

## JAPAN

## Tanaka dismissal might be too costly for Koizumi

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

**T**EARS are women's greatest weapons. When women cry, men cannot compete with them," its hard to believe such a comment coming from a self proclaimed champion of reform who wants to change the Japanese society to make it compatible to the realities of the twenty-first century. But this was what the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said commenting on his Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka's tearful appearance at a recent parliamentary hearing on a controversy surrounding ministry's handling of a group of non-governmental organizations' participation at last month's international conference on Afghanistan. Tanaka's tear came amid the controversy putting her against Vice Foreign Minister Yoshiji Nogami who was backed by the bureaucracy over weather a senior ruling party politician was involved in creating pressure on the government to bar two NGOs from the Tokyo conference. The Prime Minister's sexist remark was also probably the first clear indication that the he was seriously thinking about the possibility of getting rid of his outspoken foreign minister, whose popularity helped Koizumi's meteoric rise to power only ten months ago. But in politics ten months period is too long a time to turn a trusted ally into a diehard enemy. In this latest saga of Japanese politics the old buddies are yet to turn into adversaries, but for Koizumi omens already seem to be alarming.

The way the prime minister handled the feud over NGO participation at Tokyo international meeting seems to be a reminiscent of traditional old style politics of Japan, showing him to be not much different from his predecessors of whom he is often too critical. Instead of finding who was right, Koizumi opted for the traditional Japanese solution of punishing all parties involved in the quarrel by sacking the foreign minister and her deputy.

Less than a week after Makiko Tanaka's exit from the cabinet, it is gradually becoming clear how much harm the whole episode might bring to Koizumi administration in the near future. Initial polls conducted by different organizations focusing on the issue of sacking of the foreign minister did show a big swing against Koizumi. A Nippon Television Network poll of 3,500 respondents conducted immediately after Tanaka dismissal showed that more than three quarters of people said the prime minister was wrong to sack his foreign minister. Others polls from different tabloids and TV news programs also produced similar results.

Long before Koizumi was chosen head of Japan's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) last April, Makiko

Tanaka proved herself to be a popular politician whom people regarded as a down to earth personality compared to old-guard political bosses who always keep a distance from the mass. It was her nationwide campaign on behalf of him in last year's LDP presidential elections that propelled Koizumi to power. In both of his previous two attempts he had lost by wide margins. Despite acknowledging Tanaka's shortcomings, many in Japan see her as the voice of the people against the misrule of country's bureaucracy and old guard politicians.

Meanwhile, earlier this week the approval rate for the Koizumi cabinet plummeted below 50 percent, indicating clearly people's disappointment with his decision to dismiss the foreign minister. A weekend telephone survey conducted by one of country's major dailies, the Asahi Shimbun, showed only 49 percent of the respondents approved the Koizumi cabinet, the lowest level since the formation of the cabinet last April. In Asahi's last poll a month ago, the approval rating was 72 percent.

Analysts believe the latest poll results will hurt Koizumi in his handling of the government since he had depended on high popular support for much of the momentum in carrying out his reform. Hit by such plummeting approval ratings, the prime minister delivered a policy speech earlier this week that clearly lacked the sharpness of his earlier speeches. He also refrained from using the speech in the Diet to quell the backlash from his unpopular decision to dismiss the foreign minister. Instead the speech was passive in tone and at times vague. Despite focusing again on structural reforms, it was in sharp contrast to his first policy speech that had given rise to enthusiasm surrounding his reform proposals.

Meanwhile, Makiko Tanaka's successor at the foreign office is not in a position at all to help the prime minister regain at least some of his lost support except those of the bureaucracy. It remains puzzling why Koizumi was desperately in search of a woman to replace the first woman to become Japan's foreign minister. The government's initial choice was the former UNHCR chief, Sadako Ogata, who politely declined the offer citing her age and family commitments. Koizumi was probably hoping that nominating a woman to replace the ousted foreign minister would probably defuse much of the criticism that he had encountered since making the sexist remark of tears as being women's best weapon. Since then the prime minister came under serious criticism from Japanese women in general and a group of 27 female politicians submitted a letter to Koizumi requesting that he show serious remorse over his remark. This might have prompted

the prime minister to find an alternative woman candidate for the post of Foreign Minister, who would also be helpful in countering the offence coming from different women's groups. Yoriko Kawaguchi, if anything else, would probably be of little help in overcoming the difficulties the prime minister is facing. Firstly, because Kawaguchi, who was previously environment minister, is not a member of parliament. Moreover, her previous credential as private sector managerial boss and also as a former bureaucrat gives clear indication of a conformist trend that she is going to pursue.

Japan's new foreign minister was also not at all hesitant even supporting Koizumi's remark concerning tears. While Japanese women from all segments of life were busy voicing their criticism, Kawaguchi said she wishes someone would also tell her once that her tears are women's greatest weapons. No doubt she would be appreciated much by Japan's tainted foreign office bureaucracy who were desperately seeking a way to get rid of the reformed minded Tanaka. In her first policy speech as foreign minister, Yoriko Kawaguchi pledged to reform her ministry, which has been embroiled in scandals involving misuse of public funds and hinted that she would follow the lines laid down by her predecessors. But critics suggest that the line followed by Tanaka would obviously not find its way among those of the long list of Kawaguchi's predecessors.

One of Koizumi's earlier pledges when he became prime minister last April was to transform the way the LDP worked. But the latest episode culminating in the dismissal of a populist foreign minister and replacing her by someone closer to the old style amply illustrates that the Japanese leader, now into his tenth month in the office, has not kept his words at all. His position as prime minister these days is also no less insecure as his promises. Until now he was helped much by immense public backing, a bulk of which came in the form of support for Makiko Tanaka. But from now on he will have to face the consequences of having removed his popular foreign minister, who has been especially popular among women voters. As the prime minister has a narrow support base within the faction-based politics of LDP, this would mean Koizumi becoming more dependent on those whom he until recently tried to keep out of influential political positions. And who can say if those powerful faction leaders wouldn't join hand in the near future to dump the leader who wanted to get rid of them!

## Presidents and problems

**T**HE FIRST lady has completed a year on the job; the second has done six months. Both, however, are in political trouble. The Philippines President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and her Indonesian counterpart, Megawati Sukarnoputri, face formidable hurdles &#151; both at home and abroad.

Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo has gone the whole hog in supporting the American camp; a joint U.S.-Filipino military exercise involving some 650 American troops is currently under way on the Philippine island of Basilan and is directed against the Abu Sayyaf terrorist outfit. Ms. Megawati, on the other hand, has been soft on Islamist militants. She has even begun to earn the ire of neighbouring countries for appearing to be reluctant to take action



against what appears to be a regional militant network.

Both in the Philippines and Indonesia, the domestic and international challenges the Presidents face are closely inter-linked. After the Philippines closed down the U.S. base at Subic Bay years ago, Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo has gone overboard in her overtures to bring the Americans back to the Philippines and enlist them in the battle against the Abu Sayyaf.

Outside Afghanistan, the United States has committed the largest number of troops anywhere since September 11, 2001, to the Philippines in the battle against terrorism. While there has been much debate on the scope and nature of the "exercise", the mere fact of the American presence is significant. American troops, as per an "agreement", will not engage in combat operations against the Abu Sayyaf, but will shoot back if shot at. Clearly, a lot is left open to interpretation in such an arrangement. From Washington's point of view, the Abu Sayyaf continuing to hold an American couple hostage is provocation enough.

Many civil society groups in the

Philippines, especially those on the Left, have been critical of Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo's decision to allow American troops. There have been demonstrations and protests on the streets and even dissent within her Government. There is considerable criticism against Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo for being unable to deal with the problems of poverty and unemployment while using public money to project herself abroad.

The Vice-President and Foreign Secretary, Teofisto Guingona, has spoken out publicly against the President permitting the joint military "exercise", scheduled to last for six months at present. "I will not be silent... I'll still look (out for) the interest of the nation. I did not sacrifice and will not compromise my principles," Mr. Guingona has said.

The Vice-President said he had full faith in the Philippine military to deal with the Abu Sayyaf problem and wanted the issue to be resolved. Mr. Guingona remains convinced that the extended stay of U.S. troops in the Philippines is unconstitutional.

For her part, Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo has been sharply critical of her deputy. "I do not want (Mr.) Guingona to air his reservations publicly... we already know he has reservations. It's not good to stress that because we belong to one team. It's all right for us to disagree as long as we disagree among ourselves and not in public."

The Philippines President has taken the lead in South-East Asia as far as building an "anti-terrorist" model is concerned. Her warm interactions with the U.S. President, George W. Bush, have been noted. It is evident that Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo has not been able to "sell" her U.S.-Philippine joint military "exercise" to the Filipino people. These reservations may cause long-term problems for the President.

