

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Political Turmoil in Japan Following the 2025 Upper House Elections: Implications of the Restructuring of Japanese Political Order on Korea-Japan Relations

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1. Results of the 2025 Upper House Election and Political Significance

The Upper House election held on July 20, 2025, marked a crucial turning point in Japanese political history. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) retained its position as the largest party but failed to secure a majority of seats. Even when combined with its coalition partner, Komeito, the ruling bloc was unable to maintain a majority in either the House of Representatives or the House of Councillors. This outcome exposed the structural limits of the LDP system that has dominated Japanese politics since its founding in 1955.

Moreover, the election revealed the stagnation of Japan's traditional two-party system and heralded the rise of emerging alternative forces. While the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition lost a total of 19 seats, the Democratic Party for the People and Sanseitō each gained 13 seats. The Japan Conservative Party and the newly formed *Team Mirai* also achieved notable results. In contrast, the Constitutional Democratic Party remained stagnant, and the Japanese Communist Party declined further, both failing to respond effectively to the generational changes underway.

Several factors explain these changes. First, the fallout from a political funding scandal virtually dismantled the LDP's factional structure, significantly weakening its organizational mobilization capabilities. Second, government efforts to curb soaring rice prices alienated

the agricultural sector, a traditional support base. Third, Komeito faced structural limits due to the aging of its religious base, the Soka Gakkai, coupled with insufficient inflows of younger supporters, which weakened its collective mobilization capacity. In this environment, public trust in established political forces eroded, while voters increasingly turned to new alternative parties, accelerating the diversification of Japan's political landscape.

2. Political Crisis of the Ishiba Cabinet

The direct political consequence of the election defeat is most starkly revealed in the crisis facing Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's cabinet. Although it has been widely anticipated that Ishiba would resign before the election, he strongly asserted his intention to remain in office afterward. Nevertheless, mounting pressure from both inside and outside the party has continued to call for his resignation.

Currently, five scenarios are under discussion:

1. Maintaining the premiership through issue-based coalitions.
2. Ishiba's resignation followed by an LDP leadership election.
3. Formation of a new ruling coalition premised on his resignation.
4. Election of a new prime minister that includes political forces outside the LDP.
5. Dissolution of the House of Representatives by a new prime minister, leading to an early general election.

Given the political pressures, the likelihood is high that Ishiba will eventually step down, ushering Japan into a period of political transition and restructuring.

3. Implications for Korea-Japan Relations

The political uncertainty in Japan has significant ramifications for Korea-Japan relations. The most crucial variable is the historical perspective of the next prime minister. Ishiba has been regarded as a moderate within the LDP, supporting a policy that prioritizes stable bilateral ties. However, if he resigns and a politically hardline figure with a firm stance on historical issues assumes power, the fragile restoration of Korea-Japan relations could regress.

The risk is evident in ongoing historical disputes, including recurrent Japanese provocations over Dokdo, distortions in history textbooks, prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, unresolved issues around the Sado mine commemorations, and disputes related to the continental shelf agreement. Should these issues resurface under a new administration, the cooperative momentum built between the two countries is likely to weaken. Thus, changes in Japanese political leadership extend beyond domestic politics, directly affecting Korea-Japan relations and the broader stability of East Asia.

4. Recommendation on Korea's Strategic Response

In light of these developments, Korea should pursue three strategic responses.

First, President Lee Jae-myung's upcoming visit to Japan on August 23, and the Korea-Japan summit must serve as a platform to produce concrete joint measures for stabilizing bilateral relations despite Japan's domestic political instability. Beyond symbolic diplomacy, it is necessary to advance tangible agreements that strengthen ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.

Second, given Japan's political diversification, Korea should expand dialogue channels not only with the LDP but also with newly prominent parties such as the Democratic Party for the People and Sanseitō. As the era of LDP dominance wanes, cultivating ties with multiple parties will be vital for establishing a stable diplomatic foundation.

Third, Korea must monitor changes in Japan's immigration policies revealed during the election. Potential tightening of controls over foreign workers and long-term residents could adversely affect the rights of the Korean community in Japan, including students and migrant workers. Diplomatic consultations and administrative preparations are therefore needed to prevent potential harm.

5. Conclusion

The 2025 Upper House election revealed fundamental cracks in Japan's LDP-centered one-party dominant system, signaling a transition toward multi-party coalition politics. Instability in the Ishiba cabinet is expected to generate short-term political turmoil and likely drive structural realignment of Japan's political landscape in the medium to long term.

Korea should recognize that this political shift in Japan is not merely a risk but also an opportunity to create new diplomatic space and cooperation channels. While preparing for historical disputes as potential flashpoints, Korea should simultaneously strengthen broad networks across Japan's diverse political spectrum to build a future-oriented bilateral relationship. Ultimately, Japan's political transition represents both a critical test and an opportunity for Korea's diplomacy to respond proactively and strategically.

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