catalinac and Motolinia 2021; Liff and Maeda 2019; Nakakita 2019). For the LDP, Komeito provides up to 10,000 (sometimes even up to 20,000) votes in many single-seat districts. These votes are extraordinarily valuable to the many LDP members running therein.⁵ While the same number of votes could be pieced together by cozying up to other groups in one's district, unless they matched those that other LDP members were cozying up to, it would be hard for a single LDP Diet member to ensure that the group's interests were reflected in policymaking. Having all LDP members cozy up to Komeito is more efficient. On the Komeito side, attaching itself to the LDP enables it to influence budgets and enact policies for its supporters.⁶ While it could attach itself to another ruling party, there is no guarantee that its distribution of votes would match that party's needs as well as it does the LDP's. Generally speaking, the LDP needs votes in urban areas, and Komeito has them.

Each partner understands the value of the other. But they do not always agree. In April 2023, they had a spat, which led to speculation that the coalition was on the brink. But the probability of the LDP–Komeito coalition breaking up is even smaller than the probability of an opposition-led government. What the 2023 spat reveals is not that the coalition is in danger of breaking up, but the reverse: it is so strong that both parties feel comfortable fighting for a greater share of the spoils. The spat was about candidacies. In 2022 it was decided that, to reduce disparities between electoral districts (brought about by population shifts) in the number of votes needed to elect

4. The December 2023 money politics scandal, unfolding at the time of writing, may lead to increased support for the opposition.

5. Interview, LDP lower house member, Tokyo, December 12, 2023; interview, LDP lower house member, December 13, 2023.

6. Interview, former Komeito upper house member, Tokyo, December 14, 2023.

a representative, ten rural prefectures would lose one seat each, and five urban prefectures would gain between one and five seats each. The partners had to decide which of the new seats would feature an LDP or a Komeito candidate. Komeito wanted Tokyo's 28th district. The LDP said no. Komeito responded with threats; the LDP offered no visible response; and Komeito eventually withdrew them (Kuniyoshi 2023).

Thus, without an election having to be held anytime soon, and with an electoral system that keeps the opposition down and the LDP–Komeito coalition up, Kishida was in good shape to pursue essentially whatever he wanted. So a key takeaway from 2023 is that he did not take the opportunity to do so. I will return to this at the end, but for now, I present an overview of key events in Japanese politics, political economy, and foreign security policy in 2023.

UNVEILING OF KISHIDA'S SIGNATURE POLICIES

Going into 2023, support for Kishida's Cabinet was at an all-time low (33%). The six months following the assassination of former prime minister Abe Shinzo in July 2022 had seen media scrutiny of LDP–Unification Church ties, Kishida's (initially unsuccessful) attempts to cleanse his Cabinet of people with these ties, the beginning of an investigation into the church, and a fraught decision to hold a state funeral for Abe. This contributed to declines in support from 59% in July to 43% in August, and then into the thirties by October.

Against this background, in December 2022, Kishida announced two signature policy items. One was a bold new plan to increase spending on children and family policies to “unprecedented levels,” with the aim of arresting the declining birthrate. It would include a new government agency; greater benefits for families with children; and expanded childcare (Otake 2023). The other item was a bold plan to invest in new defense capabilities, which would increase Japan's defense spending to the level of NATO countries (2% of GNP) within five years. In three documents (a National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Defense Buildup Program), the government re-assessed the security threats facing Japan and outlined a raft of measures needed in response. To bring Japan's defense capabilities up to the point where it could assume “primary responsibility for its defense” in “the most severe and complex security environment since

the end of WWII,” the plan called for an extra ¥43 trillion (US\$300 billion) to be spent over the next five years (Liff 2023).

Crucially, Kishida was vague about financing: how the children-and-family policies would be funded would be worked out later, in 2023. The higher defense spending in the first of the five fiscal years (2023) would come from existing fiscal resources, but after that, some of it would be shouldered by the current generation (in the form of tax hikes). Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, in tandem with China’s assertive behavior and claims to territory in the region and the threat of nuclear-armed North Korea, had increased support for strengthening Japan’s defenses (Iida 2023; Solis 2023). However, the public did not want tax hikes (Hikotani 2023). Polling in January put Cabinet support at the lowest it had ever been under Kishida, at 33%; 61% of respondents were opposed to tax hikes for defense spending, and 49% said that a lower house election should be called first, to weigh public sentiment.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN FOREIGN SECURITY POLICY

After the low in January, Cabinet support recovered slightly, reaching the forties in March, where it stayed until May, reaching a high (for 2023) of 46% when Kishida hosted the Group of Seven (G7) summit in Hiroshima. The uptick correlates with achievements in foreign security policy and progress on Kishida’s first signature policy.

