

## JAPAN

## The political plague, again

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YOSHIRO Mori became the prime minister of Japan when the previous prime minister Keizo Obuchi unexpectedly suffered stroke in April of last year. Five senior politicians of Obuchi's Liberal Democratic Party, known as the Gang of Five, hurriedly picked Mori without consulting the rest of the party. This was considered by analysts to be a big mistake. Mori who shows evidence of having spent too much time at the bottom of scrums, has been a disaster since becoming the prime minister. He has reportedly committed blunder after blunder starting with his inability to perform the proper deep bow at Obuchi's funeral. Later Mori spoke favourably of Japan as a "divine nation", an unprecedented and embarrassing nod to the nation's militaristic past. And then there were those envelopes stiffed with 10,000-yen notes that kept turning up or going missing. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, the travel office was \$5 million short. Scandals forced three of Mori's cabinet members to quit. Adding to the aura of sordidness, magazines had been publishing photographs of the prime minister drinking with suspected members of organised crime syndicates.

Mori's most damaging bungle occurred on February 10 when he blithely continued his Saturday round of golf after being informed that nine people, including four teenage students, had been lost when an American submarine collided with a Japanese fishing boat off the coast of Hawaii. He was not repentant. "How can you consider it a situation requiring crisis management," he said. "It was an accident. I feel I prop-

## AFGHANISTAN

## The Taliban's world

KHALID HASAN

THE destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas may finally persuade those that recognize the Taliban regime to question its distorted interpretation of the Sharia. Until now, the Islamic world with the exception of Iran (though for its own reasons) had said nothing critical of the Taliban's extremism, or anything about their denial to women of their basic right to education, free movement and work.

Muslim governments chose instead to look away from the catastrophe that is Afghanistan under the Taliban. It has taken the savage destruction of two Buddhist landmarks to make the Islamic world come out, partially though, of its somnambulism. Meanwhile, the Lord Buddha, no doubt, has looked down on the destruction of his image with benign understanding, an enigmatic smile playing on his lips.

Ahmed Rashid in his superb book on the rise of the Taliban writes that after they captured the city of Mazar, they declared the tomb of its most beloved saint, Rabia Balkhi, out of bounds. Her story is both romantic and tragic. Born in the Middle Ages, she was the first woman of her time to compose love poetry in Persian. She died after her brother slashed her wrists as punishment for her love for a slave. As she lay dying, she wrote out her last poem in her own blood. For centuries, young Uzbek girls and boys had treated her tomb with the devotion appropriate to a saint, going there to pray for the fulfilment of their own romantic dreams. The Taliban did not raze her tomb to the ground. Perhaps one should be grateful for small mercies.

When the Taliban banned every form of entertainment, the Muslim states remained indifferent since it did not directly affect them. One recalls a time before the invention of the VCR when Pakistanis in large numbers used to make short trips to Kabul to watch Indian movies. That could have happened in another lifetime. In the ravaged city of Kabul, as it is today, there are no movies, no music, no television. All this and more has been declared against Islam as understood by the Taliban.

erly demonstrated the required leadership."

Everyone else in Japan, including members of Mori's party disagreed. The poll conducted by *Asahi Shimbun*, a leading Japanese newspaper, showed his approval rating had plunged to a rock bottom 9 per cent.

But even if Mori is somehow bundled off stage, there is still a problem with the last act: who would succeed him? The LDP sorely lacks a powerful shogun like the late Noburu Takeshita who not only served as prime minister but was a master of behind-the-screen politics of grooming new leaders and smoothing over intra-party squabbles.

These days Takeshita's old office is occupied by Mikio Aoki, an LDP heavyweight who hails from the same prefecture as Takeshita. But, having little clout and less charisma, Aoki is no Takeshita. He's competing for influence with Hiromu Nonaka another Gang of Five who belongs to the largest party faction led by former prime minister Ryutaru Hashimoto.

Without a clear kingmaker, the off-stage plots, sub-plots and counter plots became so intricate that no one could be sure who was on top. Or even that some new actor was ready to steal the spotlight. "Anybody could be chosen," said an LDP member. For example, Junichiro Koizumi, head of Mori faction and radical reformer, could jump in once his boss fizzles out. Word is that no senior LDP leader, not Nonaka, not Koizumi wants to become the prime minister just now.

