

# Corruption allegations against Tanaka intensify factional warfare in Japan

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The corruption allegations levelled on April 4 against former Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka, who Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi sacked from the cabinet on January 30, mark a new turn in the factional war within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The scandal is a calculated attempt to destroy Tanaka's political career at the point where she was emerging as a prominent critic of and potential challenger to Koizumi.

According to the magazines *Shukan Shincho* and *Shukan Bunshun*, Tanaka has been misappropriating the salaries of her registered parliamentary secretaries since 1998. The secretaries remained as employees of a Tanaka family company and were paid their normal salaries, plus a top-up of 50,000 yen from Tanaka's office. The higher state-paid salaries of 430,000 yen (\$US3,300) were deposited into Tanaka's parliamentary funds and the balance—amounting to 380,000 yen—was allegedly used for other purposes. Similar charges against Social Democratic Party (SDP) legislator Kiyomi Tsujimoto—another critic of the LDP hierarchy—led to her resignation from the parliament early this month.

Tanaka has denied the charges, telling the press: "I do not know who is giving such information to the magazines". She has no lack of enemies within the LDP, however, including some who are close to Koizumi. While there is no evidence that any of Koizumi's supporters were the source, they have the most to gain if the allegations are substantiated.

The high profile daughter of a former prime minister, Tanaka emerged into national prominence in the 1990s, under conditions of economic stagnation and depressed stock prices and real estate values. Reflecting the sentiment of sections of Japanese big business, she denounced successive LDP administrations as ineffectual, protectionist and beholden to vested interests. Tabloids and talk shows built her up as a potential Margaret Thatcher who would spearhead sweeping free market deregulation. With the media's aid, she won a large base of support among the urban middle class, which has become increasingly susceptible to such appeals after more than 10 years of economic slump.

A year ago, Tanaka supported Koizumi, a member of the ultra-nationalist Fukuda or Mori faction of the LDP, when he challenged for the party leadership against the major factions.

She promoted him as the party's "last card" to implement radical economic changes to bring about a recovery. With Tanaka's backing, Koizumi won overwhelming support from the LDP membership and defeated the candidate of the major factions, former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. As her reward, she was given the post of foreign minister.

Their alliance rapidly broke down amid factional in-fighting. While Koizumi and Tanaka share a general agreement that Japan's highly regulated postwar economic policies are no longer tenable, they hold widely divergent positions over how to protect its strategic interests in Asia. The debate over these issues, which has raged in Japanese ruling circles for more than a decade following the end of the Cold War, has been sharpened as a result of the country's intractable economic problems.

Tanaka is a representative of those who view Japan's subordinate role in the postwar security alliance with the US as being inimical to their interests. She has been a consistent advocate of forging far closer relations with China and other Asian states where Japan has large-scale investment, if necessary at the expense of the military ties with Washington—Japan's chief economic rival.

Within weeks of her cabinet appointment, transcripts of discussions with European foreign ministers were leaked, revealing that Tanaka opposed the US National Missile Defense system because it antagonised China and was generally hostile toward the Bush administration. She later expressed sympathy with the calls for the removal of the US military base on Okinawa and allegedly told Chinese leaders she supported Taiwan's reunification with China.

Koizumi and his Fukuda grouping represent another tendency. In response to Japan's diminished ability to exert influence in Asia and internationally using economic clout alone, they have made calls for the repeal of the country's constitutional constraints on the use of military power. This policy has temporarily dovetailed with the Bush administration, which has encouraged Japan to remilitarise so it can play an active role in any US conflict on the Korean peninsula or with China.

The different orientations provoked sharp tensions within the cabinet. In order to build a broader base for constitutional

change, as well as to divert social tensions in Japan, Koizumi has actively promoted Japanese nationalism. He refused to prevent the publication of school textbooks promoting rightwing patriotic views and visited the Yasukuni shrine where some of Japan's World War II leaders and convicted war criminals are interred. Tanaka publicly criticised both acts for poisoning relations with China and the Koreans, which fear they could be targets of a resurgent Japanese imperialism.

