

Document 1387

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Yet another political scandal is racking Japan .

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But this time it 's hurting opposition as well as ruling-party members .

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And as it unfolds , it 's revealing some of the more tangled and scamier aspects of Japanese society .

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Already , ruling Liberal Democratic Party demands that opposition members testify under oath in parliament have stalled one budget committee session and forced the committee to plan a special two-day investigation at the end of the month .

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But the scandal itself is so convoluted that ruling-party members are divided between those who want to pursue the matter in hope of undermining the opposition and those who favor leaving well enough alone .

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But , he adds , " We ca n't tell where it will go at all because we 're still in the middle of it . "

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Pachinko , a kind of pinball , is Japan 's favorite form of legal gambling .

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But the implications could be great .

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Pachinko is slightly on the shady side , often linked to the lower ranks of Japan 's underworld and regularly at the top of annual lists of tax evaders .

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Recently the industry has faced the threat of new restrictions , and political donations may have been made with the intent to bribe .

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Also , about 60 % of pachinko parlor owners are Korean , many of whom maintain close ties with North or South Korean residents ' organizations , and donations by such foreign groups are illegal in Japan .

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To many Japanese , pachinko is benign or enticingly unsavory .

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Garish neon pachinko marquees blaze from the main streets and narrow alleys of cities and towns across the country .

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Devotees pass hours , watching the lights blink and listening to the metal balls ping , as much to gamble as to get a little time to be anonymous , alone with their thoughts .

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At 500 yen (\$ 3.60) for a handful of balls , pachinko is a common pastime , and has been since it took root as cheap entertainment in the years after World War II .

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And because the pachinko industry is regularly at the top of annual lists for tax evasion , some observers estimate the real income could be as much as 20 trillion yen .

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If that money were being taxed , it could bring the government a badly needed several trillion yen .

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In 1984 , an attempt was made to crack down on the industry with tougher restrictions .

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Then , in 1988 , a proposal to keep better track of income by selling prepaid cards for pachinko was fielded in parliament .

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The proposal split the industry in two , along the lines of national origin : North Koreans oppose the plan while South Koreans , Japanese and Taiwanese accept it or are neutral .

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In August , a conservative weekly magazine reported that a pachinko industry organization donated money to Japan Socialist Party members .

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The magazine alleged that in making the donations , the pachinko industry may have been offering bribes to win support in the battle against prepaid cards , or it may have been laundering money back and forth between the JSP and the North Korean residents ' organization , the Chosen Soren .

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The Chosen Soren and the JSP immediately denied the report .

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And at first , neither the opposition nor the LDP wanted to pursue the issue .

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But the press kept it alive : as with the Recruit scandal , lists began circulating with names of people who had received money .

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Within a matter of weeks , less-conservative magazines reported that members of the ruling LDP had received much larger donations from pachinko organizations .

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So far , though , there have been no allegations that the contributions the LDP members received amounted to bribes .

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Then the two camps upped the ante : Reports that Chosen Soren had donated directly to JSP members were rapidly countered by statements that the South Korean residents ' organization had long been donating directly to LDP members .

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On Friday , the chief cabinet secretary announced that eight cabinet ministers had received five million yen from the industry , including 450,000 yen (\$ 3,175) by Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu .

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No one has alleged that the donations were by themselves illegal .

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Direct donations from either of the residents ' organizations would be illegal because the groups are defined as foreign , but both groups deny making direct donations .

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The issue is further complicated because although the organizations represent Korean residents , those residents were largely born and raised in Japan and many speak only Japanese .

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Many Japanese think it only natural that the organizations or their members would donate to politicians , the way many Japanese do , to win favor or support .

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Both residents ' organizations admit to receiving some funding from abroad .