First, January saw Japan and the United States agree to strengthen cooperation in cyber security and improve the agility and integration of the allied defense posture. The US said that the protection it is obligated to provide under Article 5 of the US–Japan Security Treaty also extended to space—that is, Japanese satellites (Solis 2023). Kishida visited Washington, and the two leaders issued a statement reaffirming their partnership. It also said that the two countries “strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, anywhere in the world.” Kishida also visited five countries in the G7 to discuss security cooperation. This yielded a new defense agreement with the United Kingdom, which allows forces from each country to be dispatched to the other for training and joint exercises.

This was followed in March by an unannounced visit to Ukraine, where Kishida met with president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Also in March, he hosted South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol in Tokyo, for the first summit between leaders of the two countries in 10 years. The visit was preceded by

Yoon's announcement that his administration would establish a fund to compensate Korean victims of the colonial-era forced conscription of Japanese companies, effectively removing the expectation that the companies would provide the compensation. In response, the Japanese government announced that it would drop restrictions on the export of technology to South Korean companies, which it had imposed in 2019 when the dispute over compensation had emerged. Later, the countries reinstated a military intelligence-sharing pact and each other as preferred trading partners, both casualties of the 2019 dispute. Later in 2023, both leaders traveled to Camp David for a summit with Biden, which resulted in a pledge to consult in the case of a security contingency (Green 2023). In a May poll, 53% of respondents were hopeful that the relationship between Japan and South Korea would continue to improve.

April also saw the launch of the Official Security Assistance program, under which the government allocates a fixed sum (initially ¥2 billion, US \$14 million) through which grants for (nonlethal) defense equipment and infrastructure can be given to like-minded countries with a view to strengthening their militaries (Nishida 2023). In a poll after the G7 Summit in May, which saw a surprise visit to Japan by Zelenskyy, 75% of respondents said they "appreciated" Zelenskyy's participation, either "to a certain extent" or "strongly."

IMPLEMENTING CHILDREN AND FAMILY POLICY

March through May also saw key steps in the implementation of Kishida's children-and-family policies, with the release of draft policies (March), the establishment of the Children and Families Agency (April), the establishment of the Children's Future Strategy Council (April), and the council's adoption of a Children's Future Strategy (June). Bringing together individuals from most of the ministries charged with policies for children,⁷ the agency's mandate includes policies to reverse the declining birthrate, to support pregnant women and children with disabilities, and to address child abuse and poverty (Benozza 2023). Defining the three years from 2024 as a "critical period" in which "intense activities" are needed, the strategy calls for increasing lump-sum payments on childbirth, increasing monthly transfers to families with

7. Education remained the preserve of the Ministry of Education.

children, and expanding public child care (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2023).

The government provided more clarity on financing, stating that the extra ¥3.5 trillion (US\$24 billion) in annual funds would come from existing fiscal resources, curbing increases in social security spending, issuing new (child-care) bonds, and later, hikes in social insurance premiums. In polls, 53% wanted it paid for with cuts to other items in the budget; 19% supported adjusting social insurance premiums.

PROGRESS ON LGBT RIGHTS?

In June, the government passed the Promotion of Public Understanding of Diversity of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Act (colloquially known as the LGBT Understanding Act).⁸ It calls on national and local governments, employers, and educational institutions to promote the awareness of diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. Sponsored by an LDP lawmaker, the bill received the support of the governing coalition, as well as Ishin and DPP. Other parties opposed it on the grounds that it was a watered-down version of a 2021 law that was not enacted. Groups advocating for the rights of sexual minorities also expressed dissatisfaction on two counts. One, in lieu of a statement that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is “unacceptable,” the act stated that “there will be no unfair discrimination.” Advocacy groups said this implied that some discrimination *was* acceptable. Two, a clause was added to the effect that the law would be implemented as long as citizens felt “at ease.” Critics held that this wording reinforced the idea that sexual minorities posed a threat (French 2023).

