

Donald Tsang's popularity has declined as public confidence in the central government is on the rise, writes Stephen Vines

# Slip-sliding away

Is Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen becoming the new Tung Chee-wah, in terms of public esteem? The latest University of Hong Kong opinion polls puts confidence in Mr Tsang at a dismal 39 per cent, perilously close to the 35 per cent score achieved by Mr Tung just ahead of the first July 1 anti-government rally in 2003. Yet Mr Tung – like Mr Tsang – came into office with very high poll ratings, the only difference is that confidence in Mr Tsang has slipped at a faster rate, giving him a shorter honeymoon.

This is staggering because Mr Tsang's successor had the easiest job in the world to shine in comparison to the outgoing chief executive, who left office to the sound of a collective sigh of relief.

However, Mr Tsang, who in many ways is not like Mr Tung, shares his predecessor's fatal flaw in one cardinal respect: he strains every sinew to prove his loyalty and obedience to the bosses in Beijing.

There is something curious about this because, while confidence in Mr Tsang suffers a precipitous decline, public confidence in the central government is on the rise. It might therefore be thought, not least by Mr Tsang himself, that this popularity would carry through and help out the chief executive, who is keen to portray himself as Beijing's best friend.

However such a simplistic view severely underestimates the intelligence of Hong Kong people. A majority may well have greater confidence in the central government but this does not mean they want their leader to be a mere cipher for Beijing. On the contrary, they expect the leader of Hong Kong to stand up for local interests and, most importantly, to be the leading advocate of the "two systems" part of the "one country, two systems" concept that is supposed to prevail in the special administrative region.

This is only part of the story, because the mounting pile of official blunders creates an overall impression of not just incompetence but, more importantly, a sense that the government is out of touch and unjust. The appointment of a new layer of mini-ministers is viewed as taking cronyism to new heights, the monetary handouts ahead of the Legislative Council election are seen as little more than cynical, and the temporary scrapping of the domestic helpers' levy produced the kind of chaos that showed a lack of intelligent planning by an administration that prides itself on pragmatism.

When these individual problems combine, they leave a lingering image of an administration that is careless, out of touch

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and arrogant. Mr Tsang himself reinforces this image by increasingly shunning open debate and assuming the imperial style of government that blighted his predecessor. Yet it is possible to have some sympathy for him because he feels the need to serve two unforgiving and highly judgmental masters. On the one hand is the government in Beijing which showed no compunction in ejecting his predecessor when he became more of a liability than an asset. On the other is the Hong Kong

public, powerless to choose their head of government but more than capable of taking to the streets and expressing their views when electing legislators determined to give Mr Tsang a hard time.

The sympathy for Mr Tsang is, however, mitigated by his bizarre belief that he was indeed elected by the people and his stubborn view that bureaucrats know best. It should never be forgotten that he is essentially a product of an elitist and self-satisfied system where promotion is often secured by those displaying the highest levels of sycophancy.

Real talent, independent thought and a preparedness to challenge those in charge are not attributes that tend to work in this system.

And here lies the crux of the problem, because Mr Tsang refuses to acknowledge that critics may have a point, indeed his strategy is to isolate and demean opposition voices. Instead of engaging in a

dialogue, he strives to avoid it; instead of learning from mistakes, he concludes that they are all the fault of those who do not understand him.

The irony of all this is that, while something approaching a government crisis is emerging, Hong Kong itself is far from being in crisis. The economy is in better shape than many other economies and life goes on, although it is getting very tough for a growing number of people at the bottom of the pile – but they have no voice where it counts.

It would be a start to see their problems addressed, not by short-term palliatives, but more fundamentally and it would really help if the government gave the smallest impression of showing itself modest enough to acknowledge that it does not possess all the answers.

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## Bear with a sore head

To some minds, the bear is back. Russia's belligerence over Georgia is the first time it has flexed its military muscle since its powerful predecessor, the Soviet Union, began unravelling two decades ago. The message would seem to be clear: refreshed from its hibernation, Moscow has returned to the world stage as a force to reckon with. There is even talk of a new cold war.

Those chill winds would seem to have started blowing when Russia sent troops into the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and with the recognition this week of their independence. This was surely a declaration of its intent to protect what it sees as its strategic space. For those in the west alarmed by Russian nationalism and its building of alliances with western-unfriendly countries, the natural next step would appear to be to bring back the "good old days" by reassembling the Soviet Union.

Such arguments are flawed. The cold war was grounded in ideology and Russia is not being driven by a desire to challenge for dominance of the world order. The nation is not as militarised, unified or as globally powerful as was the Soviet Union. Nor can comparison be drawn between Russia and the foremost Soviet challenger, the United States. Russia's economy is one-tenth of America's, US military spending is 700 per cent greater and, due to rapid ageing, there are 800,000 fewer Russians each year.

