Japanese government pushes through law to allow naval support for Afghan occupation

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Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda last Friday used his government's two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament to force through legislation restarting Japan's naval refuelling assistance to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The vote not only overruled the opposition-controlled upper house, but also ignored widespread popular opposition in Japan to the Bush administration's "war on terror".

The naval mission was abruptly terminated on November 1 when Fukuda failed to renew the special "anti-terrorist" legislation passed in 2001 to effectively override the so-called pacifist clause in the country's constitution. Then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi was an enthusiastic supporter of Bush's global war on terrorism as a means for ending constitutional restrictions on the military and advancing his own plans for a more aggressive assertion of Japanese interests in Asia and internationally.

Koizumi's commitment of Japanese forces to support the US occupation of Afghanistan and particularly Iraq provoked widespread opposition and was a significant factor in the political demise of his immediate successor, Shinzo Abe. Abe resigned suddenly last September following a devastating defeat for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in upper house elections, ongoing scandals and hostility to the impact of the government regressive economic policies. The immediate trigger for Abe's resignation was the refusal of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to renew the anti-terror legislation.

Fukuda, a longstanding LDP politician and minister, was installed as prime minister in a bid to salvage the government. He described his ministers as a "do-or-die" cabinet, warning that if it failed, the LDP would be ousted from power. All efforts to reach a compromise with the DPJ on the anti-terror law, including an offer to form a government of national unity, failed and the legislation expired.

Japan was under considerable pressure from the Bush administration to renew the naval mission. While the military assistance involved was limited, the mission signalled Tokyo's continued commitment to the bogus "war on terror" after Japanese troops were pulled out of Iraq in 2006. If Japan ended its support for the occupation of Afghanistan as well, it would undermine US efforts to press its European allies to play a more active military role in Afghanistan.

The government called an extraordinary session of the Diet and introduced new legislation which passed the lower house on November 13. Days later Fukuda flew to Washington where he reaffirmed that the US remained "the one and only ally" of Japan. "I told President Bush that I will make the utmost efforts for an early enactment of legislation so that Japan's naval refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean will resume as soon as possible," Fukuda told reporters. "We should never allow Afghanistan to once again become a hotbed for terrorism."

Faced with continuing DPJ opposition in the upper house, Fukuda resorted to drastic measures to enact the legislation. The government used its numbers in the lower house to extend the extraordinary session of the Diet twice by the maximum allowable limit, forcing parliament to sit over the Christmas and New Year period for the first time in 14 years. The government then invoked Article 59 of the constitution, which allows a two-thirds majority of the lower house to override the upper house if it rejects a bill or fails to vote on it within 60 days. With the 60-day limit about to expire, an upper house committee voted against the legislation on January 10 and the government overturned the vote the following day.

The government's use of Article 59 was the first since 1951. In part, the virtually unprecedented character of the move is explained by the unusual balance of

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parliamentary forces: the LDP controls the lower house with a large majority, but faces a hostile upper house after last year's election loss. At the same time, the use of this mechanism is a sign of mounting social and political tensions, as it represents the breakup of Japan's consensus politics that dominated much of the postwar period.

The DPJ, which is largely an amalgam of LDP factions that broke from the party in the 1990s, has no fundamental differences with the government. It is, however, seeking to capitalise on antiwar sentiment, hostility to US militarism and anger over the social impact of the government's economic restructuring program. The Democrats did not oppose the US occupation of Afghanistan as such or rule out Japanese military support, but insisted that it required UN endorsement and accused the government of slavishly following Washington.

In a televised debate with Fukuda last week, DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa accused the government of failing to establish clear rules for the dispatch of Japanese forces overseas. "Considering the country's past, the judgment must not be left up to the powers-that-be of the time. That could mislead our nation," he said. The vague reference to the "country's past" is designed to appeal to deeply felt opposition to war engendered by the record of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Koizumi's dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq—the first to an overseas war zone since World War II—provoked protests. While the LDP has attempted to justify the US occupation of Afghanistan as part of the "war on terror", it is also deeply unpopular. A Kyodo News survey found that 44.1 percent of respondents backed the new anti-terror bill, but 43.9 percent were opposed. The same survey also found sharp divisions over the use of Article 59 to pass the legislation—46.7 percent were in support, but 41.6 percent declared it was inappropriate.

DPJ parliamentarian Yoshito Sengoku told the *Washington Post*: "This is a clear abuse of power. The government will now surely lose the trust of the people." Yet, the opposition parties have not to date used their majority in the upper house to pass a no-confidence motion in the government. Such a motion would not constitutionally force the government to dissolve the lower house and hold new elections, but would heighten the pressure on Fukuda to do so.

The DPJ's reluctance to press the issue further demonstrates that its differences with the government are tactical. While advocating a more independent foreign policy, the opposition party is not opposed to the US-Japan military alliance and does not want to alienate Washington. The DPJ is now focussing on the parliamentary budget session due to start today with a call last weekend for cuts to petrol taxes. "This is a major theme for forcing a snap election. It is directly related to the lives of the people and we are resolved not to retreat one step," DJP secretary general Yukio Hatoyama told Fuji TV on Sunday.

The budget itself only requires lower house approval, but various supplementary bills must also be passed by the upper house. These measures need to be passed in time for the start of Japan's new fiscal year on April 1. As a result, the standoff over the anti-terror law could be reproduced in the budget session and may force an early election which is not formally due until September 2009.

The LDP is keen to put off a lower house poll for as long a possible. Support for the Fukuda cabinet has fallen since its installation last September. A Nikkei poll in mid-December showed its approval rating at 43 percent, down 12 percent from November, and its disapproval at 46 percent. A policy document presented to an LDP convention yesterday described the situation as the worst crisis in the party's history. "I am painfully aware that you must all feel voters' lack of trust in politics and dissatisfaction with the LDP on a daily basis," Fukuka told delegates.

The prime minister has hinted that he might call an election after hosting the annual summit of the G-8, due to take place in the Lake Toya resort in early July. Instead of resolving the current political deadlock between the upper and lower houses, an election could create a full-blown constitutional crisis. While the DPJ is confident of winning office for the first time, it may fall short, opening up the prospect of weak LDP government lacking the two-thirds majority needed to overrule the DPJ-dominated upper house. Increasingly what is being mooted is a government of national unity amid growing resentment, hostility and opposition to the entire political establishment.

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