

Japan PM under pressure as opposition wants ministers out
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TOKYO, April 18 — Japan's opposition filed censure motions against two government ministers today, further complicating Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's task of mustering support for his plan to double the sales tax in a split parliament.

The motions, which are set to pass in the opposition-controlled upper house, are non-binding, but in the past the opposition has successfully used a threat of boycotting parliamentary proceedings to force ministers out.

Noda, Japan's sixth leader in five years, has already parted with three ministers since he formed his government in September, last time in January when he replaced two ministers in a minor cabinet reshuffle.

This time, defence minister Naoki Tanaka and transport minister Takeshi Maeda landed in opposition crosshairs.

Noda is in a bind since keeping censured ministers will delay parliamentary debate on the sales tax plan he has made his priority, while sacking them promptly could be seen as a sign of weakness by his own party.

Analysts said Noda was most likely to buy himself some time and try to turn the situation to his advantage, but in the end may have no choice but give in.

"If parliamentary sessions remain paralysed for an extended period, people will start questioning the stalling tactics at the time when important bills are piling up," Waseda University professor Tetsuro Kato said.

"Having said that, the sales tax bills are at the very top of Noda's priority list. So, if he decides later that letting them go is critical in pushing the bills forward, there is a good chance he will replace them."

Tanaka, who joined the cabinet in January after his predecessor was censured over mishandling of sensitive issues surrounding the US air base in Okinawa, came under attack for a series of comments that the opposition said revealed his lack of knowledge of security issues.

He was also criticised for a slow government response to the failed rocket launch by North Korea last week.

Maeda has been accused of interfering in a local election. The upper house will vote on the motions as soon as tomorrow.

Noda aims to raise the sales tax to 10 per cent in two stages by October 2015 to fund welfare costs and fix public finances, but faces resistance in his own party for the plan and needs opposition backing to pass the plan in parliament.

The parliamentary deadlock already delayed the creation of a nuclear watchdog, which was originally slated for April 1.

The biggest opposition Liberal Democratic Party backed a sales tax increase to 10 per cent in a recent manifesto. But it wants to force an early election ahead of the passage of the tax bills, which the government has hoped to start discussing in parliament this month. —
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