

Japan's Koizumi backs first woman PM hopeful

TOKYO (AFP) — Japan's popular former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi threw his weight Friday behind Yuriko Koike, who is trailing in her bid to become the nation's first female leader, reports said.

Taro Aso, a conservative former foreign minister, has taken an early lead ahead of the September 22 vote of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to replace unpopular Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who quit last week.

A new poll showed that Aso also enjoyed a strong edge over the resurgent opposition's leader Ichiro Ozawa for general elections, which are expected to be held within months.

But Koizumi, Japan's longest-serving premier in recent times, was reported Friday to have come out on behalf of Koike, a former defense minister who has pledged to carry out free-market reforms from Koizumi's 2001-2006 tenure.

Seishiro Eto, a lawmaker who supports Koike, said Koizumi voiced to him his preference, according to Jiji Press.

"I support Koike. I will vote for her. If a Prime Minister Koike becomes reality, she would give a good fight to the Ozawa-led Democratic Party," Koizumi was quoted as saying.

The intervention was unusual for Koizumi, who has mostly kept a low profile since stepping down, focusing on his hobbies including opera.

Koizumi was the rare modern Japanese prime minister to enjoy popularity throughout his tenure, with voters drawn to his charismatic campaign style, which included picking fights against the old guard of the LDP.

Aso is seen as backing traditional economic policies of the LDP, which has been in power for all but 10 months since 1955.

Aso supports government spending to revive the troubled economy and has hinted he would ignore Koizumi's pledges to tame the ballooning public debt, the highest among rich nations.

Aso's other rivals include Kaoru Yosano, the economic and fiscal policy minister, who has openly criticized Aso's budget policies and called for fiscal discipline.

Indian Kashmir braces for separatist protests

SRINAGAR, India (AFP) — Thousands of police deployed across areas of Indian Kashmir on Friday ahead of protests called by Muslim separatists in the region.

A separatist committee spearheading recent demonstrations has called on people in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley to take to the streets after midday prayers.

Last Friday, thousands of Muslims held sit-in protests against Indian rule outside mosques in the summer capital Srinagar and other towns.

"We have deployed police and CRPF (riot police) personnel in good numbers in all the sensitive places," police official Pervez Ahmed said.

Residents said riot police were also deployed around the main mosque in Srinagar and another major shrine.

More than 30 protesters have been shot dead by security forces and 1,200 people injured in protests sparked by a state government plan, made public in June, to grant land to a Hindu pilgrim trust.

The protests reignited the separatist struggle in Indian Kashmir, where a two-decade-old insurgency has claimed more than 43,000 lives.

In the latest incident, Indian troops shot dead three Muslim militants during an early morning gunbattle in the southern district of Kishtwar on Friday, army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel S.D. Goswami told AFP.

Deaths make 2008 deadliest for U.S. in Afghanistan

KABUL (AP) — Insurgents killed two U.S. troops in Afghanistan on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks Thursday, making 2008 the deadliest year for American forces since U.S. troops invaded the country in 2001 for sheltering Osama bin Laden.

The deaths brought the number of troops who have died in Afghanistan this year to 113, according to an Associated Press tally, surpassing last year's record toll of 111.

Afghanistan was the launching pad for al-Qaida's terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. U.S. forces invaded in October 2001 in response and quickly drove the Taliban out of power.

Across Afghanistan, U.S. troops paused in silence Thursday to commemorate the 9/11 attacks. At a U.S. base in Kabul, members of the New York National Guard, many of whom served at the site of the World Trade Center after the towers came down, remembered the attack on their home state.

"For those of us who were there, served at Ground Zero, 9/11 is deeply personal," said Col. Brian K. Bale, the commander of the 27th Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

Maj. Stephen Bousquet, 34, of Buffalo, N.Y., provided security at Ground Zero for three weeks after the attack. He now trains and mentors Afghan police, he said, "so American and coalition forces can leave one day."

Osama bin Laden, leader of the al-Qaida network, is believed to be in the lawless tribal belt on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. He had been sheltered by Taliban leader Mullah Omar before 9/11.

Taliban fighters folded in easy defeat in fall 2001 in what at first appeared to be a resounding U.S. victory. But militants that U.S. commanders once derided as ragtag amateurs

have transformed into a fighting force advanced enough to mount massive conventional attacks. Suicide and roadside bombs have turned bigger and deadlier than ever.

The number of Arab, Chechen and Uzbek militants flowing into the Afghan-Pakistan region has increased this year, bringing with them command expertise the Taliban lacked.

U.S. death tolls have climbed sharply from the first years of the war. Only five American service members died in 2001. Thirty service members died in both 2002 and 2003; the toll climbed to 49 in 2004,



then 93 in 2005 and 88 in 2006.

