

JAPAN: April's unified local elections come as Kishida's numbers trend upwards

- Campaigning has begun for some races in April's 'unified local elections,' a set of separate polls in almost 1,000 districts held concurrently across the country every four years; five Diet by-elections will also be held.
- Beside local issues, candidates will debate national policies like inflation, tax hikes, and revitalizing regions amid long-term demographic decline.
- With the Kishida Cabinet's approval rates clearly trending upwards, the ruling LDP will hope for a solid set of results in both the local and by-elections, though fresh talk of the PM calling a snap general election this year seems premature.

Elections

Over two Sundays in April, contests will be held in 985 sub-national districts, for prefectural governors and assemblies and municipal mayors and councils. Five Diet by-elections will also be held, for seats in both the Lower and Upper Houses.

- On 9 April, there will be gubernatorial elections in nine of the 47 prefectures, prefectural assembly elections in 41 prefectures, mayoral elections in 6 of 20 ordinance-designated cities (with populations above 500,000), and municipal council elections in 17 designated cities.
- On 23 April, there will be mayoral and council elections in certain other cities and also in wards in municipal Tokyo, as well as mayoral and council elections in towns and villages across the country.
- On 23 April, there will be elections for the Lower House's Chiba No. 5 district, Wakayama No. 1 district, and Yamaguchi districts Nos. 2 and 4. For the Upper House, there will be an election for a seat in Oita prefecture.

Issues

Many races will focus largely on local issues, such as Osaka's proposed casino-focused 'integrated resort' or whether Sapporo should bid for the 2030 Winter Olympics. National political themes of the moment will also be debated, including inflationary pressures and the government's countermeasures, and proposed tax hikes to fund higher spending on national defense and policies related to children and families. The meta-issue looming over every policy question is that of demographic decline, and the candidates must also articulate their proposals to revitalize regions, maintain local public services like schools, develop infrastructure and services that meet the needs of a rapidly aging society, and do so as the overall population—and the local tax base—is in long-term decline.

Some races will be fought along traditional lines, with local members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and junior coalition partner Komeito competing against those from opposition parties like the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), Ishin no Kai, the Democratic Party for the People (DPP), or the fringe Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Other races will feature face-offs between competing LDP-linked candidates, an independent incumbent supported by both the governing and opposition parties, or other permutations.

Yet many races will not be fought at all. Demographic decline is also causing a shortage of candidates for many seats, and about one in four races in the 2019 round of local elections were won unopposed. That share could rise further this time, despite electoral law reforms in 2020 aimed at widening public funding for candidates' campaign expenses. Voter turnout has also been plumbing historic lows in recent local elections, a trend that often helps the LDP.

Outlook

Any round of elections represents a test of sorts for a ruling party, but the diverse nature of the unified local elections should help buffer Prime Minister Fumio Kishida from any potential negative outcomes. One signpost to watch will be whether the LDP can stay above the 50% threshold for seats in prefectural assemblies and the 30% level in designated city councils. In the Diet by-elections, the LDP is likely to hold onto the two Yamaguchi seats, and may even hold Chiba No. 5, where the incumbent resigned due to a political funding scandal.

After the long series of difficulties faced by the government following its July 2022 Upper House election victory, the Kishida Cabinet's approval ratings are now clearly trending upwards. Six major polls in March all found positive swings in net approval of 5 to 10 percentage points (pp) since February; two polls showing net approval turning positive for the first time since last summer, and two others were only marginally negative. Polls also show the party support rate for the LDP remains steady in the mid-30s to low-40s, typically 30pp or more ahead of the second-placed party.

Public support has been high for the prime minister's recent initiatives including the rapprochement with South Korea and Kishida's historic visit to war-torn Kyiv. The public mood has also been helped by a nascent slow-down in inflation (particularly energy prices), the prospects of further government subsidies, and even the national baseball team's recent triumph in the world championships. There are so many green shoots recently that political speculation has re-emerged about Kishida calling a snap general election in the second half of this year, but the probability of such an event for now remains relatively low.

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