

Plan to restructure Japan's science academy draws protests from researchers

Proposal to give new panel a say in naming oversight council would weaken group's independence, critics say

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Anthropologist Juichi Yamagiwa was one of five former presidents of the Science Council of Japan to speak against proposed changes to the council's structure at a 14 February press conference in Tokyo. YOSHIO TSUNODA/AFLO/NEWSCOM

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Research groups in Japan are lining up against a government plan to exert greater control over the Science Council of Japan (SCJ), the country's national scientific academy. They argue the changes would expose the council to political influence and weaken its independence.

More than five dozen academic societies, as well as SCJ itself, have raised concerns that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will soon ask the National Diet to create a new outside panel to help choose the 210 SCJ members who oversee the organization's activities. Traditionally, SCJ itself selects this oversight council. SCJ is asking the government to reconsider its plan, which it says could expose the organization to "[political and administrative control or pressure](#)."

The proposal comes in the wake of growing friction between SCJ and politicians from the LDP, a conservative party that has led Japan almost continuously since 1955. For decades, the process of selecting oversight council members, who serve staggered 6-year terms with half appointed every 3 years, was not controversial. Candidates are nominated by an SCJ committee and approved by the general

assembly, usually by consensus. Legally, however, SCJ is under the jurisdiction of Japan's prime minister, who must formally appoint the council. (SCJ also has about 2000 associate members appointed by the SCJ president to 6-year terms.)

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In 2020, then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga broke with precedent and blocked the appointment of six of the 105 nominated scholars. Suga never explained why. But the rejected scholars—from social sciences, law, and the humanities—[had all criticized legislation adopted by the previous LDP administration](#). Those six were never appointed.

Politicians have complained that SCJ's process for selecting the oversight council is too restrictive. SCJ is trying to address those concerns. For example, in identifying the 105 candidates for terms starting in October, SCJ says it is casting a wide net, soliciting suggestions from both the academic associations it has long relied on and business and industry groups, bar associations, and consumer and labor organizations.

Despite those steps, on 6 December 2022 Japan's Cabinet Office issued a terse statement declaring that SCJ "[needs to carry out drastic reforms](#)." On 21 December, it followed up by outlining a proposal to amend the law underpinning SCJ. Among other things, the amendments would create a new committee composed of third parties, other than SCJ members, to "[provide opinions](#)" on oversight council nominations. The statement did not spell out who would appoint the committee, how many members it would have, or whether its recommendations would be binding.

Such outside involvement would be highly unusual, says Yukari Takamura, an international law scholar at the University of Tokyo who is an SCJ vice president. "Other national academies never have such third-party committee intervention" in the selection of oversight bodies, she says.

Although details are vague, "It is clear that the amendment intends to strengthen the government's power over the SCJ," says Tadashi Kobayashi, an emeritus professor of the philosophy of science at Osaka University.

The LDP's motivation, he and others believe, is to influence SCJ's policy recommendations. They point to a 2017 incident when the government dramatically expanded funding for academic research on dual-use technologies that can be used for both civilian and military purposes. SCJ urged institutions to study the implications of accepting the money, given a long-standing taboo on military research at universities stemming from academia's cooperation with Japan's government during World War II. "This [SCJ] recommendation worked as an excuse for universities to refrain from applying for this funding, and this irritated the LDP," says Kobayashi, an SCJ adviser.

The LDP's current move to amend the law is "clearly connected with the 2017 statement" on military research, says Akio Komorida, professor emeritus of law at the University of Tokyo. "LDP politicians criticized this statement, which points out the contradiction between research for military security and academic freedom."

Other SCJ positions have also irked LDP officials. In 2018, the council concluded that the expected scientific payoff from the proposed International Linear Collider, a giant physics facility Japan hopes to host, was too small to justify the estimated \$7 billion cost. That finding particularly upset politicians representing the Tohoku region where the facility would be built.

The government aims to submit its plan to the LDP-controlled Diet, which is almost certain to approve any proposal, in March, says Yasuaki Kodama, director of the Cabinet Office's General Policy Promotion Office. "We are still seeking an opportunity to discuss the issues with the Science Council," he says.

The controversy is already hindering SCJ's efforts to recruit candidates for its oversight council, Takamura says. "I hear that there was a bit of hesitation about being nominated because people fear they might face rejection," she says.

Physicist Takaaki Kajita, a Nobel laureate and current SCJ president, says a lot is at stake. "If [SCJ] has limited scientific independence," he says, "I think our role will be changed very much."

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