JAPAN’S economy is in recession again, and the government is calling an election.

The government reported this week that the economy declined at an annual rate of 1.6 percent during the third quarter, after a 7.3 percent fall in the second quarter. Those figures are adjusted for inflation, or deflation, as the case may be.

The second-quarter decline had been expected, coming after an increase in the national sales tax. In anticipation of that increase, many people and companies had accelerated their purchasing, leading to economic growth of 6.7 percent in the first quarter of the year. But economists who had forecast a third-quarter bounce back were disappointed.

For much of the last two decades, the Japanese economy has been shrinking, at least before deflation is considered. In the fourth quarter of 1997 — nearly 17 years ago — the Japanese economy peaked, as measured in yen.

Abenomics, as the economics program of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became known, had promised to get Japan growing again. The central bank, the Bank of Japan, embarked on a program of quantitative easing and vowed to get inflation up to a 2 percent target. The value of the yen has fallen rapidly, in part as a result of that program, which it is hoped will spur Japanese exports. Structural reforms, promised but not yet passed, are supposed to help stimulate growth in a variety of ways, including by getting more women to join the labor force.

The prime minister called a snap election for Dec. 14, and indicated that if he won, the government would postpone a planned second increase in the national sales
One depressing part of the report on third-quarter gross domestic product was that the overall inflation rate — known as the G.D.P. price deflator — fell again in the quarter, at an annual rate of 1.3 percent. Inflation leapt in the previous quarter, largely because of the sales tax increase, but the failure of inflation to continue is an indication that the Bank of Japan’s program to promote inflation is not yet working, even though official figures indicate that average salaries are now rising at a 2 percent annual rate.

The declining yen has served to depress the purchasing power of the Japanese, but it does not yet seem to be doing very much to stimulate exports. After years of large trade surpluses, Japan’s trade balance turned negative in 2011 and has remained there. But income from overseas investments meant that the balance of payments remained positive until this year. Now it, too, is in deficit, albeit by small amounts.

Japan has remained a rich nation throughout its long period of little or no growth, and its 3.6 percent unemployment rate is very low by international standards. It is far too early to pronounce Abenomics a failure. But the new G.D.P. report does provide a sobering reminder that halting deflation is not going to be easy.