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## Prime Minister Kishida's Shaky Leadership: Prospects for Japanese Politics and Korea-Japan Relations

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**Choi Eunmi**

Research Fellow

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The approval rating of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's Cabinet has been on the decline. In a recent poll by major Japanese newspapers, negative public opinion surpassed positive public opinion. A Mainichi Shimbun poll showed Prime Minister Kishida's approval rating was 29% in September and 27% in October. If the Cabinet's approval rating falls significantly in Japan, it means that chances are high that the Prime Minister may change. The criterion is usually said to be around 30%.

Despite the death of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July, conditions were ripe for Prime Minister Kishida's approval rating to rise for the past three or four months, such as winning the Upper House election and reshuffling his cabinet. However, it is increasingly clear whether Kishida's Cabinet will even continue. Why does the Kishida Cabinet's approval rating keep falling? In this situation, can Prime Minister Kishida play an active role in improving Korea-Japan relations?

This report analyzes the causes of the declining approval rating of the Kishida Cabinet, focusing on Japan's political situation over the past three months after Abe's death, and outlines the impact on Japanese politics and Korea-Japan relations.

### **1. Why has the approval rating of the Kishida Cabinet been falling?**

Why is Prime Minister Kishida's approval rating falling? **The first reason** is uncontrollable external factors. In the past three to four months since Prime Minister Abe's death, the biggest topic in Japan has been the issue of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (hereafter, the Unification Church). As it was revealed that the cause of Prime Minister Abe's death was due to his connection with the Unification Church, the relationship between the Unification Church and Japanese politics drew widespread attention. Prime Minister Kishida himself has no direct relationship with the Unification Church. However, the close relationship between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Unification Church continues to be revealed. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Kishida didn't respond appropriately to this matter and public disappointment with Kishida has continued to grow.

**The second reason** is the structural constraint of Japanese politics which is conducted according to factional politics. Prime Minister Kishida, who became prime minister amid the dynamics of factional politics, could not help but pay attention to factional movements even after Abe's death. It was inevitable that he had to consider Abe's faction, the largest faction in the LDP, to maintain his position. Under this political context, Prime Minister Kishida decided on holding a state funeral for Abe in spite of negative public opinion. Also, he reshuffled his cabinet considering the balance with each faction. However, these decisions tarnished Prime Minister Kishida's "listening skills," which has always been emphasized by Kishida himself as his strength. Also, it led to disappointment and dissatisfaction from the public.

**The third reason** stems from Prime Minister Kishida's personal leadership. In other words, Prime Minister Kishida's own vision is getting indecipherable and unclear. Not only generating nuclear power and strengthening defense power, but also "new capitalism," which Prime Minister Kishida has emphasized with his signature policy, is losing its own characteristics and it resembles Abe's economic policy. And as a result, it resulted in low expectations for Kishida's leadership and ability to respond to the crisis.

## **2. What will happen?**

What will happen to the Kishida Cabinet and the LDP? And how will this affect Korea-Japan relations?

**First, the LDP will continue.** Although the LDP's approval rating is falling due to the Unification Church issue, it will not lead to an increase in the opposition party's approval rating. Therefore, the LDP's position as the ruling party will continue for the time being. Also, Japan's policy direction will not be changed for the time being, because the LDP, which holds an absolute majority of seats in the National Diet will retain their position. So, it is hard to expect any significant change in Japan's policies.

**Second, Kishida's long-term tenure is uncertain.** The Upper House election in July was considered to be an interim evaluation of the Kishida Cabinet, which was launched in October 2021. In addition, there is no big national election for the next three years, described as the 'three golden years.' So, there are big expectations for Prime Minister Kishida to make a full-fledged policy platform that could cement his own brand. However, the Kishida Cabinet has become unstable as the Unification Church issue broke out. If its approval rating continues to decline, the Kishida Cabinet may be replaced.

However, the approval rating for the LDP is also falling due to the Unification Church issue, so it is a low possibility to take the option of replacing the Cabinet in the near future. Moreover, it has not been long since the new Cabinet was launched, and there is no candidate for the next prime minister to succeed Prime Minister Kishida. Therefore, it is expected the Kishida Cabinet and the LDP will maintain the current situation despite low approval ratings.