Last year 111 troops died, including one killed by a sniper while meeting with Pakistani officers in Pakistan. That mark was surpassed Thursday — with more than three months left in the year — reflecting both the increased number of American troops deployed to Afghanistan as well as the insurgency's increasing potency.

Top U.S. generals, European leaders and analysts say the blame lies to the east, in militant sanctuaries in

neighboring Pakistan. As long as those areas remain havens where fighters arm, train, recruit and plot increasingly sophisticated ambushes, the Afghan war will continue to sour.

"What you have is a broad expansion on the front, and because of this you have expansion in areas of the Taliban. Even in areas where there is no substantial fighting, the presence of insurgents has increased," said Anthony Cordesman, a security expert with the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"You have less cooperation from

in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, according to the Defense Department.

The Pentagon says 117 U.S. service members died last year in Operation Enduring Freedom, but that includes six deaths outside the Afghan region: two in the Philippines, two in Ethiopia, one in Somalia.

The NATO-led force in Afghanistan said one soldier was killed Thursday in the east when insurgents attacked a compound. The separate U.S.-led coalition said a second service member died while conducting combat operations. No other details were released, but a Western military official told The Associated Press that both troops were American.

Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense, noted the militants aren't just targeting U.S. forces. He said Afghan soldiers and police have also suffered a record number of casualties over the past year. Figures weren't immediately available.

President Bush announced this week that he was sending an Army brigade and a Marine battalion to Afghanistan in November to replace two that are scheduled to leave.

Some 33,000 U.S. troops are now stationed in the country, the highest level since 2001. Overall, more than 65,000 troops from 40 nations are deployed in Afghanistan.

U.S. commanders in Afghanistan say they need another 10,000 troops — even more than the deployment plan Bush announced. The commanders also urge more nonmilitary aid and say the Afghan government must perform better.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee this week that, "I'm not convinced we're winning in Afghanistan. I'm convinced we can."

Power of the people fights democracy in Thai protests

BANGKOK (New York Times) — It looks a lot like a "people power" revolution, the kind of brave and joyous pro-democracy uprising that has toppled dictators from the Philippines to Serbia.

Samak Sundaravej was forced out of office as prime minister Tuesday when a court ruled he had violated the constitution.

For more than two weeks, thousands of people have camped on the grounds of the prime minister's office, cheering and clapping as speakers with microphones have stood on the back of a truck and called for the downfall of the government.

But in fact the protest is more like a counterrevolution by the Thai establishment against the rising electoral power of the mostly rural poor.

The government the protest seeks to bring down, whatever its faults, was democratically elected with a huge majority. The new order the protest proposes would roll back democracy by replacing an elected parliament with one that is mostly appointed, keeping power in the hands of the country's royalist, bureaucratic, military elite.

"This is a very weird situation where a reactionary movement is mobilizing people by using conservative ideology mixed with leftist language," said Prajak Kongkeerati, a leading political scientist at Thammasat University.

In the vision of the protesters, power would run top-down, as it does in the hierarchy of traditional Thai society.

The confrontation reflects a dynamic that is visible throughout the region: an underclass that is growing in power and an entrenched establishment that is pushing back.

The government, for its part, is hardly democratic, pursuing autocratic policies and seeking to neutralize the checks and balances of the constitution. It is the friendly successor to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a coup in 2006 after a six-year tenure during which he worked to centralize power in his own hands while cracking down on the free press and on independent organizations.

Whichever way the confrontation ends, analysts say, democracy is unlikely to be the winner.

Although Thailand has in recent years been seen as a beacon of democracy in Asia, the system has always been tenuous, plagued by coups and corruption.

Since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, its governments have been unstable and mostly short-lived coalitions, scrapping and replacing their constitutions 17 times. They have been subject to two corrective forces particular to Thailand: repeated intervention by the military and by the monarchy.

There have been 18 coups since 1932, and Thai commentators say conditions are ripe for a coup now. The army chief, Gen. Anupong Paochinda, has promised that this will not happen, but promises like this have been broken in the past.

If the situation becomes critical, many Thais hope King Bhumibol Adulyadej will step in as he has several times over the years to defuse confrontations. The king stands above the fray of politics, but he is deeply revered and his word is the authority of last resort in a country that has still not found its political footing.

Calling themselves the People's Alliance for Democracy, or PAD,

protesters have occupied the grounds of the prime minister's office since Aug. 26, forcing him to move the business of government elsewhere.

