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By Daimon Sayuri

He is perhaps the best-known governor in Japan, largely because he has been breaking with tradition ever since he took office in Nagano Prefecture in October 2000.

After converting his private office into a glass-walled room to make his work as transparent as possible, Gov. Tanaka Yasuo defiantly declared "No More Dams" in a direct counter to the local economy's heavy reliance on public works projects at the expense of ecological concerns. He also abolished the traditional, self-serving press club system in his prefecture, and has been busily promoting environmental protection in his mountainous domain since day one.

In 2002, conservative assemblymen who were upset by Tanaka's challenge to tradition and decades of pork-barrel politics passed a no-confidence vote against him, and forced him from office. In the ensuing gubernatorial election, however, Tanaka made a successful comeback, thanks to overwhelming popular support.

Besides tackling local politics, the flamboyant 49-year-old devotes his time to writing columns for magazines and criticizing and analyzing national and local politics on radio and

television programs. He is also a well-known restaurant critic.

Though he was born in Tokyo in 1956, Tanaka's family moved to Nagano in 1964 as his father, who was a psychologist, took a post as a professor at Shinshu University. When he was still a student at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo in 1980, he received the prestigious Bungei Award for his novel "Nantonaku Kurisutaru (Somewhat Like Crystal)."

After graduation, Tanaka at first joined the oil giant Mobil, only to leave three months later to pursue his career as a writer. Soon after the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, he became deeply engaged in volunteer relief activities in Kobe.

Then, just last month on the day before this interview, he became leader of New Party Nippon, a new political party founded to challenge Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro 's Liberal Democratic Party in the Sept. 11 general election.

Though small, Tanaka hopes his fledgling party will make a difference in Japan by encouraging people to think twice about Koizumi's ongoing reform drive, which he believes falls far short of being true reforms.

Despite his hectic schedule, the outspoken governor took time out for an hour to share his views on both national politics and his ongoing challenges in Nagano Prefecture, as all the while his campaign mascot -- a felt badge of a chubby mountain goat called "Yassy" -- smiled out from his lapel.

When you were young, did you want to become a writer?

Not really. When I was little, I wanted to be an astronaut or a diplomat.

What prompted you to write "Nantonaku Kurisutaru (Somewhat Like Crystal)" when you were at university?

I wrote that novel 25 years ago about the young Japanese in such an affluent society who are scrambling around for a sense of identity.

Many young Japanese can only define themselves by naming the company they work for or the designer brand they wear. Our society is filled with people who can't objectively describe themselves without the help of company names or brands.

In the endnotes of my novel, I included data about the declining birthrate, the percentage of elderly people in the population and rising pension costs. It was meant to illustrate the underlying problem of this society, which is that Japan has become an aging society. I was wondering if Japan would continue to be a materialistic society -- and what would come after that.

Unfortunately, many critics failed to understand the meaning of my novel. While some praised it, many criticized me for creating a heroine who is totally hooked on designer brands. They said a novel centering on such a character is not a literary work, but the truth is that such people do exist in real life.

Just as I described in my book, Japan is an affluent society with an abundance of material goods, where people have no need to worry about food or clothes. But who can be proud of, or be happy about, being a member of this society?

You have been the Nagano governor for

more than four years, and you have now established New Party Nippon. What kinds of things do you want to change?

To make a better society, people who have power must be subject to scrutiny and held accountable for their actions. In my prefecture, I insisted that all documents originating from prefectural government officials have their full names attached to them. In Japan, it's common to attach only last names, but just giving last names, such as Tanaka or Suzuki, is the same thing as being anonymous.

Japan's administrative system is not politically driven at all. When you use the word "political initiative," many people may take that to mean a pork-barrel politician intervening in a decision-making process. But who is really deciding the future of Japan?

Usually, a day before a regular Cabinet meeting, a meeting of administrative vice ministers is held. There, each ministry proposes bills that it drafted, and officials from other ministries do not intervene in one another's business. So, the whole process is just a formality.

Then, in the Cabinet meeting the following day, ministers spend most of the time chatting with each other; there is no real debate.

Without attaching full names to documents, you can't see who is responsible for anything. Japan's future is determined by civil servants who would prefer not to be held responsible by being identified by name.

And look at what this bureaucratic system has created. It has created a huge debt amounting to nearly 1,000 trillion yen -- a debt that is increasing by 3.9 billion yen each hour. Japan's debts have increased by 170 trillion yen since Prime Minister Koizumi took office four years ago. What's more, 100 people take their own lives each day.

