

## JAPAN

## After Suzuki it's now Tanaka facing the tune

MONZURUL HUQ in Tokyo

FOR quite sometime Japan's once powerful ruling party politician Muneo Suzuki was seen by many as a symbol of greed that taints politics in Japan. His arrest last Wednesday on charges of taking bribe of 5 million yen from a Hokkaido lumber firm in exchange of using his influence on behalf of the company puts an end to a long battle between the ruling and opposition blocks. The opposition for quite sometime was threatening to boycott of committee debate on a number of important bills submitted by the government. The main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), on the other hand, had to give in to the opposition pressure after a similar demand was raised from one of the junior partners of the three-party coalition.

Suzuki's fall from grace started with the dubious way he treated a non-governmental organization early this year when its representatives wanted to participate at the international conference on Afghanistan held in Tokyo. Suzuki forcibly tried to prevent the participation of the organization by using his influence at the foreign ministry. But that high-handed initiative miserably backfired as the media started questioning the real motive of the foreign office behind such questionable decision. Suzuki by then must have been puzzled by such a dramatic turn of the event, as never before any such decision had stirred so much controversy. But one of the main reasons for his action drawing so much anger and attention was his high-profile feud with the then foreign minister, Makiko Tanaka, which eventually revealed many other illegal meddling of Suzuki in the affairs of the state.

Suzuki was also unlucky in the sense that the timing

of his scandals being revealed coincided with that of a number of other financial scandals by some leading politicians. The series of scandals soon followed three prominent resignations from the Diet, clearing the way of departure from political arena of some influential politicians considered until recently to be essential players of country's political game.

But Suzuki, despite a number of scandals that associated him with official wrongdoings, kept on refusing to give up his parliamentary seat taking any such responsibility, whereas the party leadership also had shown a softer standing towards by allowing him to retain his Diet membership and expelling him from the party. Despite the expulsion, Suzuki remained a staunch LDP supporter at the Diet and this would have probably continued if not a new scandal had forced one of the ruling coalition parties to press on the LDP leadership for the waiver of parliamentary immunity on Suzuki so that prosecutors would be able to arrest him on charges of corruption.

Diet members in Japan are immune to arrest while the legislative body is in session unless the house they belong gives permission for their arrest. The immunity clause is originally designed to ensure freedom of lawmakers' activities in the Diet.

Suzuki was a particular breed of LDP politicians known in Japan as *Zoku*, or tribe, who serve as a conduit for passing requests of various business sectors to bureaucrats and also accumulating wealth in the form of political donations in exchange of providing that essential service. It was hardly possible to criticize Suzuki for such an act, as most of the leading LDP figures are doing more or less the same thing in a manner similar to that of Suzuki. He was also a champion lobbyist,

spreading his carefully accumulated wealth among members of different LDP factions. That was the reason why no one in LDP was willing to take stand against Suzuki once his scandals started to come into the light. Suzuki was also treating a fine legal line when his aide was arrested earlier this year on suspicion of interfering in the bid for public contracts that resulted in smaller coalition partners to refrain from demanding his resignation from the Diet in line with the opposition.

The prosecutors are now looking into details of the allegation that Suzuki received bribe from a Hokkaido lumber company, which has been subjected to administrative punishment by the Forestry Agency, in exchange of influencing to secure favorable treatment to offset company's losses resulting from the penalties. The agency punished the company for cutting trees in national forests by imposing prohibition on the firm to participate in public works projects for seven months. Under the offence with which Suzuki is charged, a public servant is held criminally responsible for accepting money in exchange of favorable treatment regardless of any official authority. Many in Japan now believe that the case against Suzuki will eventually help investigators to find new clues about his involvement in other major allegations taken up by the Diet, including the much talked about one of his alleged meddling in government-funded projects on the four Russian-held islands. But how far it would help LDP to clear the house of corrupt practices of fund raising remains doubtful, more because of other development within the party concerning the former foreign minister and Suzuki arch-rival, Makiko Tanaka.