In a strange twist unrelated to the protest, the prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, was forced from office on Tuesday when a court ruled that he had violated the constitution by accepting payments to appear on a television cooking show while in office. A new prime minister was expected to be named Friday, but the vote is now set for Wednesday — and it could be for Samak, whose party has nominated him to succeed himself — but the protests have continued and show no sign of coming to an end.

The protests go beyond a challenge to one government and are rooted in social and political divides that have only hardened in the past three years of political tension. It is a story of haves and have-nots, with the haves rising up against the poorer classes.

Traditionally in Thailand, governments have pursued policies that reflect the country's hierarchical culture, favoring the urban elite.

"We can say that every government has a policy platform that has an urban bias," Prajak, the political scientist, said. "So when elections come, they court the support of the rural vote. But when they are in power, they formulate policy that favors the urban and industrial sector."

Because of this, he said, "we have an unequal growth between the agricultural sector and the industrial sector."

"This gives us the very high gap in income distribution."

Thaksin tapped into this disparity, placing the poor at the center of his governing strategy

with populist policies like low-cost health care and debt relief. Poor and rural voters found their voice in voting for him, creating an overwhelming electoral base that gave him and his allies increasing economic and political power that some saw as a challenge to the monarchy.

The People's Alliance is a self-contradictory mix of royalist elites, generals and business professionals with some liberal democrats, students and trade unionists, united only by their opposition to the pro-Thaksin government.

But at its core, the People's Alliance would move Thailand away from the basic democratic principle of one person one vote, Prajak said. "Many Thai elite don't believe in that," he said.

The People's Alliance would return the country to a 20-year-old model of "semi-democracy," in which the bureaucracy and the military have a role in politics and business professionals share a voice with elected representatives, Prajak said.

In their resistance to democracy, the protesters are squarely in a political camp that has roots deep in Thai history, said Thongchai Winichakul, a professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"The PAD is a variation of the deep-rooted hierarchical society," he said. "In a nutshell, it's a kind of distrust of the people."

He added: "You can find this idea beginning in the late 19th century, when King Chulalongkorn said Thai people do not want democracy, that Thai people trust the king."

"Throughout all the years that kind of idea remained," Thongchai said. "People are not ready."

Zimbabwe deal gives power to Tsvangirai

Robert Mugabe Thursday agreed to surrender day-to-day control of the government and much of his power in a historic deal with his opponent, Morgan Tsvangirai, to end Zimbabwe's long political crisis. But the agreement fell short of Tsvangirai's demand for Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader since independence 28 years ago, to become solely a ceremonial president after losing the last credible election six months ago.

The deal is also expected to result in a de facto amnesty for the military and Zanu-PF party leaders responsible for the bloody campaign against opposition supporters and activists over recent months. Their attempt to overturn Tsvangirai's election victory in March left hundreds dead and thousands badly injured.

Precise details of how power will be divided under the agreement, which has been mediated by South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, will be formally released at a signing ceremony on Monday.

But according to opposition sources, Tsvangirai will become prime minister at the head of a council of ministers, the principal organ of government, which will be drawn from his Movement for Democratic Change and the president's Zanu-PF party. Mugabe will remain president and continue to chair a cabinet that opposition sources say will be a largely consultative body. The real power will lie with Tsvangirai.

Mbeki, who has staked his dwindling political reputation on brokering a deal, heralded the agreement. "I am absolutely certain that the leadership of Zimbabwe is committed to implementing these agreements," he said.

British reaction was muted Thursday night, with the government waiting to see the detail of the deal. "We are following the situation closely," said a Foreign Office spokesman. "We look forward to seeing the detail of the agreement announced by President Mbeki this evening. Our overriding concern is the welfare of the Zimbabwean people."

If the agreement results in a real shift in power, it is likely to unlock the hundreds of millions of pounds in foreign aid desperately needed to shore up Zimbabwe's economy, which is collapsing under the weight of hyperinflation, a key factor in Mugabe conceding authority.

(Source: Guardian)

Suspected missile strike kills 8 in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Explosions caused by a suspected U.S. missile strike killed eight people Friday at a militant stronghold near the Afghan border, Pakistani officials said.

Two intelligence officials told The Associated Press that the missiles struck a home near Miran Shah, the main town in the north Waziristan tribal region, before dawn.

The officials said the identity of the eight people killed and five others who were injured was not immediately clear.

U.S. forces in Afghanistan are stepping up their efforts to hit Taliban and al-Qaida militants in what they describe as safe havens in Pakistan's wild border regions, despite stiff protests from Islamabad.

With the insurgency in Afghanistan intensifying, President Bush secretly approved more aggressive cross-border operations in July, current and former American officials have told The AP.

The intelligence officials said agents in South Waziristan had told them about the latest attack. A military official also confirmed the suspected missile attack. He had no information on casualties.