

Osaka voters say no to merger. Again.

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Voters in the city of Osaka on Sunday night said “no” for a second time to a referendum that would have merged the city’s 24 wards, dealing a heavy blow to the Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka) local political group and effectively ending the career of Osaka Mayor Ichiro Matsui.

The defeat leaves Matsui and Osaka Ishin no Kai, which is affiliated with the national Nippon Ishin no Kai, with their main political goal unaccomplished and the party’s political future uncertain.

At a news conference late Sunday, Matsui, who heads both Osaka Ishin and Nippon Ishin, conceded defeat but said he would not resign.

“My strength as a politician in the majority to vote for the referendum was insufficient. But I will finish out my term,” Matsui said, adding that he would stay on to hand leadership of the grouping off to the next generation of politicians, including Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura.

“We need to work to make the 2025 World Expo a success,” Matsui said of the event, which Osaka will host.

He added that Osaka Ishin would continue to work with the local chapter of Komeito. An NHK exit poll showed that Komeito voters were almost evenly split over the merger issue. In the first referendum in 2015, Komeito was opposed to the merger plan but, despite reservations among the party’s local supporters, decided to back it this time.

The vote also came amid concerns that the coronavirus pandemic might dampen turnout, but Matsui denied it had affected the final result, saying the loss was due to his inability to persuade people to vote for the measure.

The mayor had said repeatedly in September that he would take responsibility if the referendum was voted down, noting that it would mean his career as a politician was finished.

Yoshimura, also a member of Osaka Ishin, said earlier that he would not resign as governor. But his future role in the party is now unclear. The merger referendum applied only to the 2.7 million residents of the city of Osaka and not the other cities in the prefecture.

The rejection of the merger is also a defeat for the local Komeito chapter, which works with Osaka Ishin in the municipal assembly to form a majority. Although the merger plan had deeply divided Komeito’s rank-and-file members in the city, Komeito leader

Natsuo Yamaguchi visited Osaka in October, urging voters to back the plan, which Komeito and Osaka Ishin assembly members had agreed on.

On the other hand, the result is a victory for local chapters of the Liberal Democratic Party and other major opposition parties that had opposed the merger. Local LDP representatives joined forces with their counterparts from the Japanese Communist Party to campaign against the merger, often appearing in local television debates together against Matsui and Komeito representatives.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who enjoys a close, personal relationship with Matsui, had refrained from taking a public stand, saying it was a matter for the people of Osaka to decide. Attention now turns to how the loss will affect not only their personal relationship but also the political relationship between their two parties.

While local media polls in late September had shown the majority of respondents were pro-merger, the mood began to shift in the latter half of October.

Osaka Ishin had long pursued the merger, saying it was the only way to end a raft of redundant bureaucratic services offered by both the city and Osaka Prefecture, while also saving residents money and attracting new investment.

But concerns about its cost at a time when economic damage from the coronavirus was still being felt, confusion about the effect on local city services, and what a growing number of Osakans said were unconvincing explanations about the merger's necessity by Matsui and Yoshimura, saw anti-merger forces gain a slight lead in polls late last week.

Sunday's loss comes about 5½ years after a very thin majority of voters rejected a merger referendum in May 2015. That defeat led Mayor Toru Hashimoto, who co-founded Osaka Ishin together with Matsui, to announce he that would not seek re-election in that November's double election for governor and mayor.

However, Matsui and Yoshimura, who won the governor's race and the mayoral race respectively in November 2015, vowed to hold a second referendum on the issue. Both have said there are no plans for a third vote.