That is not to say that Russia is faring poorly. High oil and gas prices have created strong foundations for its development. A construction boom is under way. The chaos that Russia was mired in from the Soviet collapse to the late 1990s under befuddled president Boris Yeltsin is well and truly behind it.

What is pushing Russia is not a hunger for power, but its being treated shabbily by the west. Its views have been disregarded on Nato expansion to include former Soviet states on its doorstep and

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by invading Afghanistan and Iraq and, most recently, aiding and abetting Kosovan statehood.

In Bosnia, warring ethnic groups were forced to live together in a single state. Ethnic separatism could not, at any cost, be rewarded because of the message it would send to other such groups elsewhere. Yet the principle was ignored with Kosovo, with Serbia's rights being overridden and militant separatism backed to the hilt. Little wonder that Russia has responded to western hypocrisy by sending soldiers and tanks into Georgia and sowing some independence of its own among Moscow-friendly populations. It has dangerously upped the ante in a game about ignoring international rules that the west foolishly started.

Colleague Fred Weir, a Canadian who has lived in Moscow for the past 22 years as a correspondent for foreign media, crystallised my views. He is impressed by Russia's dynamic growth, which is based on more than oil and gas wealth. The country, he says, has decisive leadership and self-confidence. Yet, to Moscow, the west treated it like the basket case it was under Yeltsin, ignoring it and shunting it aside in the name of expansion. Russia's leaders should be given an equal place at the international table and allowed a piece of the action. They are entitled to respect.

The slippery slope that the world has gone down and which Russia is furthering in Georgia does not have at its end another cold war. There is a more frightening parallel. Germany was similarly isolated after its defeat in the first world war, and its concerns about the economic expansion of the powers that defeated it went unheard. Quickly and quietly, it muscled its way into the global system. We must avoid the same mistake.

Peter Kammerer is the Post's foreign editor

## Other Voices

### UN has taken wrong approach to Myanmar

Pavin Chachavalpongpun

UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari visited Yangon last week – his fourth trip to Myanmar since a crackdown on protesters last September and the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in May. After failing to meet chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, General Than Shwe, and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Dr Gambari has defended his visit, saying it was not worthless.

Yet, his mission to push for the political inclusion of Ms Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, seems ever more elusive. Following the referendum endorsing a new constitution, Myanmar is gearing up for elections in 2010 in which the military will retain its firm political grip.

Dr Gambari's visits should not just focus on Myanmar's political future; his role and authority, as UN envoy, need to be assessed, too. Can the UN, and Dr Gambari in particular, really have any impact on Myanmar's political process?

Since Myanmar's independence, in 1948, the UN has turned off its radar on Myanmar's political development. Things came to a head in 1995, seven years after Myanmar's army massacred hundreds of demonstrators, and five years after the government annulled the result of the general election.

After being criticised for doing nothing about the political situation – in stark contrast to its active role in Angola and Afghanistan – the UN General Assembly for the first time adopted a detailed resolution on Myanmar. It has since urged the junta to allow fair and free participation in politics – a plea that has continued until today.

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has ensured that conflicts in Asia, including in Myanmar, are kept on the UN radar screen. Nevertheless, promoting peace and democracy in Myanmar has seemed an uphill struggle. What has gone wrong?

First, the UN has been unsuccessful in cultivating "trust" when interacting with Myanmar's leadership. It has also failed to convince junta leaders that it is in their best interests to take up a political option, where dialogue with the opposition was possible.

Second, accessibility is a key to success. How many times has Dr Gambari been granted access to General Than Shwe? The junta has been cautious, and assigned a "contact person" to deal with Dr Gambari and other foreign envoys. This shows that, while Myanmar has agreed to work with the UN, it still dictates the game.

Third, the UN has begun its crusade in Myanmar with the most difficult issues: democratisation and human rights violations. Instead, perhaps it should take on so-called "soft issues", like humanitarian co-operation, to gradually build trust and confidence. The co-operation in the post-Nargis reconstruction effort is a good start for both parties.

The international community has high expectations of the UN. There are many areas in Myanmar that can be left to non-governmental organisations and private business. The UN is an essential instrument for political change, but don't expect a sudden breakthrough.

Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun is a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore

### Tariffs, not patents, hurt low-carbon innovation

Tim Wilson

A hundred countries are meeting in Accra, Ghana, this week in negotiations for a new climate change agreement after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Understandably, developing countries refuse to sacrifice growth to cut emissions, so they want new low-carbon technology.

India, China and a variety of pressure groups are campaigning for "compulsory licences" on low-carbon and renewable-energy technology, saying developed nations are to blame for climate change and should underwrite the alleged solutions.

"The developed countries should get off the backs of India and China. Instead, they should help India and China move towards a low-carbon economy with technology and finance," Rajendra Pachauri, the Indian economist and environmental scientist who chairs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said last month.

