

# ASIA'S NEW LEADERS

## THE POLITICIAN

# The Unmaking of a Prime Minister

Can a Young, Media-Savvy Politician Help Defeat Yoshiro Mori's Powerful LDP?

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TOKYO — Keeping his hair in order would seem the least of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's worries right now. But for feisty opposition politician Kiyomi Tsujimoto, who knows the increasing importance of image for Japan's subtly changing electorate, a comely coif could turn out to be one of her most potent political weapons.

"I go to a hair salon, a salon in Omotesando — a chic district of Tokyo "where there are all these young people with dyed-brown hair and fashionable celebrity hairdressers," she says, starting a story about how her hairdresser is so fed up with Japan that she's thinking of emigrating to the U.S. After visiting the hairdresser recently, she stopped by the Comme des Garçons boutique. "A young saleswoman comes up to me and says, 'I hope you'll wear that and topple Mr. Mori,'" recounts Ms. Tsujimoto.

Removing Mr. Mori's ruling Liberal Democratic Party won't be so easy, of course. But Ms. Tsujimoto's hair salon encounter underscores just how badly out of touch Japan's grizzled Liberal Democratic Party veterans, who favor cheap blue suits and greasy pompadours, are with Japan's rising generation of voters. In the past, when political machines ruled Japanese politics and politicians prospered by pandering to powerful lobbies like the construction industry, farmers, and big labor, such fashion fastidiousness hardly mattered. No longer.

Machine politicians like Mr. Mori still run Japan, but the trend of the times is running against the organizations — farmers, construction companies, unions — that once got out the vote. Only about 1% of Japanese households are now engaged in full-time farming. Union membership has fallen sharply. So increasingly politicians must appeal to the large group of voters who aren't tied to any vested interest — the ones who tell pollsters that they're dissatisfied with the status quo. Working women — a growing

political force in Japan — are a prime example of such burgeoning political constituencies.

Ms. Tsujimoto's overarching political ambition is simple: Kick out the LDP. The 40-year-old legislator from the opposition Social Democratic Party, who overcame a troubled background to attend the prestigious Waseda University, strongly

around from business to business with little success. "My home was always poor," she says. "When I was in 6th grade, my father piled up debts and disappeared. Until my relatives discovered him in Nagoya three years later, no one knew where he was." Her feistiness, in part, stems from those tough early years. She remembers, for instance, shouting at the bill collectors who used to come by looking for her father. "Take whatever you want and get out of here! How do you expect us to pay back the money?" she would yell.

While at Waseda University (also, coincidentally, Mr. Mori's alma mater), Ms. Tsujimoto got interested in how Japan's perception of World War II differed from that of its Asian neighbors. Mainly to educate younger Japanese, after graduation she founded a nonprofit cruise company called Peace Boat, which conducts boat tours to developing countries.

Busy with her Peace Boat work on Oct. 1, 1996, she got a call from a secretary to Social Democratic Party head Takako Doi, who asked Ms. Tsujimoto to run for parliament on the Social Democratic ticket. The election was less than three weeks away. An admirer of Ms. Doi for years, she decided to take the plunge. She won, albeit by gaining a proportional representation seat, which are doled out to parties based on the share of a category of votes cast in each election for parties, not specific candidates. The going was less easy last year, though, when Ms. Tsujimoto took on the more daunting challenge of running for a district seat, where voters elect a person, not a party. She ran in an Osaka district against a candidate

backed both by the LDP and the powerful Soka Gakkai Buddhist group. Battling against the powerful LDP machine and the disciplined Soka Gakkai faithful, Ms. Tsujimoto won by 731 votes. "I didn't have any money," she says. "The fact that I was able to win shows that people want to change the political culture and style."

Ms. Tsujimoto's path to power shows how political life in Japan is slowly moving away from the days when party power

brokers and backroom intrigues determined who was in or out. Throughout most of Japan's post-war history, LDP politicians usually made it to the top by developing ties with powerful interest groups such as construction companies, farmers, doctors, and war veterans. Opposition legislators traditionally developed their own, often built around labor union support. Then upon entering parliament, new LDP legislators attached themselves to a powerful boss, sometimes called an "oyabun" or parent, attempting to gain his favor by performing political chores.