Nevertheless, there is a possibility of dissolving the House of Representatives after the successful hosting of the G7 summit in May 2023 in Hiroshima, which is Prime Minister Kishida's district. Also, it can be more clearly expected through the results of the local elections in April 2023. If the results of the April election are positive for the LDP, it will be possible to dissolve the House of Representatives after the successful hosting of the G7 and seek another victory.

### **3. Prospects for Korea-Japan relations and policy recommendations**

In this situation, what will happen to Korea-Japan relations? In order to lead Korea-Japan relations proactively, the two leaders' positive will, the two governments' efforts, and domestic support are essential. Also, for the Korean government, the Kishida Cabinet's stable support and high approval rating will be helpful for improving Korea-Japan relations. However, the current situation does not seem easy for both countries politically at home. What should Korea do in this situation?

**First, the Korean government should not be impatient about deriving results in improving Korea-Japan relations.** But it is necessary to manage the time schedule. Some people are concerned that it is only the Korean government that is making efforts to improve Korea-Japan relations. However, since Korea's Supreme Court ruling on the forced labor issue in 2018, Korea-Japan relations have been neglected without any progress in resolving the problem. Considering the plaintiffs' grievances over the past years, the Korean government's strong will and steady efforts have been evaluated positively. However, it should be noted that the insufficiently coordinated speed may rather impact as a burden on Kishida's Cabinet and take a step back.

Therefore, the Korean government should control the speed, build a step-by-step improvement plan in consideration of coming political schedules. After the first face-to-face meeting at the NATO summit in June, the two leaders' meeting in September at the UN General Assembly, bilateral talks in November in Southeast Asia are good steps. If Korea is invited to the G7 summit in Hiroshima in May 2023, this can be a good opportunity for the two leaders' summit meeting. Through this process, we can expect the Yoon Suk Yeol-Kishida Joint Declaration in 2025, which is the year the 60th anniversary of the normalization of Korea-Japan diplomatic relations.

**Second, it is necessary to secure domestic understanding and support and lead social consensus to resolve Korea-Japan historical problems.** If the Korean government takes a policy against public opinion on Korea-Japan relations, it could lead to another backlash. Therefore, the government should make efforts to gain domestic understanding and support through a sincere explanation of the importance, the necessity, and the way of improving Korea-Japan relations. To resolve the forced labor issue, more open forums and seminars should be held beyond the public-private consultative body, to share more diverse opinions and

strive to reach social consensus. Many experts from various fields should participate in these meetings, and efforts should be made to talk together, seek solutions, expand mutual understanding, and resolve conflicts.

**Third, Korea-Japan cooperation for regional peace and stability, such as economy and security, should be continued.** The history problems between Korea and Japan is not a problem that can be solved in a short period of time. Even if the forced labor issue could be solved legally, we also need to make efforts toward reconciliation including apologies and contrition. However, these historical conflicts should not hinder bilateral cooperation. Even though Korea and Japan have many conflicts, the two countries are cooperating, competing, and rising in the international community. Above all, efforts should be made to jointly respond to the escalating security threats in the region, and to defend the values of liberal democracy and the market economy, such as over the Ukraine crisis and China's threat. Economically, the two countries are inseparable. Their economic cooperation will be more important in stabilizing supply chains, economic security, decarbonization, and fostering next-generation industries. In this situation, Korea and Japan should try to overcome the current conflict and create a more constructive relationship. In addition, it is necessary to improve bilateral relations and cooperate based on a correct understanding of Korea-Japan relations.

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### **CHOI Eunmi**

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. CHOI Eunmi is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. CHOI received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from Korea University. Previously, Dr. Choi was a research professor of the Center for Japanese Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA), a visiting researcher at University of Michigan (USA), Waseda University (Japan) and the Sejong Institute, and a researcher at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK. Her main area of research interest is Korea-Japan Relations, Japanese Diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia.