

JAPAN

Koizumi starts a turbulent second year

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LAST Friday marked the first anniversary of the Japanese administration under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. A year ago when Koizumi formed his cabinet, many in Japan were enthusiastic about the future of the government and hoped that the new administration with its unique approach and style would be able to initiate reform that would not only steer Japan out of deep economic trouble, but also make politics much more transparent to wipe out widespread corruption and malpractices.

A year after much of that hope now remain elusive, and as a result gone are the feelings of that earlier enthusiasm. Most of the recent indicators show that the Koizumi cabinet, which enjoyed unprecedented popular support after its inauguration, is now in serious trouble.

Approval rating for the Koizumi cabinet started to take a sharp declining course towards the end of January with the removal of popular Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka from the cabinet. That downward trend is continuing ever since, making reform effort of the prime minister much harder to reach the goal. A year ago when Koizumi launched his cabinet, he declared that his priority would be to pursue structural reform without any sacred cow. He also loudly proclaimed that he would disband his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in case the party failed to comply with his reform initiatives.

All those pledges and promises were something completely new to the Japanese people and they jumped in immediately to express their support for such popular initiatives. The result was a near 85 percent rating for the Japanese prime minister, an all time high since the beginning of the process of ratings in the country.

This in some cases also resulted



in wildly unrealistic expectations attached to the Koizumi government, which was simply not in a position to address all such desires. But instead of taking that message back to the people, the administration kept uttering promises as if everything is deliverable if Koizumi only had been given the opportunity to work according to his own plan. Reality, on the other hand, seemed to be much harder obstacle for the prime minister to overcome.

A year after Koizumi took office, a slow progress on reform with occasional miscalculated political steps has seen his fortunes sink and many in Japan have already started casting doubt on his ability to last

one more year. As a result, there are increasing signs of behind the scene political maneuvering within the LDP as well as other major parties for a possible scenario of change of guards in Japan. Leading politicians and ambitious Diet members of major parties have started their careful calculation of an outcome that would be favorable to them.

There are disagreements among political analysts on the question of why Koizumi's reform drive lost its momentum and failed to bring desired results. He is still upbeat about the outcome of his reform, and at a press conference organized to mark the first anniversary of

his administration, Koizumi again proclaimed that he would not be detracted from the path of reform and his structural reform would help Japan to come out of its economic recession. But only few people outside the government see these days signs of any real progress.

A group of political analysts believe that Koizumi decided to take a go-slow approach to avoid a showdown with his powerful rivals within the LDP who are opposed to many of his reform goals. As a result a half-hearted approach naturally failed to bring desired results and that caused disillusionment among many of his supporters. Others say he became worried at one stage that a financial crisis triggered by reform efforts might take the whole situation out of his control, and to prevent any such possibility he decided to back off from his earlier agenda of a painful reform.

A year after Koizumi cabinet was installed, Japanese economy is now in a much more bad shape and the reality was reflected on the World Economic Outlook issued by the International Monetary Fund earlier this month. The Outlook forecasts that the economy would contract 1 percent this year and termed Japan as a source of serious concern for the world economy.

The end result of all such recent developments is the fact that Japan's mainstream political circles these days no longer take into account the option that Koizumi will be succeeded by none other than himself as both prime minister and party president in the near future. Politicians aspiring for the post have already started their tactful manoeuvre, though it is still too early to say who will be the frontrunner in that race. But one thing obvious is that, the second year for Koizumi is bound to be a turbulent period and any further delay in delivering net results of his much talked about reform initiatives can only make the situation even more complicated.

THE PHILIPPINES

Rewriting the definition of democracy

TED LERNER

PHILIPPINE President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo likes to keep a framed picture of her and US President George W Bush on her desk in Malacanang Palace. At least that's what she does when she makes one of her frequent pleas to the nation for help and understanding. The photo is rather conspicuous and can be seen easily, even on a small television set.

Whenever the president's National Security Adviser Rollo Golez is making a speech, or in a room full of people, he sends his aides around handing out shiny pocket-sized 2002 calendars. On the opposite side of the small calendar is a photo of a beaming Golez shaking hands with, you guessed it, George W Bush.

Besides reaping millions of dollars in military aid from the United States, Arroyo's trip to Washington several months back also won her another thing; a chance to wow everybody back home with how close she and her cabinet are to the Americans. This is supposed to impress her fellow Filipinos. Yes, after decades of colonialization, many Filipinos have a certain fondness for Americans, especially on a personal level. Nothing wrong with that, for sure. On a government-to-government level, however, it's not always been so smooth. Over the past 10 years, the Philippines had practically fallen off the radar screen as far as the Americans were concerned. The Americans didn't like being kicked out of their military bases in Subic and Clark, especially after offering more than US\$300 million for their use. But then came September 11 and, well, the world changed.

It's likely, though, that Arroyo is not just showing off. The president and her national security adviser are perhaps trying to send a warning to her domestic opponents. "We're tight with W. Don't try anything funny. Not only are we with the Americans, but they're already here in the country and they're armed to the teeth. Better back off."

And so it goes for a government that was not elected and came to power under extremely questionable circumstances. If all else fails, at least they've got the Americans, who obviously like the red carpet welcome they've received from the Philippine president.

These must truly feel like the dog days of summer for Arroyo. The weather has been scorching and the monsoon rains haven't yet come. But it's not just the torturous heat that drives people to madness. The political climate has spiraled out of control. The country is caught in a never-ending war of intrigue that has sent the establishment lurching from one crisis to the next.

The date May 1 has proven to be a lightning

rod, a particularly volatile rallying point for anyone with a grievance against the government. And in these steaming hot days of summer, that seems to be just about everyone. May 1 is the 100th anniversary of the worldwide Labor Day celebrations and labor groups are planning to hold huge rallies against Arroyo's government, whom they accuse of being a puppet of the United States, selling out to the interests of the global economy and ignoring the plight of ordinary people.

Besides being Labor Day, however, May 1 was also the first anniversary of the uprising against Arroyo's government by the supporters - mostly the country's poor - of ousted leader Joseph Estrada, who at the time had just been arrested and jailed on charges of corruption. Three days of massive street protests last year ended when Estrada's supporters marched to the presidential palace and tried to storm the gates. They were eventually repelled by the police and military.

Several weeks back, Arroyo decreed that the annual May 1 Labor Day celebrations would be moved to April 29. May 1 being a Wednesday, the president wanted to move the holiday to a Monday. She claimed it was part of her "holiday economics". She has declared a four-day workweek for government employees during the summer months of April and May in the hopes that the extra day would allow people to head out of town and spur domestic tourism. But others saw paranoia in the change of Labor Day. Was the president trying to pre-empt another threat to her government? She said no, but she eventually backed off when labor leaders threatened huge rallies anyway.

Naturally, the pro-Estrada groups planned to produce big numbers on May 1. Arroyo keeps saying that Estrada is a spent force, but her actions speak otherwise. Besides trying to pre-empt any protest actions by changing the date of Labor Day, she recently sent the police to arrest Ronald Lumbao, a known Estrada ally who heads a large urban poor group that was planning demonstrations on May 1. Lumbao was arrested on rebellion charges stemming from his involvement in the uprising last year.

On top of this, Arroyo's lackeys in the government censor's board recently banned the showing of a documentary film put out by the followers of Estrada. Two television stations that were going to air the documentary in prime time were told they couldn't show it. The video delves into the accomplishments of Estrada that he says were blatantly ignored by the mainstream press during his time in office. It then goes on to point out that Estrada had not resigned his post as president, as the Arroyo people had decreed during the uprising in January 2001 that led to

Estrada's ouster. The most damning part of the documentary is the video footage of then vice president Arroyo taking her oath of office at the height of the protests against Estrada. Arroyo takes her oath as the "acting" president. Technically, this means that Estrada is still the legal president of the Philippines and can reclaim his seat at any time.

The military is restive and rumors swirl far and wide daily. A group of current and retired generals recently claimed they were disgusted with the Arroyo administration. But it wasn't because of any noble reason, such as defending the constitution, which is supposed to be their highest calling. Indeed, these generals supported the illegal withdrawal of support for the duly elected leader of the country. They're upset now because they helped put Arroyo in power and feel they haven't received just compensation.

With this kind of scenario unfolding on a daily basis, it should come as no shock that the president keeps that picture of Bush featured prominently on her desk. But what shouldn't surprise anyone is the chaos in the Philippines. It is what happens when powerful interests take the law into their own hands because they think they know better than others what the country needs. It is perhaps the supreme irony of the democratic system that Estrada, a self-confessed womanizer and heavy drinker, ends up being the one to teach his country about the true values of democracy. Whether he intended this to be his fate and whether anyone but his most ardent supporters are paying attention to this strange fact is debatable.