LDP has suspended Tanaka's party membership for two years for crating obstacle on a party probe into

allegations of her misuse of salaries of government paid aides. Tanaka had out rightly denied any wrongdoing and angered her accusers by refusing to cooperate in their probe.

The LDP Ethics Committee executives decided that her membership would remain suspended for two years, a period during which she wouldn't be able to attend party convention or participate in party presidential elections. She is also banned from holding important party posts. The former foreign minister is the daughter of the late Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka. She was reelected to her third four-year term in the lower house in June 2000 and her present term expires in June 2004. The suspension makes it unlikely that Tanaka would seek a fourth term on LDP ticket or stand in any other elections as a party candidate.

The usually outspoken Tanaka remained remarkably silent since her punishment was pronounced last week. Having effectively been kicked out of the party Tanaka now joins the rank of independent lawmakers in the Parliament. But the risk remains that she might join the opposition or form her own party. In either case it might turned out to be a severe blow to Prime Minister Koizumi, who is now seen struggling to carry on reform initiatives that he promised so much.

Some analysts suggest that Tanaka's next move, as well as those of other key players within and outside the LDP would bear close watching for signs of new political polarization that might see defectors both from the LDP and the opposition joining hands in a bid to take the advantage of a confusing situation that has turned politics in Japan almost to the level of a soap opera.

## SOUTH KOREA

## Back to business (not) as usual



PEPE ESCOBAR in Seoul

CALM mornings - and evenings - finally are back to the land of Morning Calm. After an extraordinary three weeks that shook the world - and not only in soccer terms - the Red Devils won't go to the final in Yokohama after all; instead, they'll settle for still another opportunity to party next Saturday in a third-place battle ending their formidable World Cup campaign. A party is always a party, and the millions of red supporters who once again took over the streets of South Korea are not exactly complaining about being upstaged on Tuesday in the semi-final by an usually boring but nonetheless Mercedes Benz-precise German team.

Quoting sources close to the Ministry of Industry, the Munhwa Ilbo newspaper said 25 million Koreans - more than half the country's population - were wearing a red T-shirt on Tuesday, June 25, exactly 52 years after the beginning of the Korean War. North and South are still divided - and still technically at war. No one at the moment will dare predict what effects this extremely successful World Cup campaign may have in terms of overall Korean unity. The universal consensus is that South Korea is now one. It is not so far-fetched to dream that the North might catch the fever.

Anyway, in South Korea a mechanism is already in place to exploit this newfound unity as a political commodity. "Hiddink for President" was a ubiquitous banner at all of Korea's matches. In the event that the Dutchman, Korea's national coach, is granted rarely given South Korean nationality (the whole nation supports the move anyway) and ran for president, he would obviously win by a landslide.

But of course Guus Hiddink won't be a presidential candidate: that honor falls on the all-powerful Chung Mon-joon. South Korea's outstanding soccer success developed exactly as Chung had planned. He wears, among others, many crucial hats: head of the Korean Football Association, vice president of the world soccer controlling body Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), president of the organizing committee of the World Cup, a member of parliament and, crucially, the son of the founder of the mega-conglomerate Hyundai, a key World Cup sponsor.

Chung is extremely popular because Koreans identify him as the man who enabled the country definitely to bury the memories of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and regain its pride - not only by co-staging the World Cup with amazing success, but by the unexpected and astonishing success of the Red Devils themselves, written off as virtual no-hopers before the tournament. There have been many allegations, especially in the Italian and Spanish press, that Chung had a "hand of god" in the extremely controversial refereeing decisions that ultimately contributed to the elimination of Italy and Spain from the World Cup at the hands of the Koreans.