In neighbouring Indonesia, Ms. Megawati is still allowing Islamist militants a free rein. If Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo is doing too much, Ms. Megawati is simply doing too little. Both Malaysia and Singapore want key members of a regional militant network arrested by Jakarta; so far the Megawati Government has not gone beyond questioning one of the wanted persons. Her reluctance to take on the Islamists has undermined the President's secular credentials and placed a question mark on whether her Government will be able to enforce the rule of law. Ms. Megawati, who doesn't have a majority of her own in Parliament, also faces credibility questions in

dealing with issues of corruption. The Golkar leader and House of Representatives chairman, Akbar Tandjung, has been named a suspect in a corruption case by the Attorney-General.

But the Indonesian President has stopped more active members of her Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) from supporting the formation of a parliamentary panel to probe Mr. Akbar's alleged acts of corruption.

The Attorney-General's office in Indonesia is notorious for being slow and allowing big fish to get off scot free. In such an environment, the President has been found wanting as far as dealing with the issue of corruption and nepotism is concerned. Ms. Megawati's decision to depute her husband-



politician, Taufik Keimas, to China at the head of a business delegation, has also led to criticism from several quarters. The President has also kept the press at arm's length. This is particularly galling for a press used to excellent access from the former President, Abdurrahman Wahid. Ms. Megawati rarely deals with the press, the job is left to her lieutenants.

Both Ms. Megawati and Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo (in the Philippines) took power at times of crises for their respective countries. Though six months and a year may be considered short to evaluate their performance as leaders, the indicators warn of more troubles ahead. In the Philippines, there is persistent talk of "coups" &#151; reports that are denied from time to time by the military as well as the political leadership. Such talk doesn't enhance the image of the Philippines as a stable polity.

Civil society in the Philippines and Indonesia have made their positions clear about the direction their leaders should take. Will Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo and Ms. Megawati take the cue?

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.

## North Korea and the axis of evil

If you wondered what George W. Bush thinks of North Korea, now you know: It is "evil." Will rhetorical flourishes send the two sides into war, or prompt ground-breaking dialogue? As Bush's visit to Seoul approaches, he heads into uncharted waters.

JOHN LARKIN IN SEOUL AND MURRAY HIEBERT IN WASHINGTON

**F**OR NEARLY A YEAR George W. Bush struggled to find the right words to express his repugnance for North Korea. In the end it took just three, but what an impact they had. In making North Korea the opening exhibit in his now famous "axis of evil," the United States president has finally and unambiguously put his personal stamp of disapproval on the regime.

Bush's blunt assessment of North Korea, listed alongside Iran and Iraq in his State of the Union address, stunned South Korea, which has been trying doggedly to engage its difficult neighbour.

South Korea shouldn't have been surprised: Bush had been building up to this day. Last March he hinted he didn't trust North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. In November he linked North Korea

with Iraq in the war against terror. On January 29, standing before Congress after the crushing military victories in Afghanistan, Bush erased any lingering doubt: "North Korea," he said, "is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction while starving its citizens."

Bush's colleagues later nuanced his broadside to suggest there had been no change in Washington's policy of talking to Pyongyang "any time, any place." But his choice of the emotionally charged and historically resonant phrase "axis of evil" foreshadows huge changes to the future of dialogue with North Korea.

That's if there is to be any. North Korea has been more willing to negotiate on weapons of mass destruction than the other countries on Bush's list. But despite assurances from Secretary of State Colin Powell that dialogue is still a priority, Bush's policy is beginning to resemble benign neglect. That carries big

risks. "The question now is whether North Korea will be cowed, or belligerent," says a Republican Congressional aide working on Asia policy. Bush may not stop at neglect. He could take more aggressive steps like suspending work on two light-water nuclear reactors promised to North Korea in a 1994 deal designed to replace its nuclear weapons programme with so-called "peacetime reactors" that cannot easily be used to make bombs.

**BUSH GUIDED BY 1999 REPORT** Bush's thinking appears guided by the tough-minded findings of a 1999 report written by Richard Armitage when he headed a policy forum on North Korea. Armitage, now Bush's deputy secretary of state, recommended that, should diplomacy fail, North Korean ships be interdicted on the high seas to stamp out its missile exports. It proposed, as a last resort, pre-emptive strikes targeting military facilities against which the U.S. believes it would have "probable success."

Even that drastic option doesn't seem so far-fetched now, though Bush officials say it's not on the table. Bush has already adopted some of the Armitage report's key proposals, including the linkage of peace talks to reductions in Pyongyang's conventional forces. "The Bush approach seems to follow closely the report of the Armitage group," says Larry Niksch, an Asia analyst at the Congressional Research Service.

