Japan PM vows to stay on despite election debacle

AFP – Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba vowed Monday to stay in office despite his gamble of snap elections backfiring, with the ruling party's worst result in 15 years.

Ishiba, 67, called Sunday's election days after taking office on October 1, but voters angry at a slush fund scandal punished his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has governed Japan almost non-stop since 1955.

With projections suggesting the LDP-led coalition would lose its ruling majority, Ishiba vowed to stay in office, saying he would not allow a "political vacuum".

"I want to fulfill my duty by protecting people's lives, protecting Japan," Ishiba told reporters.

He said the biggest election factor was "people's suspicion, mistrust and anger" over a scandal, which saw LDP figures pocket money from fund-raising events and which helped sink his predecessor Fumio Kishida.

"I will enact fundamental reform regarding the issue of money and politics," Ishiba told reporters, repeating that voters had delivered a "severe judgement" on the party.

The yen hit a three-month low, sliding more than one percent against the dollar, as exit polls and results reported by national broadcaster NHK and other media showed the worst result for the LDP and its junior coalition partner Komeito in 15 years.

They were projected to fall short of Ishiba's stated goal of winning at least 233 seats – a majority in the 456-member lower house.

The LDP won 191 seats, down from 259 at the last election in 2021, and Komeito 24, according to NHK tallies. Official results were expected later Monday.

Ahead of the election, Japanese media had speculated that if this happened, Ishiba could potentially quit, becoming the nation's shortest-serving prime minister in the post-war period.

On Monday the LDP's election committee chief, former premier Junichiro Koizumi's son Shinjiro Koizumi, resigned.

The most likely next step is that Ishiba will now seek to head a minority government, with the divided opposition seen as probably incapable of forming a coalition of their own, analysts said.

Ishiba said Monday he was not considering a broader coalition "at this point".

"Lawmakers aligned with (former prime minister Shinzo) Abe were cold-shouldered under Ishiba, so they could potentially pounce on the opportunity to take their revenge," Yu Uchiyama, political science professor at the University of Tokyo, told AFP.

"But at the same time, with the number of LDP seats reduced so much, they might take the high road and support Ishiba for now, thinking it's not the time for infighting," he said.

— Booted out —

A big winner was former premier Yoshihiko Noda's opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) which increased its projected seat tally to 148 from 96 at the last election.

Ishiba had promised to not actively support LDP politicians caught up in the funding scandal.

But the opposition jumped on media reports that the party has

provided 20 million yen ($132,000) each to district offices headed by these figures, who were still standing in the election.

“Voters chose which party would be the best fit to push for political reforms,” Noda said late Sunday, adding that the “LDP-Komeito administration cannot continue”.

Mirroring elections elsewhere, fringe parties did well, with Reiwa Shinsengumi, founded by a former actor, tripling its seats to nine after promising to abolish sales tax and boost pensions.

The anti-immigration and traditionalist Conservative Party of Japan, established in 2023 by nationalist writer Naoki Hyakuta, won its first three seats.

The number of women lawmakers meanwhile reached a record high at 73, according to NHK, but still representing less than 16 percent of the legislature.

“As long as our own lives don’t improve, I think everyone has given up on the idea that we can expect anything from politicians,” restaurant worker Masakazu Ikeuchi, 44, told AFP on Monday in rainy Tokyo.

“I think the outcome was a result of people across Japan wanting to change the current situation,” said fellow voter Takako Sasaki, 44.

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