Where can we start? How can we reform this sick society?

That's what I'm doing as the governor of Nagano.

When I took office four years ago, Nagano Prefecture's financial condition was the second worst of the 47 prefectures. If we hadn't done anything to improve that situation, our prefecture would have been bankrupt by last year. That's why I negotiated with officials in the prefecture and implemented a 10 percent cut of their salaries.

I have also taken various other measures to reduce the prefecture's debts.

As a result, Nagano has been able to cut its accumulated debts by 54.7 billion yen in the past four years, while other prefectures are increasing their debts. Nagano is the only prefecture in Japan that cut its debt for four consecutive years. But that does not mean Nagano's economy is shrinking. Its unemployment rate is the second lowest in Japan, and its ratio of job offers to job seekers is always over 1.0.

What have you done to reduce those huge debts?

What I did was to reform public works projects. My declaration of "No More Dams" after my inauguration as governor is the basis of that reform.



Tanaka inspecting construction project

Nagano Prefecture was building huge dams, 72.5 percent of whose construction costs came from the central government. Many prefectural assembly members say that it would be a loss to the prefecture if we didn't construct dams, because nearly 70 percent of the construction costs are funded by the central government. But the truth is that about 80 percent of the total costs are paid to general contractors based outside Nagano, and construction materials such as iron and concrete also come from outside Nagano.

When it comes to road construction, the central government supports prefectural governments by paying 60 percent of construction costs, but the local governments have to shoulder all the maintenance costs.

Furthermore, big companies with their head offices in Tokyo place successful bids for these road construction projects, and many companies within Nagano Prefecture are not even able to participate in the bidding. They are only able to undertake the construction work as subcontractors. The public works system in most prefectures in Japan is like this.

So, we introduced a competitive bidding system that enables companies in the prefecture to take part in the bidding. Since then, on average, the winning bids by construction firms

have been about 80 percent of the upper price limit. In other words, if the prefecture offers a 10 million yen project, the successful bidder will complete it for only 8 million yen. As a result, the prefecture can spend the remaining 2 million yen on things like welfare and education.

Did you encounter friction when carrying out these reforms, especially with general contractors?

In my case, if someone gives me a hard time, I write or speak publicly about it. So I think people decided not to give me a hard time.

But when we were getting ready for the launch of the new party, people whom I worked with for the party said that they faced a lot of pressure and harassment from different people. People with power gave the new party members such a hard time.

What do you think of the reform drive that Prime Minister Koizumi is pursuing?

Reform without friction is not reform. Do bureaucrats in Kasumigaseki [the Tokyo hub of central government] oppose Koizumi's reform? No. It's because Koizumi is letting bureaucrats take control of the matter.

For example, the government says it has privatized Japan Highway Public Corp., but existing highway construction plans in Japan remained virtually unchanged. It costs about 4 billion yen to build 1 km of highway in both Italy and Japan. But in Italy, expressways operated by privatized companies charge tolls of about one fourth those of Japanese highways.

The distance between Rome and Milan is about the same as that between Tokyo and Kobe. The rate for a passenger car between Rome and Milan is about 3,200 yen to 3,500, yen but the Tokyo-Kobe toll rate is 12,000 yen. In the case

of trucks, because they are charged double that, the drivers tend to avoid expressways and choose regular roads. But because of this, local governments have to spend on creating sidewalks to protect children and the elderly, as well as on building bypasses [to reduce traffic in congested areas]. That is the way those extra investments were made.

Even though JH was privatized, these problems remain. If Koizumi calls that "reform," he should do something to make it real reform.

What do you think about Koizumi's postal reform drive?

Our group is not opposed to the postal privatization itself. But we have some questions about the plan the LDP is pushing.

In the case of the defunct Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan, the government injected 6 trillion yen of taxpayers' money into the LTCB to revive it, but then sold it to a U.S. financial institution for a mere 1 billion yen -- which is one 6,000th of the amount that was put in. And Shinsei Bank, the institution that it has now become, makes a profit of about 1 trillion yen every year. That raises the question of whether the government really needed to spend that much money on the failed institution just to sell it to a U.S. fund.

Would a similar thing occur regarding privatization of the postal savings and postal life insurance systems?

[Editor's note: Japan Post currently handles mail delivery, postal savings and postal life insurance operations, with combined assets of some 340 trillion yen. Under the current plan, Japan Post will be privatized as four separate companies, and within 10 years, shares of those four companies will be sold to the public.]

