

JAPAN: TINA will bring Kishida back in from the doghouse

- A recuperating Prime Minister Kishida responded humbly to the two-pronged scandal that has burst his cabinet's net approval ratings since the death of Shinzo Abe.
- Kishida promised to cut ties between LDP Diet members and the controversial Unification Church and sought to better explain his decision to grant a costly state funeral for the divisive former premier on 27 September.
- But structural reasons, and the specific contours of this episode, give strong grounds to expect that the government's approval ratings will rebound after forthcoming economic policy announcements and the state funeral.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's press conference on 31 August was his first in-person event since catching Covid-19. He was clearly in better health, but in the wake of plummeting approval ratings, he was also in a humble mood. Four major recent polls all had the Kishida Cabinet's net approval rate down significantly month-on-month, by an average of 16 percentage points.

One main reason is the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s long-obfuscated [ties to the controversial Unification Church \(UC\)](#), a messianic religious movement and business empire founded by the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Polls suggest that upwards of four in five voters are still concerned about the issue, even after Kishida's half-hearted effort to address it in last month's cabinet reshuffle. This time, Kishida offered a low-bowing apology and announced that he would investigate thoroughly and direct all LDP Diet members to cut links to the group. It was a more substantial response from a chastened prime minister, though it remains unclear how in practice those widely metastasized ties will be excised.

The other reason is opposition to the government's decision to hold a 27 September state funeral for divisive former premier Shinzo Abe. Fully half of respondents in several polls oppose the event, which is likely to cost taxpayers around USD 12mn. Kishida acknowledged the criticism the decision had provoked and attempted to articulate a clearer justification for the move, noting Abe's historic contributions to the political and diplomatic life of the nation and the expressed desire of many international leaders to pay respects. More broadly, Kishida admitted that recent events had fallen short of the vision he articulated in last September's LDP leadership election to restore trust and empathy to politics, and his vow to do better seemed sincere.

Better than it seems

Despite tumbling numbers and harsh media coverage around the two-pronged scandal, some reports of Kishida's demise have been greatly exaggerated. The second Abe administration (2012-2020) weathered a long series of political storms--notably around the contentious national security legislation program in 2015 and the *Mori-Kake* cronyism cases in 2017--but public approval rates always rebounded, so reliably that political scientists studied the phenomenon. There have been no shifts in the broader structure of Japanese politics since then and there seems no reason why this administration would not similarly recover from its first major political storm.

Specifically, there are three reasons to think that Kishida will soon recover and perhaps emerge even stronger than before. First, this is not really his scandal, in that he personally and his closest lieutenants are not among the more than 140 parliamentarians with significant links to the UC group. Arguably, Kishida's greatest misstep to date was not dealing harshly

enough with the 80 or so UC-involved LDP Diet members at the first time of asking. The promise to make colleagues cut ties should go some way to answering critics on that point.

Second, though UC connections span various LDP factions and even other parties, it is the hard-right wing of the ruling party, formerly led by Abe, that will emerge the biggest losers from this affair. Though now in the plurality, the *Seiwakai* faction was long considered to be on the party's fringes, which may explain why many members turned to groups like UC for 'volunteer' election workers and coordinated votes while mainstream factions like Kishida's *Kochikai* courted established business interests. Given their number, not all UC-linked figures will be sidelined, but many senior and even mid-level figures on the right wing of the party will now have their political influence curtailed and promotion trajectories disrupted. The fact that he did not cut them loose at the first available opportunity will also help burnish Kishida's authority going forward in terms of intra-party politics.

Third, and most fundamentally, it remains the case that [there is no alternative](#) (TINA) to the LDP. Cabinet approval ratings may have slumped but the LDP's party support rates have been resilient in the high 30s or low 40s in most polls, while those of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and *Ishin no Kai* have remained unmoved, typically in the 5 to 10% band. Put simply, the electorate cannot envision any other party of government.

So, while the next few weeks are set to be uncomfortable for Kishida and the ruling party, public opinion may gradually begin to soften during the course of September, first when the government announces another set of inflation countermeasures and again when images are broadcast of past and present world leaders honoring a slain peer at Tokyo's iconic *Budokan* arena. And when the state funeral is in the rearview mirror and public debate re-centers on core issues like the cost of living, energy security, and national defense in uncertain times, TINA will likely bring the Kishida cabinet back in from the doghouse.

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