In Manila's main public gathering point, the green and expansive Luneta Park, thousands of police recently spent a brutally hot Sunday afternoon practicing crowd-dispersal techniques in preparation for the expected huge rallies on May 1. More than 10,000 cops are being deployed around the metropolis to keep everyone in line. Potential flash points include the Veterans Memorial Medical Center, where Estrada is currently detained, the United States Embassy and, most important, the Presidential Palace, which has been ringed with barriers and barbed wire, some of it reportedly electrified. Crowds are not allowed within 500 meters of the palace gates.

Indeed things are definitely heating up in Manila these days, and it's not simply because of the incredibly hot and humid weather. Cutting corners to subvert the will of the majority tends to do that. Which is why President Arroyo is no doubt busy admiring that picture of her and George W Bush and making sure that it stays prominently featured on her desk.

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US-NORTH/SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

Is 'good cop, bad cop' working?

RALPH A. COSSA

"OUR firm stance toward North Korea is working!" So goes the conventional wisdom in Washington these days, as supporters of President Bush's "hardline" policy claim credit for Pyongyang's recent decision to resume its dialogue with Seoul. "Not so fast," say supporters of ROK President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. It was Seoul's persistent evenhanded (and open hearted) approach toward the North that persuaded Pyongyang to come around, despite (rather than because of) Bush's confrontational policies.

My guess _ and, when it comes to divining North Korean motives, the best anyone can really do is guess _ is that they are both wrong.

True, as the "bad cop" in this drama, the Bush administration's uncompromising stance toward the North has no doubt convinced Pyongyang that Washington is not about to return to the good old days when it seemed to be bending over backwards to engage with the now-officially branded member of Bush's "axis of evil." Any future talks between the U.S. and DPRK can be expected to be tough and demanding, with little prospect of rewards to North Korea just for showing up. As a result, talks with Seoul (or even with Tokyo) seem just more promising (and potentially rewarding). And it is equally true that President Kim -- the quintessential "good cop" _ has been waving olive branches until his arms are about ready to fall off, and Pyongyang must surely realize that this window of opportunity is closing as December's ROK presidential elections draw near. Besides, if dialogue with Washington still remains the ultimate goal, it's been made clear to Pyongyang that progress

in North-South talks must come first.

But, why now? Essentially the same circumstances existed in October, 2001 when the North inexplicably walked away from the latest round of discussions with the South, despite a long shopping list of promised actions and potential rewards. Who knows, had Pyongyang kept that particular ball rolling (and been a bit more forthcoming in voicing support for the war on terrorism), it might have even avoided the "evil" list. For whatever reason, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il saw fit once again in October to pull the rug out from under the Sunshine Policy.

Now, after meeting with ROK special envoy Lim Dong-won (whose official career Pyongyang played a major role in ending), the North has agreed to resume high level dialogue and selected other activities, such as the long-awaited resumption of divided family exchange visits, in the latter case after forcing the South to agree to still tighter controls, including using the Mount Kumgang resort area as the primary venue (which prevents North Korean citizens from coming to the South and seeing for themselves the remarkable accomplishments achieved under democracy).

While one always welcomes any sign of North Korean cooperation, even under less than ideal circumstances and with the usual North Korean self-serving caveats, a bit of caution remains in order, given Pyongyang's previous tendency to renege on agreements. The fact that Pyongyang announced earlier this year that it was opening up this spring's Arirang Festival in North Korea (which also commemorates the 90th anniversary of their founder Kim Il-sung's birth) to international visitors, and then boldly predicted that 200,000 or more tourists would come, raises the possibility

that narrow economic motives (and pride _ imagine the embarrassment if few show up) may be the main reason for the latest overtures, rather than a genuine desire to promote peace and reconciliation.

It remains anyone's guess as to how many World Cup tourists to the South will decide also to venture North, and only time will tell if this latest round of North Korean cooperative behavior will last beyond (or even until) the World Cup's final round.

Even if the Arirang Festival is not the primary motivator, it's clear that economics is. The Joint Press Release signed during Lim's visit focuses heavily on the revitalization of the North-South Committee for the Promotion of Economic Cooperation and goes so far as to note that one round of talks will be held at the North Korean resort location "to pep up the tour of Mt. Kumgang." While dates were set for all other meetings, the two sides merely agreed "to recommend the respective military authorities to resume talks" while placing the opening of rail and road corridors through the demilitarized zone under the purview of the Economic Cooperation committee. The North's avoidance of discussion with Seoul on security matters continues.

Meanwhile, it is useful for proponents of the "good cop, bad cop" approach to recognize that this tactic works best when both cops are in agreement as to how best to play the game. This hardly seems to be the case between Washington and Seoul today.

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