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By Ronald Dore

Koizumi Junichiro, Japan's prime minister, has lost the vote on his grand scheme to privatise the country's post office with its vast savings pool and will go to the polls. For now, the village-pump communitarian face of Japanese conservatism has won out over anti-bureaucratic, privatising radicalism. The global finance industry will have to wait a little longer to get its hands on that Dollars 3,000 billion of Japanese savings.

But the snap election next month is likely to focus as much on the dire state of Japan's relations with China and Korea as on privatisation. Here at issue is the other face of Japanese conservatism: the reluctance to feel guilty about the

war. The key symbol of that reluctance has been Mr Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo to pay respects to Japan's war dead. There is speculation he might open his election campaign with such a visit on the 60th anniversary of the war's end on August 15. Opinion polls show a bare majority think it "wiser" not to go. Mr Koizumi may think bravado and talking tough to the Chinese will win more votes than wisdom.

Certainly, Yasukuni shrine, centre of the oppressive pre-war state Shinto cult of patriotism, is a strange place to go to pray for peace - which is what Mr Koizumi says he does. It is exclusively dedicated to those who "gave their lives for the Emperor" (not including air-raid victims). An attached museum glories in the patriotic heroism of Japan's tragic failure. Also - a core theme of Chinese complaints - it enshrines those judged by the Tokyo war crimes trials to be war criminals.

In the wake of Mr Koizumi's legislative defeat, the opposition Minshuto

(Democratic Party) now has a real chance of governing. What line might it take?

One possibility is to promise serious debate about the justice of those war crimes

trials. Every Japanese party leader must take into account a widespread feeling

that Japan was not singly to blame for the war.

Only one-fifth of that bare majority

in opinion polls who thought official visits to the shrine unwise thought also they

were "wrong". But this vague unease is currently expressed and exploited only by

the fanatic populist right whose blogs and manga cartoons make martyred heroes

out of the "victims of victor's justice". The

establishment line hitherto has been

not that the trials were "just", but that "Japan accepted the justice of the

trials in the San Francisco peace treaty: the matter is closed". Nothing could

more clearly signal the absence of that key

Confucian virtue, sincerity.

One idea might be to ask an international body, possibly one under the United

Nations umbrella, to set up a panel - three internationally distinguished

historians, say, with one Japanese, one Chinese and one Korean adviser - to

reassess the trials. In opening the issue, any "revisionist" should make clear

to China and Korea that the debate is not about the scale and nature of

individual atrocities for which the "B" and "C" class war criminals were

punished - many with death sentences. The standards of military justice applied

may well have been wanting; but only the rabid fringe in Japan would deny that

atrocities were committed, or seek to justify them.

It is, instead, about the events leading up to the war itself, and the burden

of guilt of the so-called "A" class war criminals, including the seven who were

hanged, and whose enshrinement in Yasukuni drives Chinese protests.

The first point for any revisionist to make is that the "orthodox" thesis - a

blameless Japanese people dragged into war by a fanatical militarist faction

whose leaders were properly hanged - is too easy a cop-out. As an excuse, it is

morally available only to the relative few who passed the war in prison and the

slightly larger number who sat it out in sullen alienation. Any 70-year-old

Japanese will remember the general feeling, a month before Pearl Harbor, that

war could not honourably be avoided, given US demands. They will remember, too,

the national euphoria that prevailed in the initial, victorious six months of

the war.

If by any chance Mr Koizumi adopts this line, he might even mention his politician grandfather who hounded an "unpatriotic" pacifist out of his party in the late 1930s, in the end finally destroying party politics.

The key question, however, is whether the sins of the Japanese nation were so extraordinary as to warrant execution of its leaders, even as a symbolic act. General Tojo and his crowd were certainly racists, but their assertions of Japanese superiority were partly a response to slights from the white, western world, such as the rejection of Japan's proposal for a declaration of racial equality in the preamble of the Versailles treaty. It was a racial war, but the Japanese had no genocidal project equal to the Nazis' systematic slaughter of Jews and Gypsies.

They were racists, yes, but all imperialists were racists. Like earlier generations who fought China and Russia to win Taiwan and Korea, they were trying to build an empire that could claim equality with the European empires. Racial resentment apart, they had similar motives to the European imperialists:

the same sheer national self-aggrandisement, the self-righteous belief in a civilising mission and the hypocritical cynicism to use the one to justify the other.

An amusing history game: try to match Japanese leaders with the imposing figures of 19th-century British history. Matsuoka Yosuke had a bit of the flamboyant self-assurance of Palmerston, if not the wit. In the freelance buccaneer class, Sasakawa matches with Cecil Rhodes (both eventually set up British educational foundations). The dour Tojo perhaps most resembled the pious General Gordon, who sacked Beijing only 40 years before Tojo's men sacked Nanjing.

The big difference was that the Japanese came too late. And lost. The winners could declare the imperial age over, cede their colonies and claim they had saved the world for freedom and democracy. Why would mainstream Japanese politicians hesitate to talk in these terms? Probably because it would upset too many powerful Americans. Yohei Kono, speaker of the lower house of Japan's Diet and a former foreign minister, got to the heart of it when he said last weekend: "We need an even-handed approach . . . We need

to rethink our habit of doffing
our caps to America on the one hand and talking
down to the Chinese on the
other." Perhaps he had in mind the Chinese
charge that putting Japan on the UN
Security Council would be giving two votes to

the US.

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