Where would the money in the postal savings and postal life insurance go once they were privatized?

What happens if a foreign company takes control of the privatized postal savings company and the postal insurance company?

As the top administrator, Koizumi has a responsibility to explain these matters to the public. But no one points out such things. This morning, I was on a TV program, and I was questioned about the postal privatization plan. The TV station received many e-mails from viewers agreeing with what I said. Many of them said they have had doubts about the postal privatization, but they couldn't express them well.

I think those people who have doubts about Koizumi's policy should vote. But unfortunately, the voice of Democratic Party of Japan leader Okada Katsuy doesn't reach those people who disagree with the LDP.

I think politics should be about what politicians actually say. For example, South American countries may have some political turmoil, but the debates in their parliaments are like an art formed by the politicians' speeches. But I wonder if any Japanese politician's speeches could reach the hearts of the people.

Is that why you established New Party Nippon?

I didn't want to repeat the tragedy of the battleship Yamato. Yamamoto Isoroku [commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet during World War II, until he was killed in April 1943] had opposed Japan going into the war -- and also construction of the Yamato. But Japan went to war, and in April 1945, when the battleship was sent off [to Okinawa, to engage enemy warships there], everyone knew that the ship, which only carried enough fuel for a one-way trip, could never return, and many people's lives would be lost.

But no one could oppose the decision at that time.

In Japan, people can't think objectively in a group. They lose their identities. Even if they notice something is wrong, they can't say "no" or stand up in opposition if they are part of an organization.

We created our party, hoping that each individual in Japan will be able to look at Japan objectively and will be able to express themselves.

You announced a "Declaration of Departure from the Press Club System" soon after you became governor. Why did you do that?

I really wondered why only a handful of media people could join the press club. Why are reporters from Akahata [a journal of the Japanese Communist Party] and The Seikyo Shimbun [a journal of the lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai] not allowed to join?

What is even stranger is that there are three press clubs within the Nagano Prefectural Government alone, and members of one press club couldn't attend a news conference hosted by another. As a result, I would have had to hold the same news conference two or three times.

That kind of system is not consumer oriented.

Since abolishing the press club system in Nagano, has anything changed?

Not really. Japan's established media people must have a grudge against me for doing that. I think Japan's press club system and the Japanese media are the last remaining trade barriers in Japan. Even in other non-English-speaking countries, such as Thailand, there are foreign-language media that enjoy a leading position in those countries. But in Japan, unless something is reported in Japanese-language newspapers or it appears on Japanese TV, it does not become "evidence" to be taken

seriously.

So, it's like the national seclusion policy [of international isolation imposed by the government from 1639-1854]. Being protected by the press club system, there are many reporters who do not know what's really going on in the society. They even dismiss reporters from magazines and freelance journalists as if they are inferior to them.

Isn't this a hierarchical society? I treat a small village with a population of only 700 and a big city like Nagano the same way. That's why leaders of those towns and villages are beginning to understand my reforms. But conservative mayors of the big cities seem to have a lot of pride, and they don't like the way I do things. It's just like the press club system.

Your term as governor will end next year. What would you like to achieve in your remaining time in office?

I would like to continue what I have been doing. I have improved the prefecture's fiscal condition, secured employment for people and established a new structure for our industry.

Are you going to run for another term as governor? Or would you like to eventually go into national politics and serve as a Diet member?

I will do what the Nagano people want me to

do. I want to listen to what people in Nagano say, whether they say I should stay or leave office.

Now you are the leader of New Party Nippon and the Nagano governor. How can you manage to do both jobs?

When I work hard and meet many people, I get new ideas and energy. If I only do the job of the governor in the office, and I don't go into the mountains and talk to people who live there, or to various other people, I won't be inspired. And if I'm not inspired, I won't have the unusual ideas that lead to my idiosyncratic actions.

You have remained single for a long time. Do you have any plans to get married?

My current girlfriend doesn't seem to want to get married. I also think it's better for us not to get married now -- that way we can maintain a good relationship. (Laughs)

Finally, do you think you will write another novel?

Well, that's a difficult question, but people say that I am a story-maker, not a story-teller.

Daimon Sayuri is a staff writer for The Japan Times. This is a slightly streamlined version of a profile that appeared in The Japan Times on Sept. 4, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus on Sept. 4, 2005.