As background, a 2019 survey on the degree to which national laws in OECD countries guarantee equal treatment for LGBT individuals ranked Japan the second-worst performer and mentioned its lack of progress since 1999 (OECD 2020). While the share of legislation guaranteeing LGBT inclusivity in the *average* OECD country increased from 20% in 1999 to 53% in 2019 (a 33-point increase), in Japan it increased from 18% to 24% (only six points). The report notes that in Japan there is no national law

8. In Japanese, Seitēki shikō oyobi jendāaidentiti no tayousei ni kansuru kokumin no rikai no zoushin ni kansuru houritsu (<https://www8.cao.go.jp/rikaizoshin/>).

prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and same-sex marriage is not recognized. This denies same-sex couples rights reserved for their married counterparts, including the rights to inherit, to make medical recommendations, to receive life insurance payments, and to adopt children. And while transgender individuals have been allowed since 2004 to change their gender identity, they must meet five conditions to do so, one of which is sterilization.

Beginning with Shibuya and Setagaya in 2015, Japanese municipalities began introducing same-sex partnership certificates. With limited legal standing, they nevertheless call on real estate agencies, schools, and hospitals to treat same-sex couples with certificates as in a relationship equivalent to marriage, and extend them equivalent rights, including access to public housing.⁹ Public opinion polling started showing broad support for same-sex marriage and protections for these individuals. Business organizations started speaking out about how Japan's lack of protections and reluctance to extend equivalent rights to same-sex couples hurt their ability to attract skilled foreign workers.

In 2019, the LDP promised to enact such legislation but did not. In 2021, advocates argued that as host of the Olympics, Japan needed to ensure that its domestic laws matched up to the Olympic Charter, which bans discrimination against these individuals. This time, a bill was submitted to the lower house, but opposition within the LDP scuttled it. In a survey in 2022, only 11% of LDP candidates supported legalizing same-sex marriage (French and Imahashi 2022). In 2023, with the G7 summit coming up, advocates pointed out that in 2021 Japan had signed a G7 communique which called on governments to tackle discrimination (White House 2021). The US ambassador to Japan, Rahm Emanuel, made a video in which 14 ambassadors to Japan all exhorted legislators to act on the protection of LGBT rights. These factors may have contributed to the act's passage.

KISHIDA'S STEWARDSHIP COMES INTO QUESTION AGAIN

Following a high of 46% in May 2023, Cabinet support fell again over the next three months. Three issues likely contributed. One, a law was passed

9. As of 2023, 328 municipalities, covering 71% of Japan's population, have adopted this system (<https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01836/>).

that replaces national health insurance cards with My Number cards. Introduced in 2016, the My Number system creates a single, unified digital ID for access to person's health, tax, and social security records. The 2023 law effectively reneged on the government's promise not to make the cards mandatory. This, combined with media reports of errors whereby people were matched with data belonging to others and private information was disclosed, tapped into a perception that LDP governments mishandle private information.

Two, a scandal involving Kishida's son, Shotaro, whom he had appointed as an executive secretary, made headlines. Kishida had initially come under fire for the appointment on the grounds that 32-year-old Shotaro was not qualified. Then, in January 2023, it emerged that he had used official cars to go souvenir shopping while accompanying Kishida on trips abroad. In May, photographs surfaced of a New Year's party his son had hosted in the Kantei (the prime minister's office), in which partygoers appeared to be fooling around in official spaces, contributing to the perception that Shotaro was not responsible. Kishida let him go, but the public felt that he had not done so quickly enough.

Three, in July, the Nuclear Regulatory Agency announced that the operator of the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant had tested the treated radioactive wastewater it had stored since 2011 to see whether it could be released into the waters surrounding Japan, and it passed those tests. Though Japan had allowed IAEA inspectors and received South Korea's support, the fishing industry protested. As the release (designed to occur gradually, over several decades) began, China banned all marine products from Japan (Siripala 2023). Polling showed that the Japanese public felt the release had not been explained sufficiently.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AT A STANDSTILL?

In September, in the face of three months of disappointing numbers, Kishida reshuffled his Cabinet. Of the 20 members, five were women. But any positive sentiment this could have generated was lost when the lineup of junior ministers (*fuku daijin* and *seimukan*) was announced: 54 men and no women (Konahana 2023).

In 2023, Japan was 125th out of 146 countries on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index, nine places lower than in 2022. On the

political empowerment dimension, it had slipped to 138th. Female participation in politics, at both the national and local levels, remained exceedingly low, at just 5.7%. In June a statement by the mayor of Yokosuka that women likely had “centuries of oppression embedded in their DNA” made headlines, as did a petition started by Yokosuka residents demanding that he retract the statement and take gender and diversity training. In the eyes of some, the fact that several G7 leaders and foreign ministers are women means that having a woman prime minister is an “imminent issue” in Japan (Ohamasaki 2023).

