

Ishihara defiant, teflon to scandal

Hit for spending, autocracy, fire-from-hop populist still shoo-in

By JUN HONGO

Staff writer

Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, an ex-transport minister, award-winning writer, Yasukuni Shrine pilgrim known for firing racist and sexist remarks from the lips, has recently drawn flak for taking pricey trips on taxpayer money and nepotism for choosing his son to work on an event he sponsored in Switzerland.

But despite the public outcry, the hawkish politician remains the front-runner for the April 8 gubernatorial election, and no contender appears strong enough to take him on.

The media have glommed onto the overspending, but just as much attention has been given to the row that has developed between Ishihara and the Japanese Communist Party, which revealed the details of his spending sprees.

"Assembly members of the JCP have been campaigning against me, and people seem to be enjoying it," Ishihara, 74, told reporters last month when he announced he would run for a third term.

"So we'll see how things turn out."

JCP members of the metropolitan assembly announced in November they had evidence the governor had overspent on most of his 19 official overseas trips since he first took office in 1999.

According to documents, 15 of the governor's official trips cost an average of about 16 million yen each, including his June 2001 visit



Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara beams at a Tokyo hotel last August after the Japanese Olympic Committee chose the capital as the JOC's candidate for the 2016 Summer Games. AP PHOTO

to the Galapagos Islands, where he rented a cruiser and spent 520,000 yen a night in taxpayer money.

In comparison, governors in Chiba and Kanagawa prefectures only spend between 2 million yen and 8 million yen per trip.

The JCP followed up a month later with news that Ishihara paid 1.3 million yen for his youngest son, Nobuhiro, to fly to Davos, Switzerland, in 2004 to participate in a cultural event hosted by the governor on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum. The son was hired to design a scenic backdrop for a "taiko" drum performance at the event.

When Ishihara was questioned about why his son was chosen, he told reporters his son was "a fine painter." And about his business trips, he claimed metro government officials decided on the budgets, not him.

Hidenori Hasegawa, representative of the political party Toseio Kakushinsuru Kai (Group to Reform Tokyo's Politics), said excuses from the governor are "simply unacceptable."

The former metro assembly member calls Ishihara both dogmatic and dictatorial.

Hasegawa cited Ishihara's municipal directive making it mandatory for students and teachers to stand and sing the "Kimigayo" national anthem at school ceremonies.

The Tokyo District Court last September nullified the directive and ordered the metro government to pay 12.03 million yen in compensation to teachers who were punished for disobeying the order. The metro government immediately filed an appeal, a reaction that didn't surprise Hasegawa.

"Ishihara never apologizes for what he does, even for something that is obviously immoral," Hasegawa said.

Observers say Ishihara is hoping to create a political dynasty.

His oldest son, Nobuteru, 49, deputy secretary general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and a former land minister, and his third son, Hirotaka, 42, a former employee of Mizuho Financial Group Inc., won a seat in the House of Representatives in 2005. It is rumored that Ishihara's second son, Yoshizumi, will run in the House of Councilors election in July.

There is even speculation that the day Ishihara steps down, he will

back one of his sons to succeed him.

While Nobuteru has the most experience in politics, 45-year-old Yoshizumi, a popular actor and TV celebrity, is also a possible candidate to follow in his father's footsteps if he wins an Upper House seat.

"For his children to depend on their father's popularity is a sign of depravity," Hasegawa said.

Ishihara's backers claim he continues to be popular because he is transparent.

Takunori Ikaruga, a member of the council in Onojo, Fukuoka Prefecture, and head of the group Supporters of Shintaro Ishihara for Prime Minister, said the governor has exactly what people want in a politician.

In a poll of 600 Japanese men aged between 20 to 39 published in the weekly magazine SPA! this month, Ishihara was tied at No. 1 as the person best suited to be prime minister along with film director Takeshi "Beat" Kitano. They both received 67 of 300 votes. The governor got nearly twice the votes cast for former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who came in fourth after comedian Hikari Ota.

Never one to shy away from the media, the outspoken governor has made appearances on live TV talk shows recently to counter the accusations about his spending.

Ikaruga, 46, who has led the group of about 100 Ishihara fans since 2000, said the governor demonstrated he is transparent by going on TV to talk directly to the public and that move cancels out any wrongdoing he might have done.

Ikaruga does not deny that the governor may have done some questionable things in office.

"No one expects or hopes a politician to be a sacred figure of virtue; what they seek is a governor who has a clear opinion about social issues. That is why Ishihara is so popular," he said.

Ikaruga, like many of the governor's supporters, is disappointed that Ishihara has decided to run for governor again and not to re-enter national politics. Ishihara served in both Diet chambers between 1968 and 1995.

"He will be too old to become prime minister after his third term. I really thought he would be able to change the country," he said.

Ishihara has said he wants a third term so he can lead Tokyo to win the spot as host for the 2016 Summer Olympics. In August, the capital was chosen as Japan's candidate to compete at the international level, after heavy lobbying by Ishihara.

Ishihara set a record in the 2003 gubernatorial election by garnering more than 3 million votes. He ran as an independent to beat former U.N. Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Yasushi Akashi, who was backed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito.

It is rumored that the Democratic Party of Japan is still deciding who to put up against Ishihara in the April election, but rumors are that they may choose former DPJ chief Naoto Kan or economic critic Banri Kaieda, a one-time member of the House of Representatives.

But with his popularity intact, spending scandal notwithstanding, and no strong rival on the horizon, Ishihara is more confident than ever.

When asked during a news conference earlier this month about how important the LDP's informal decision to back him was, the governor said the LDP had not spoken to him. "I've also got supporters in the DPJ, so . . . ?"

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