Shri Raja, the Indian environment minister, wants an agreement "paralysing" what he calls "the successful agreement on compulsory licensing of pharmaceuticals", which has undermined supply, quality and trade. This will destroy any incentive for invention. Developing countries should instead remove their tariffs and other barriers that increase prices dramatically.

Some even claim patents confer a monopoly that reduces competition and stops downward pressure on prices. But patents are not a monopoly, they are an exclusive right over a specific product. Patents on existing products do not in any way prevent the development of other inventions.

Without the property rights that patents confer, many inventions that cost millions of dollars to develop can be copied. So, without patents, there are no incentives for investors and innovators to spend time and money researching and developing new technology. This is especially counterproductive as low-carbon technology is in its infancy and requires high investment to take it to the next level.

The low-carbon or "renewable" inventions that would be under-

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mined by removing patent rights include wind turbines, clean coal, solar panels and fluorescent lamps.

A UN Development Programme study last year found compulsory licensing of low-carbon technologies would directly reduce investment. Similarly, a World Bank report found that weak intellectual property regimes act as a barrier to the transfer of low-carbon technology.

Attacking patents is a distraction when there are policies that require greater attention. For example, the top 15 greenhouse-gas-emitting developing countries impose hefty tariffs and other trade barriers that can drastically increase prices on "green" technology they claim is essential.

Zambia and Egypt have tariffs on solar panels at 30 per cent and 32 per

cent, respectively. In Nigeria, barriers against "clean coal" technology add 160 per cent to the final product cost. In Egypt, the extra cost on fluorescent lamps is 87 per cent, in the Philippines, 93 per cent, in Brazil 96 per cent and 102 per cent in India.

The egregious extent of tariffs and other barriers on low-carbon technologies has prompted the United States and the European Union to propose an environmental goods and services agreement in the World Trade Organisation, to encourage the transfer of technology. But, since the collapse of the Doha Round last month, that seems unlikely.

By ignoring these self-imposed barriers, the anti-patent campaign is gaining traction; it is always more attractive to blame someone else.

That spells bad news for the poor. Companies that invest in low-carbon technology are dependent on capital to develop new products. If patents are waived, investors will not see returns and the funding for new technology will dry up.

Forget patents: governments in poor countries can make newer, cheaper and more efficient low-carbon technology available by dropping their trade barriers.

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### Syrian-Israeli peace talks on the cards

David Ignatius

Of all the wild cards in the Middle East deck, this one may be the most intriguing: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appears ready for direct peace talks with Israel, if the US will join France as a co-sponsor.

That's the word from senior advisers to Mr Assad, who spoke to me in Damascus this week. The same assessment comes from top French officials in Paris. A direct meeting would raise the Syrian-Israeli dialogue to a new level; so far, it has been conducted indirectly through Turkey.

The Syrians would like to see a clear signal from the Bush administration that it supports the peace process and that the US is prepared to join the French as "godfather" of the talks. But Syrian officials are pessimistic, and say they doubt that the administration, which has sought to isolate and punish Syria, will change its policy.

The prospect for direct Syrian-Israeli negotiations will become clearer next week when French President Nicolas Sarkozy visits Mr Assad. That meeting follows Mr Assad's trip to Paris last month for a summit of Mediterranean nations, where he sat at the same table as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The French diplomatic engagement with Syria has already helped break the logjam in Lebanon, opening the way for the election of a president and a new government.

Syria wants a US role in the negotiations partly as a guarantee that Israel will withdraw from the Golan Heights to the border that existed before the June 1967 war. The Syrians have received private assurances through Turkish

mediators that Israel will do so as part of an overall peace deal.

Syrian officials caution that Washington shouldn't expect any quick, decisive break in its alliance with Iran. Instead, they say, Syria aims to broaden its relationships to include Turkey, France, Russia and even the US and Israel, in addition to Iran. Officials talk of a Syrian role as a potential bridge to Iran, rather than as a new means of isolating it.

Mr Assad's trip to Moscow last week, in which he discussed arms sales and military co-operation with Russia, raised concerns that Syria was slipping back into its old cold war alignment. But officials in Damascus say the trip was driven in part by Mr Assad's concern that Syria could get squeezed in any future conflict between Iran and Israel – and its desire for Russian protection. In this sense, a strategic relationship with Russia might be an alternative to its dependence on Iran, some Syrians argue.

Another card for Mr Assad is his ability to pressure Hamas to restrain attacks in Gaza and the West Bank, sources say. That would address US concerns about Syrian support for Hamas, Hezbollah and others.

Israelis have been wondering for many months whether the peace feelers from Damascus are real. They may have a chance to find out the answer soon, if the Bush administration decides to join France in sponsoring a meeting that would test everyone's sincerity. Often enough in the Middle East, potential diplomatic breakthroughs prove to be illusory. But that's no reason not to give this one a try.

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