

Japan: Shinzo Abe's political future in doubt as wife linked to cronyism scandal

Controversy deepens after finance ministry admitted to tampering with records relating to land sale to remove references to the first lady

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A spiralling cronyism scandal linked to the Japanese prime minister and his wife has reached fever pitch after the finance ministry admitted to tampering with records to remove references to the pair.

Scandals threaten Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's grip on power

[Shinzo Abe](#) acknowledged the new revelations “could undermine trust in the entire government” and added: “I deeply apologise to the people.”

The prime minister had previously said he would resign if he or his wife were shown to be involved in heavily cutting the price of public land sold to a right-wing school operator in Osaka.

The finance ministry admitted on Monday that it had altered official documents surrounding the decision to provide an 85% discount on the appraised value of the land.

One document originally quoted the educational group Moritomo Gakuen as saying that Abe's wife Akie had recommended the primary school project "move forward because it is a good plot of land". However, this was removed in a version submitted to lawmakers investigating the sale.

Kyodo News reported that the submitted papers also omitted an article in which Akie described being "moved to tears by the school's education policy".

Likewise, officials scrubbed a reference to Shinzo Abe's support for Nippon Kaigi, a conservative lobby group to which the then head of the school organisation was also linked.

Moritomo Gakuen's existing kindergarten attracted attention for requiring its young pupils to bow before portraits of the imperial family, sing the national anthem daily, and learn the 1890 imperial rescript on education, which emphasises sacrifice for country.

Akie was set to serve as honorary principal for the new primary school, but [stepped down in February last year](#) when questions were raised over the land deal.

The government has previously denied [claims that the first lady gave the school operator an envelope](#) containing 1m yen (£6,775) on behalf of the prime minister during a visit she made to the existing kindergarten.

The controversy fuelled a [steep decline in Abe's popularity](#) last year but he appeared to ride out the scandal and won a snap lower house election in October. However, the forgery revelations have intensified political pressure on Abe and his long-serving finance minister, Taro Aso.

Aso said on Monday he had no intention of resigning, but apologised for the tampering.

The widening scandal threatens to damage Abe's hopes of securing a third term as leader of the Liberal Democratic party (LDP) – and continuing as prime minister – when the party holds its leadership vote in September.

"Right now, I don't think there's enough of a smoking gun to force Abe out prematurely," said Tobias Harris, vice president of advisory firm Teneo Intelligence.

"I think it will be very difficult to convince senior LDP officials that he deserves another three-year term."