REVERSING COURSE ON TAX HIKES FOR DEFENSE SPENDING

Throughout 2023, Kishida demurred on the question of funding for the new defense spending. In October, facing low support and by-elections, Kishida reversed course, declaring that tax hikes for defense spending would be shelved until fiscal year 2025, and in their place would be income tax cuts and benefits for low-income earners. His argument was that cuts were needed to cushion the effects of inflation, which were blunting the impact of the wage hike he had helped realize in April and holding down consumer spending. *Asahi Shimbun* (2023) called this a “blatant vote-grabbing ploy.” Pointing out that the massive spending the government had pursued under COVID-19 had been financed with debt, which had added to Japan’s already humongous budget deficit, the editorial said that “no reasonable case” could be made for an income tax cut.

Cabinet support dropped seven percentage points in the month after, to an all-time low of 29%. In polls, 59% of respondents said they did not appreciate the cuts. When asked why, 39% said “it looks like an election ploy.” Kishida pushed ahead. In his proposed budget for 2024, a record ¥7.7 trillion (US\$53 billion) was earmarked, which included the cuts and the benefits, as well as tax incentives for wage increases and a 16% increase in defense spending, earmarked for counterstrike capabilities (namely, the deployment of Japan’s upgraded Type 12 surface-to-ship missile and the co-development of a next-generation fighter jet with Great Britain and Italy).

MONEY POLITICS SCANDAL

Cabinet support plunged six percentage points in December 2023, to a low of 23%. The cause was a money politics scandal so big it claimed the resignations

of four Cabinet ministers and eight other executives; it may eventually lead to Kishida's resignation as well.

What happened? Under the Political Funds Control Act (1948, revised 1975 and 1994), parties, factions, and lawmakers are allowed to hold fundraising parties, to which corporations and individuals buy tickets. The law requires hosts to produce annual reports detailing income and expenditure and disclose the names of donors / ticket purchasers if they exceed a certain amount (Carlson and Nakabayashi 2023; Carlson and Reed 2018). It turned out that the Abe faction (to which 99 of the 380-odd LDP Diet members belong), along with some other factions, did not report all the income they received from these parties. Moreover, they operated a kickback system in which members were given quotas for how many tickets they needed to sell, with the understanding that if they sold more than this, they could keep the extra proceeds. While this is not illegal, it *is* illegal not to report it, both as expenditure on the faction's funding report and as income on the lawmaker's. Numerous cases were revealed in which kickbacks were not reported or were misreported, and for some lawmakers, the undeclared amounts ran into the tens of thousands of dollars (Nagatomi 2023).

The scandal occupied media attention in December, somewhat overshadowing Kishida's hosting of a special summit meeting with the leaders of the ASEAN nations, which resulted in measures to deepen security ties, and the government's revision of the Three Principles on the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology to allow the export of lethal equipment (e.g., Patriot missiles) made in Japan under license from one country (e.g., the United States) back to that country. Interest was driven by two factors: one, the Abe faction had several individuals serve as secretary general (*jimu sochou*) over the previous five years, and all had prominent positions in Kishida's Cabinet; and two, prosecutors had indicted an LDP lawmaker in 2022 for misreporting income. He resigned and was banned from running for office for three years. The specter of this outcome for *numerous* LDP lawmakers could threaten the party's ability to recapture its majority.

As of the time of writing, attention has shifted to the recovery efforts following the Noto Peninsula Earthquake of January 1, 2024, and praise for the crew who evacuated passengers from JAL flight 516 on January 2. But 2024 will see sustained discussion of revisions of the Political Funds Control Act, and perhaps some indictments.

CONCLUSION

Japanese prime ministers remain sensitive to public opinion, particularly on the question of taxes, even when they are in enviable positions domestically (no election soon; decimated opposition; solid coalition). They can realize policies that already have broad support but will flail on policies that might be *needed* (to put Japan's finances on a healthier footing, for example) but on which public opinion is lukewarm. Japan's prime ministers are sensitive to public opinion because they are from the LDP and they are selected in highly factionalized leadership contests that occur every three years. There are always people waiting in the wings, ready to point to negative public sentiment as a sign that it is their turn now.

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