The current prime minister, Yoshiro Mori, rose through the ranks this way, starting out as a protege and occasional bodyguard of Takeo Fukuda, prime minister from 1976 to 1978. Mr. Mori gradually accumulated influence through positions such as construction minister. So when Mr. Mori's predecessor, Keizo Obuchi, suddenly collapsed in April 2000, Mr. Mori's record was undistinguished enough to satisfy LDP elders, who selected him as prime minister. Not one to deviate from the LDP's hallowed tradition of pork-barrel politics, Mr. Mori soon made sure that the new national budget included an expensive bullet-train line to his lightly populated home prefecture.

Just how weary Japan's voters are with the calcified political system Mr. Mori embodies will be put to the test during the July 29 elections for half of parliament's upper house. If the opposition parties do well a new anti-LDP government could take shape by September and, if so, Ms. Tsujimoto could win a cabinet post. A veteran of television talk shows, she is peppering the airwaves with sound bites that smack of impending triumph. Her view of the LDP: "The termites are

Kiyomi Tsujimoto

- **Profession:** Member of parliament, Japan
- **Age:** 40
- **Birthplace:** Nara Prefecture
- **Education:** B.A., Waseda University
- **Home district:** Osaka No. 10
- **Family:** Single

### ● On her background:

My father has been running an udon [noodle] shop for a while now in Nagoya, with my mother. That's going pretty well. So I'm not a second-generation legislator; I'd never seen a politician around. My dad only graduated from middle school. ... So even now I have nothing to lose, nothing to cling to. My mother says to me, 'If your career as a politician isn't going well, just quit. You can always go back to drawing a cart. You shouldn't fear anything. Don't say that you must be a politician because you want money or something.' That's what she's always telling me."

### ● On the ruling Liberal Democratic Party:

When I talk with the young

reformers in the LDP, I find areas where we agree on policy. But they're second- or third-generation legislators, and when they go back to their districts, they're still carrying all their father's supporters and his old vested interests. The policies they talk about are great, but when it comes to carrying them out, they have in their districts companies who supported their father or maybe big construction companies are funneling votes to them. So it's clear they have absolutely no ability to carry out what they say."

### ● On the upper house election July 29:

In the upper house [vote], I'm fully confident that the three-party coalition of the Liberal Democrats, the Komeito and the Conservatives will be defeated. The opposition will take a majority of the upper house and that means that if no bill can pass, we'd force a general election [for the lower house]. In the general election in the fall, assuming the alliance of the opposition parties wins, I think we'd have a change of power by the end of the year."



**Path To Power:** By cozying up to the media and focusing on her image, Kiyomi Tsujimoto is shaking up Japan's hidebound political culture

believes ousting the LDP is the ultimate answer to Japan's economic woes. And though most political analysts would call her overly optimistic, she insists that the change in power could come as early as this year. "The frustration of the people is really boiling over," she says.

Ms. Tsujimoto didn't start life in the costly Issey Miyake outfits she sports today. She says she moved 20 times as a child in the Kansai area around Osaka and later in Nagoya as her father jumped

attacking ... and it may collapse all at once." Japan's stock market? It's a "broken roller coaster."

But even though the popular dissatisfaction with the Mori administration seems to be mounting by the day, and could ultimately cost the LDP its parliamentary majority, some question whether the ideologically divided opposition parties can work together. "Opposition parties that can't agree on policy have no competence to run the government," said LDP secretary general Makoto Koga at a recent party convention. Mr. Koga elicited a thunderous round of applause from the elderly LDP stalwarts at the convention by raising the specter that an opposition coalition could include Communists.

Indeed, opposition parties are divided about whether to bring the Communists into a coalition. The idea of tying the knot with a party that still advocates

Marxist-Leninist thinking in its charter is just too much for many moderates and conservatives in the opposition. The opposition is also split down the middle on defense issues: Ms. Doi, the Social Democratic Party leader, vows to keep Japan's pacifist traditions, while conservative Ichiro Ozawa of the Liberal Party calls for a vigorous Japanese military role co-operating with the U.S. to keep peace in the region.

Many Japanese are also nervous about entrusting the country to untested hands. Unpopular as the LDP is, it also represents solidity, stability and a record of lifting Japan out of the postwar ashes.

Still, unease about the future is real and growing. Japan's new population of floating voters may finally be galvanized in the next election to push out the LDP old guard — but only if the rest of the opposition can demonstrate the same media-savvy instincts as Ms. Tsujimoto.