South Korea may have been a full-fledged democracy since the end of the 1980s, but corruption is still endemic, involving politicians, businessmen and former presidents. FIFA president Sepp Blatter, though, has

Courtesy: Asia Times Online

## MALAYSIA

## Mahathir: Exit stage left

ANIL NETTO in Penang, Malaysia

IT was a weekend that dramatically altered the course of Malaysian politics and which has left the country's leadership hanging in the balance. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stunned Malaysians on Saturday evening when he announced his resignation from all party posts in the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) after 21 years at the helm, only to apparently "retract" his decision an hour later after much persuasion.

A Malay-language national daily reported an UMNO vice president as saying that Mahathir had only agreed to consider a retraction. Others pointed out that the retraction was announced by Mahathir's deputy Abdullah Badawi, not by the premier. Even if he had retracted his quit decision, Mahathir would be returning on borrowed time, his days numbered. Before Malaysians could digest the news, opposition leader Fadzil Noor, the "moderate" leader of the conservative opposition Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), passed away early on Sunday after failing to regain consciousness following heart bypass surgery two weeks ago. He is likely to be succeeded by his hardline deputy, Abdul Hadi Awang, the chief minister of the east coast state of Terengganu, which is trying to introduce strict Islamic Sharia (hudud and qisas) laws.

The implications of these two events will reverberate in Malaysian politics for some time to come. Many Malaysians thought they had seen the biggest shock of the day when South Korea upset Spain to enter the World Cup soccer semi-finals. No one could have anticipated what followed next during Mahathir's speech to close the annual assembly of his UMNO, beamed live on national television on Saturday.

For a while, it looked like more of the same ho-hum old stuff Mahathir cajoling, lecturing, criticizing the ethnic Malays for failing to change their mindset of dependence and in not adapting themselves to a fast-changing world. But then at 5.56pm, like a bolt from the blue, the 76-year-old strongman, after taking a sip of water, announced that he was stepping down as

UMNO president and chairman of the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition - and then he broke down.

The full impact of the words appeared to hang in the air of the packed auditorium for a couple of seconds before it slammed down hard on the 2,000-odd delegates. By tradition, the UMNO presidency brings with it the premier's post. Top UMNO leaders mobbed him, asking "Why, why?" A visibly broken Mahathir responded feebly, "I have decided. I have decided - for a long time," and then left the auditorium, leaving behind him scenes of pandemonium.

An hour later, Deputy Premier Abdullah Badawi (the logical successor if it comes to that) announced that Mahathir had been persuaded to retract his resignation, to applause and cries of "Long live Mahathir!" But the questions linger.

In the aftermath, Malaysians were divided into two camps: those who thought it was all a sandiwara (staged drama) and those who felt that Mahathir had genuinely wanted to call it a day.

The skeptics noted that Mahathir did not actually announce his resignation as prime minister; he broke down before he could do so. (Uttering the "r" word was always going to be tough for someone who had ruled Malaysia with an iron grip for 21 years.) They recalled that this was not the first time he had shed tears at an UMNO assembly.

And they remembered that the leader of the second-largest party the Malaysian Chinese Association - in the UMNO-led coalition had pulled off a similar move two years ago. In May 2000, Ling Liong Sik, faced with a party leadership crisis, emotionally announced his resignation as transport minister, headed overseas for a break, and was back at work a few weeks later.

The skeptics say that Mahathir, a shrewd politician, can only strengthen his hand and quell dissent within UMNO's ranks with such quit-retract ploys. They say he needs the added popularity boost to ram through unpopular measures that are necessary for Malaysia to remain economically competitive, even though he has an overwhelming majority in parliament.