The end to the unstable alliance came with Koizumi's support for the US "war on terrorism". To the alarm of China, as well as sections of the ruling elite in Tokyo, Koizumi pushed through legislative changes enabling the Japanese military to deploy in support of the US assault on Afghanistan and hardened his government's stance against North Korea. In order to ensure the support of the larger LDP factions, Koizumi accommodated to their opposition to the radical economic restructuring measures. In doing so, he further alienated Tanaka's supporters among sections of big business and the urban middle class.

Prior to Tanaka's sacking over allegations that she lied to parliament, Koizumi effectively gagged her. All decisions and statements by her ministry had to pass through his office first and she was excluded from major cabinet meetings.

Three weeks after her dismissal, Tanaka began to criticise Koizumi in much the same way as she had his predecessors. She labelled him a member of the "anti-reform forces" and declared he faced "grave charges" for betraying the expectations of the public. Her criticisms have paralleled those in the Japanese and international financial press which has lambasted Koizumi for failing to adequately address the level of bad debt in the banking system and promote privatisation and deregulation.

In late February, Tanaka allegedly held meetings with the opposition Democratic Party (DPJ) and Liberal Party, offering to leave the LDP and join them if she became their prime ministerial candidate. At the same time, she has been openly factionalising among pro-restructuring and urban-based LDP legislators. She held a "policy study group", which 51 LDP politicians or their representatives attended, including Defense Minister Gen Nakatani and Administrative Reform Minister Nobuteru Ishihara, the son of right-wing populist and Tokyo mayor Shintaro Ishihara.

In March, Tanaka made her opposition to Koizumi's foreign policy transparent. At Beijing's invitation, she travelled to China to take part in the commemoration ceremony to mark 30 years since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. She was accorded virtual head-of-state treatment and held private meetings with both National Peoples Congress chairman Li Peng and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan. She pointedly elected to use a joint press conference with Tang on March 24 to denounce Koizumi as a puppet of the Fukuda faction, which opposed the restoration of ties with China in 1972 and continues to oppose a reunification of

Taiwan and the mainland.

Tanaka also used her China visit to threaten to split from the LDP. She declared: "The LDP's historical mission has ended. A lot of legislators are thinking it would be better if something new comes out." In answer to doubts she could win sufficient support, she said: "There are many people I can work with in other parties too."

Before the corruption allegations, Tanaka appeared to be eclipsing Koizumi in the opinion polls. A poll by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*—which is largely supportive of Koizumi—reported the approval rating of his cabinet at just 50.6 percent. A poll by Kyodo News put it at only 44.8 percent, compared with over 90 percent when Koizumi and Tanaka first formed a new government. Another poll found that Tanaka is the public's "most preferred" prime minister by a wide margin over Koizumi. A leader of the DPJ commented to the *Financial Times*: "She [Tanaka] is seeing what kind of reaction her comments generate among politicians and with the public. She is showing she is willing."

The corruption charges against Tanaka have intensified the factional warfare in the political establishment. On April 5, Tanaka refused to appear before an internal LDP political ethics committee, declaring in a statement that the allegations were only "accusations and defamation". The LDP heads have been unable to win sufficient support to move against Tanaka. Their immediate concern is an upcoming by-election in Tanaka's home region of Niigata, but their main fear is that Tanaka and her supporters will leave the LDP. The desertion of just 40 legislators could be enough to bring down the government.

However, Tanaka's opponents clearly want her to resign from parliament like SDP legislator Tsujimoto. The *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a consistent critic of Tanaka, condemned the LDP leadership today for not confronting her. Its editorial declared: "The LDP has not given up pursuing a state-paid secretary-related scandal involving the Social Democratic Party. The LDP's ability to keep its own house in order will be questioned if it actively seeks to hold the SDP accountable over this scandal while being hesitant to address its own problems."



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