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A change of government threatens the cosy ties between media and mandarins

Illustration by David Simonds



EVERY night the *Yomiuri Shimbun* building in Tokyo begins to shake. From *The Economist's* office on the eighth floor it feels, for a moment, like an earthquake. But it is just the world's biggest-selling newspaper cranking up the printing presses in the bowels of the building for tomorrow morning's edition. A different sort of tremor has rattled the *Yomiuri* in the past week. The government of Yukio Hatoyama came into office on September 16th, vowing that it wanted to shake up some of the power structures in Japan that had helped its defeated rival, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), hold sway for half a century.

The main target is the bureaucracy, which has wielded extraordinary power from its bunker-like compound in Tokyo. But one of the bureaucracy's levers of control has been the press, which critics say has too often enjoyed a relationship of mutual back-scratching with the mandarins.

So when Mr Hatoyama took office, threatening to ban regular press conferences by bureaucrats in a bid to lessen their sway, the battle lines were drawn. It took just a day for the *Yomiuri* to hit back. In an editorial, it acknowledged that Mr Hatoyama had a right to wrestle power back from civil servants—but not, it said, at the cost of the media's access to information. "We want the Hatoyama administration to reconsider its decision to muzzle bureaucrats," the newspaper said.

The skirmish may appear small, but it has important ramifications. As Takashi Uesugi, a campaigning freelance journalist puts it, Japan's equivalent of America's military-industrial complex is the "bureaucracy-media complex". But taking on both the bureaucracy and the media at the same time could expose the new government to a war on two fronts.

The power of the bureaucracy dates back centuries, when it comprised members of the samurai elite who were encouraged to administer, rather than fight. In the past 50 years, bureaucrats helped develop the industrial policies that turned Japan from post-war collapse to the second-biggest economy in the world.

The mandarins' reputation has faded during the economic hardship of the past 20 years. But Takashi Inoguchi, a political scientist, believes the samurai strain has persisted. He likens the bureaucracy to a Roman legion that will protect itself in tortoise-like formation. "Its spirit and mental framework remains that of the warrior," he says. "It is very determined, very patient and organisationally very strong."

The media, meanwhile, give the civil servants an unusually direct line of communication with the outside world. Newspapers have a circulation of 68m copies a day, the highest in the rich world, and in each ministry they are part of a system known as the "*kisha* club", or press club, which dates back to the 19th century and encourages intimate contact between the mainstream media and the bureaucracy.

In the past the clubs, whose members are self-selecting, have been criticised for closing ministerial press conferences to foreign correspondents, internet reporters and freelancers (whom they often disparage as "gossip-mongers"). The system breeds information-sharing and discourages scoops. Critics say it stifles the sort of investigative reporting badly needed after Japan's incestuous politics under the LDP.

Even some leading lights of the mass media acknowledge that change may be overdue. Yoichi Funabashi, editor-in-chief of the *Asahi Shimbun*, and one of Japan's most respected journalists, welcomed Mr Hatoyama's unprecedented decision to allow a handful of magazine and internet journalists to his inaugural news conference: "Now the dam has broken."

Less understanding members of the media, however, may turn against Mr Hatoyama. Papers such as the *Yomiuri*, with a circulation of 10m, have longstanding ties to the LDP; its boss, Tsuneo Watanabe, was considered one of the party's kingmakers. The press also has its eye on a scandal in which Mr Hatoyama admitted that his fund-raising organisation listed fictitious individual donations, including from dead people. This may return to trouble him.

Yet he would surely be foolish to leave the *kisha* club alone. His party won the election in August by a landslide partly because it promised more open government. The Japanese are keen to see an end to the murky back-room compromises in which elected officials took office, but bureaucrats were in power. If the press remains complicit with that system, Mr Hatoyama's promise to end the status quo in Japan will be all the harder to achieve.