That will cause heart-flutters in South Korea. Many Koreans fear Bush's hard line will ignite another security crisis on the peninsula: North Korea is most dangerous when it feels it's being ignored or treated disrespectfully, as in 1998, when it test-fired a Taepodong missile over Japan in protest at a lack of progress in talks with the Clinton administration.

South Korean policymakers say North Korea has not shown itself willing to make pre-emptive concessions to jump-start dialogue, as the U.S. is now demanding by asking Pyongyang to withdraw conventional forces from the border.

They believe a more U.S. assertive policy will likely put an end to

dialogue with North Korea. It could also provoke an attention-getting gesture from Pyongyang like another missile test, with an attendant ratcheting-up of tensions.

Korean policymakers in Seoul would be highly unlikely to support a military strike against North Korea, even if confronted with evidence going might trigger an uncontrollable escalation. America is making a big mistake," says Moon Chung In, a political scientist at Yonsei University in Seoul and a key adviser to the South Korean government on North Korea policy.

An acutely sensitive year in North Korea's relations with the outside world will magnify any tensions rising from Washington's policy toward Pyongyang. Victor Cha of Georgetown University sees relations with North Korea "headed for the brink again." He points out that a crucial stage will be reached in the implementation of the 1994 nuclear accord, under which the two new reactors were to be completed by 2003 but in fact are far behind schedule.

Bush is expected to intensify pressure on North Korea to submit earlier than planned to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency before the new reactors go on-line, to ensure it isn't hiding nuclear weapons. "Bush may be willing to come to a decision to suspend work on the light-water reactors if North Korea hasn't begun to comply with the IAEA," says Niksch.

Additionally, South Korean presidential elections will be held in December, with President Kim Dae Jung under intense pressure from an opposition more in tune with Bush on North Korea. "And the North's [self-imposed] moratorium on missile-testing is only good for this year," says Cha. "I think we could be headed toward posturing on the part of the North that could set off another spiral."

Those factors could drive Seoul and Washington even further apart on North Korea policy, harming an alliance that has held up for more than 50 years. President Kim has a

large amount of political capital invested in successfully pursuing his "Sunshine policy" with Pyongyang, and in enticing Kim Jong Il to make good on his promise to visit Seoul for a return summit following their historic meeting in Pyongyang in June 2000.

"Our concern now is that North Korea will retreat further into its shell," says a senior government official.

That would be political disaster for Kim, whose party desperately needs a bounce in the opinion polls. A growing sense that the U.S. is putting its own interests before its alliance partner's could fuel anti-U.S. sentiment, as happened in July 1994 when tensions over Washington's handling of the nuclear crisis boiled over into the streets of Seoul.

Discontent is already high following President Kim's summit in Washington last March, when Bush first expressed scepticism about Pyongyang. There are dark mutterings in Seoul that North Korea was included in the "axis" to drive home the message that Washington is not at war with Islam, and to distract Americans from giant energy company Enron's messy collapse. Another popular theory is that North Korea is Washington's justification for its controversial missile-defence initiative.

"If Washington takes a hard line on North Korea, all South Koreans will turn their backs on the U.S.," says Yonsei University's Moon. "It will be at the risk of ruining the alliance system."

Another summit between Kim and Bush in Seoul on February 20 could see the first public display of unpleasantness between the two men over North Korea. The shrillness of Bush's remarks will make it difficult for him to climb down, which raises the prospect of a chilly meeting. Kim sacked his foreign minister on February 4, a decision widely interpreted as a reaction to Bush's speech.

The hardening of Washington's attitude toward Pyongyang has clearly been spurred by the post-September 11 obsession with ridding the world of terrorists and punishing states that support them. But it has also been influenced by the view shared among hawks within the Bush Administration that North Korea must engage the U.S. to survive. The hardliners believe Seoul is naively pursuing engagement with an enemy that will not reciprocate its goodwill. "The Sunshine policy is dead," says Nicholas Eberstadt, a Korea specialist at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank. "The autopsy will show that Sunshine was killed by the North Korean government."

It appears that the hawks have won the day. The Bush administration, publicly at least, is moving in lock step on North Korea. Secretary of State Powell, thought to be more of a dove on North Korea than Bush, says he enthusiastically signed off on Bush's speech in the days before the address. But a senior South Korean government official said the State Department had communicated to the South Korean government its concern about the impact on relations with Seoul. "They were concerned it might undercut our efforts to reach out to North Korea," he said.

Courtesy: Far Eastern Economic Review.