## AFGHANISTAN

## Chaos, women unite into a political force

CARLOTTA GALL, The New York Times

IF Afghanistan has produced a surprise of late, it is the vocal and fearless entry of women into the traditional male domain of politics. With the continuing discoveries of Al Qaeda weapons, violent clashes between warlords and politics so confused that the description byzantine barely catches the complexity, it can sometimes seem to outsiders that little progress is being made in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

For women, that is not the case. Just six months ago, under the Taliban, they were not allowed to leave the house uncovered or receive education beyond the age of 8. Now they have found their voice - to joy of many and the consternation of some. "Afghanistan has come out of a very dark and terrible graveyard," said Dr. Nazdama, assistant director of the hospital in the town of Gardez, southeast of Kabul, and one of

the Pashtun women who were delegates to the grand council, or loya jirga, this month, which marked the firm emergence of women in Afghan politics. Nazdama, who uses just one name, was one of 200 women who joined 1,400 male delegates and used the platform to show Afghanistan that women want peace, not war; education, not guns; construction and jobs, not poverty.

"The last 9 or 10 days have changed things a lot in the whole of Afghanistan," said Nazdama, referring to the effect of speeches by women that were broadcast over national television and radio. "Six months ago you would not have been able to stand here and talk," she told a female reporter. "Nor could I have done so."

A group of women delegates berated a group of warlords and political leaders as they sat in one of the side tents the first evening, the women blaming the men for causing so much of the suffering and

destruction of recent years. They fielded a female presidential candidate, and a woman was elected deputy chairwoman of the loya jirga. Despite their gains, many of the women said they felt that the strong undertow of resistance to their return to public life and pondered how far women had to go to win equal rights in their country.

Dr. Sima Samar, the interim minister of women's affairs for the last six months, was cautious in predicting rapid change in a society in which women have had no voice for so long. "We will see the effect in a while," she said. "It takes time."

Fathia Serour, a senior adviser on women's issues to the United Nations special representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, said women had to coordinate better in order to be effective. She hopes that a network of 40 women who emerged from the loya jirga as leaders will be able to make connections across Afghanistan and work on an agenda for

elections in two years.

Still, the spectacle of women jostling with men for a microphone to make speeches from the floor at the loya jirga was a stark contrast to the disappearance of women from public life for five years under the Taliban. Women also spoke from the podium, and some even approached the UN press organizers to ask them to transmit more footage of female delegates. Samar, one of two female ministers in the interim government, was elected deputy chairwoman of the loya jirga, beating a dozen male candidates in a secret ballot.

Now, despite facing taunts and even implied death threats for her role and her outspokenness, she has agreed to head the new commission for human rights, a post that will bring her up against many of the most notorious commanders and warlords. "I am used to playing with fire," she said. "Somebody has to do it." In the

media. Although the fundamentals look sound and the first quarter showed positive gross domestic product (GDP) growth, much of it was due to pump-priming.

There is a limit to the roads and flyovers that can be constructed to boost the figures. The reality is that foreign direct investment had plummeted and the opening of global markets, especially China, presented as many opportunities as challenges.

Adding to the uncertainty - and the drama - is the question of the future of ousted deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, sentenced to jail for 15 years. He has been waiting for a Federal Court appeal decision on his original conviction for abuse of power for some time, and a decision is expected soon. Another 113 Malaysians, including half a dozen reformasi supporters, remain detained without trial under the harsh Internal Security Act.

It was only last month that Mahathir visited US President George W Bush at the White House. And in another highlight, the premier had a 10-minute private conversation with Pope John Paul II in Rome on June 7. Fifteen days later, from the pinnacle of the international recognition he had craved, Mahathir submitted his resignation to a shocked nation.

Was it a moment of grace and illumination? There comes a time when even the most worldly, hardnosed politician, staring at the limits of mortality and the futility of unbridled power, may wonder "what's the point of it all?" That stark realization may have dawned on Mahathir on that fateful Saturday. The next couple of days will see events unfolding fast and furiously. If Mahathir does return to his desk - he is now back in Italy on a sailing vacation - his tenure is likely to be brief, to allow for a period of transition. After 21 years of Mahathir, for better or for worse, Malaysia will not be the same again.

Courtesy: The Asia Times Online