Prime Minister Mori, bowing to pressure by power brokers, has now said he would bring forward elections for a new party president, a face-saving gesture that could ease him out of the premiership as early as next month. But the

five heavyweights from the ruling LDP stopped short of saying exactly when the elections would be held. Their vagueness appears largely due to a scheduled summit with US President George W Bush shortly followed by a long-awaited meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Further adding to the government's dilemma is the threat by opposition party to boycott the budget deliberations in parliament if Mori voices his clear intention to leave office. The opposition argues a lame-duck government should not be in a position to push the budget through parliament. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Mori has survived a motion of censure, but his ruling party openly kept up the debate on elections to choose his successor.

On the economic front, Japan is reportedly facing a deteriorating business climate, so much so that the country is said to set a record year of bankruptcies. Japanese banks, saddled with a mountain of problem loans created from the rupturing of the country's economic bubble in the early 1990s, have become increasingly cautious about making fresh loans to firms deemed financially unstable. Bankruptcies are expected to soar if banks move to clean up their balance sheets by pulling the plug on troubled firms.

The tug of war prompted financial regulators to seek a compromise. Instead of urging banks to directly cut off bad loans in a move that would result in more bankruptcies and job losses, regulators are reportedly leaning towards debt forgiveness as the preferred way of reducing the sector's problem loans.

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## INDONESIA

## Holy war in the Spice Islands

HERE is still gunfire every night in Ambon, the capital of the Moluccas, and sometimes a shattering bomb blast. Once a thriving commercial city, it is now a deadly maze of Christian "red" areas and Muslim "white" ones, a pattern of demarcation that has spread to the neighbouring islands. Children play near the front line and cheerfully tell visitors to relax when "there is no shooting at the moment." But virtually all adult Moluccans are tired of the killing, which has ruined their beautiful islands. Yet that does not mean it is over.

Ambon is now a city divided in two. Muslims call Christians Obet, a corruption of Robert. Christians call Muslims Acang, a corruption of Hassan. There is often no physical barrier separating red and white areas, but everyone knows where they are and rarely, if ever, does anyone set foot in the opposite camp's territory. It could mean having your throat slit. Visitors soon learn to recognise the border areas. Everything there is smashed to smithereens.

Three long bouts of religious warfare in just over two years in the Moluccas, once known to European traders as the Spice Islands, have claimed at least 5,000 lives, and probably many more. At talks in Bali and Java aimed at reconciliation, the participants spoke of 8,000 dead. Some say 20,000.

Laskar Jihad, a group of Muslim outsiders generally blamed for setting off the third and most recent wave of violence in the Moluccas last year, now has its Christian counterpart, Laskar Kristus the Army of Christ. Its commander, Agus Wattimena, looks like a latter-day Jesus with his wiry frame and long flowing locks. His followers claim to be warriors who are defending the faith; they attribute their survival to the will of God.

Some of the younger troops hang out in Ambon's half-built Roman Catholic cathedral. Work on the building stopped when the war broke out. Now it is a shelter for refugees, among them AGAS, a motley collection of teenage soldiers who will happily make you a pile of bombs if you give them \$30. AGAS stands for Church Children who Love God. It also means "gnat". Many of the children have bullet wounds, and when fighting breaks out they rush out of school and down to the front line. They call it their crusade.

Laskar Jihad emotively claims that its enemy are "RMS rebels", a name calculated to strike dread into Muslim hearts. But the RMS, the Republic of the South Moluccas, has been defunct for decades, other than as a nominal government-in-exile in the Netherlands. It made its bid for independence in the 1950s but failed miserably. Its remnants held out on the large island of Seram, to the north of Ambon, for 13 years. Eventually they too were defeated.

Muslim sources in Ambon say their side suffered badly during the

days of the RMS. Its leaders were mainly Christian officers who had fought for the Dutch colonial government. They were trying to resist integration into a centralised Indonesia ruled from Jakarta, the site of the government they had fought in the 1945-49 war of independence.

So when the current fighting broke out in January 1999, hardline Muslims quickly called the Christian side the RMS. At first it seemed laughable, but in a way it has come true. After Laskar Jihad arrived last year and ignited the third round of the war, some Christian leaders, facing annihilation and a state of civil emergency, founded a new movement of their own: the Maluku (Moluccas) Sovereignty Front, or FKM.

The FKM's aim is to re-create an independent South Moluccan state, though it says it is quite distinct from the RMS. It now has representatives in Jakarta, Europe and the United States. Its leader, Alex Manuputty, is a doctor and a member of the Indonesian Red Cross who lives in Kudamati, an area in the hills above Ambon city, which has become the Christians' command centre. But he says FKM does not want to see Christians dominating Muslims. It wants Moluccans on both sides to take control of their own destiny.

The government in Jakarta has not taken the FKM lightly. It has attempted to prosecute Dr Manuputty for separatist activities, a crime in Indonesia. But the attempt has failed: the Moluccas' legal system is in a mess, and most of the judges have fled.

Indonesia's security forces cannot bring an end to the fighting, say the Christians. Although Christian and Muslim police and soldiers work together when things are calm, the moment fighting breaks out they grab their ammunition and run to fight with their co-religionists. Some have even been filmed doing it. Members of the same units sometimes start shooting at each other. Soldiers and police sell weapons to both sides, at \$700 for an M-16 or an AK-47.

For all Dr Manuputty's fine words about living together in peace, even moderate Muslims in Ambon see his FKM as a threat. Laskar Jihad has started putting angry references to FKM alongside those to the RMS in its propaganda outside Ambon's main mosque. Its members are turning more radical. Afghan-style turbans can often be sighted in the Muslim sector of Ambon, and it is becoming more common for women to cover their heads in public. Refugees from Muslim areas of the archipelago have horrific tales to tell of forced Islamicisation, with death the only alternative to conversion. And many believe this is part of a wider long-term strategy to turn not just the Moluccas, but all of Indonesia, into a fundamentalist Islamic state.

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decided what will happen to these female fiends in the hereafter, the Taliban decree does not neglect the here and now by promising that such women would be "threatened, investigated and severely punished" and for good measure, their menfolk would be punished too.

Female patients are to go to female doctors, but if they have to be seen by a male doctor they must be accompanied by a close relative and during examination both the patient and the doctor should wear the "Islamic hijab." Male doctors are not to touch or see "other parts of female patients except for the affected part", nor are they allowed to enter the rooms or wards of female patients unless they have been specifically requested to do so. Male and female doctors are not to sit together or even converse. "If there is need for discussion, it should be done with hijab." Hospital staff must pray in mosques on time, while the religious police can go wherever they want, anytime they want and "nobody can prevent them."

No driver is allowed to pick up a woman who is wearing an Iranian-style burqa. If he does, he will be sent to jail and her husband will be punished as well. Women who are seen wearing "stimulating and attractive" clothes are not to be picked up from the street by drivers.

As for music, it cannot be played in shops, hotels, vehicles and public transport. If a music cassette is found in a shop, the shopkeeper will be jailed and his shop locked up. It may only be opened if five people are prepared to guarantee the offender's future good conduct. Anyone found with a music cassette in his vehicle will lose both the cassette and the vehicle. He will also be imprisoned. One must wonder if Oliver Cromwell has returned to earth in another form.

The Taliban have a thing about hair. "To prevent beard shaving and its cutting", those found shaven or with a trimmed beard are to be

arrested and jailed "until their beard gets bushy". Long-haired people are to be arrested and taken to the Religious Police where their hair will be shaved. The parting kick is that the "criminal has to pay the barber." The Taliban have no love for pigeons either. A December 1996 edict said:

"After ten days, this should be monitored and the pigeons and any other playing birds should be killed." Card playing is illegal as is kite-flying. All kite shops in Afghanistan have been closed down. The Afghans used to fly kites during Naoroz, the Afghan new year. No more. The skies over Afghanistan are free of colour.

The December 1996 ruling on "idolatry" in Taliban English says, "In vehicles, shops, hotels, room and any other place, pictures/portraits should be abolished. The monitors should tear up all pictures in the above places." Is it not ironic that a government, the bulk of whose income is derived from the drugs trade, should jail and punish both addicts and suppliers?

Interest is officially banned. Kabul used to have a bazaar entirely devoted to the money trade. It was perhaps the only place in the world where the Pakistani rupee could be exchanged at a good rate. No longer. Afghan women used to go to the river to wash clothes. Not possible now. Any woman found washing clothes on the riverbank is to be picked up, taken home and her husband "severely punished." Singing and dancing are not allowed at weddings. Tailors may no longer measure women. In case you are a sorcerer. Afghanistan is not where you should go. Sorcery is forbidden. All books of sorcery have been ordered burnt and sorcerers kept in jail till they repent.

These are some of the things the Taliban have done to the living. The Bamiyan Buddhas were only stone.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan