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The Constitution is Japan's Pledge of Peace to the World

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By Fukushima Mizuho

Four months after the landslide re-election of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, Fukushima Mizuho, leader of Japan’s Social Democrats (SDP), paints a through-the-looking-glass picture of the country Koizumi has helmed since 2001.

Even as much of the world’s press hails the return of economic prosperity following the publication of Japan’s best economic figures for more than a decade, Fukushima highlights the fallout from the Koizumi reforms: growing income and wealth disparities, social breakdown, declining birthrates and one of the most casualized economies in the developed world, providing a dystopic image of the once vaunted lifetime employment system.

But it is on Japan' subservience to US foreign policy and mooted constitutional reform that Fukushima takes strongest issue. The SDP leader reminds readers that Article 9, which Koizumi’s Liberal Democrats are attempting to revise, was forged in the aftermath of a brutal war that killed over 20 million Asians, and that it remains a beacon of peace and Japan’s pledge to the world that such a conflict will never happen again. Coming at a time of rising Japan-China and Japan-Korea tensions, the issues are central to the future of Japan and Northeast Asia.

Many Japanese undoubtedly share Fukushima’s views – millions are worried about the growing social cracks since the collapse of the bubble economy, surveys consistently show a majority of Japanese reject unilateral support of US foreign policy aims, and there are deep wellsprings of local opposition to US bases around Japan, above all in Okinawa where the bases are concentrated. But whether her SDP can rally the progressive mood is another question.

Long the largest opposition party in the country, the SDP is heir to the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and a much diminished force since the 1990 collapse of the Soviet Union and the party’s short-lived coalition with the LDP in the mid-1990s. Its decline may have been hastened by its failure to join the bandwagon condemning North Korea at a time of popular anger over the kidnapping of Japanese citizens. What is certain is that it won just 6 seats in the 2003 general elections, down from 18 in the previous elections of 2000. The wipeout prompted the resignation of party leader Doi Takako, once tipped as Japan’s first female prime minister.

Under Fukushima, who was elected to head the SDP in November 2003, the party showed slight signs of revival, gaining two seats (to a total of seven) in the House of Representatives election on Sept. 11, 2005. But the SDP has been eclipsed in recent years by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), an unstable hybrid of left and right that includes many breakaways from the JSP/SDP following the doomed mid-1990s coalition. One of the few bright spots for the SDPis the derailment of the DPJ bandwagon in the 2005 election and the subsequent emergence of several corruption scandals involving that party.

Can Fukushima tap into the growing mood for a real alternative to Koizumi’s government? A bright, articulate, telegenic lawyer, and the leader of one of just two parties (the other is the Japan Communist Party) that reject unpopular constitutional change and challenge an economic agenda that is guaranteed to produce a larger underclass and growing inequality, no one should write off her chances. But convincing the electorate that the SDP is a viable alternative to the LDP will be no easy task. DM

Japan's greatest problem today is the way the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his Liberal Democratic Party are advancing politics "of the winners, by the winners and for the winners," so as to widen the gap between the rich and the poor.

Politics is destroying Japanese peace and the everyday life that the people painstakingly built over the years. The people are losing hope and society is starting to fall apart, as in the fantasy, "The Never Ending Story", by the German writer Michael Ende.
Under the Koizumi administration, the gap between rich and poor has grown wider. Currently, one in every five households has an annual income of 2 million yen or less. One in every five households also has no savings. A major factor behind this is deregulation of the workplace brought about by the revised workers dispatch business law implemented by the Koizumi administration.

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As a result, many people now work on an irregular basis as part-timers or dispatch or contract workers rather than full-time employees. Currently, these people account for one third of all workers. In particular, more than half of female employees work on an irregular basis. Many of them are working under extremely poor conditions.

The average annual income of young "freeters" is between 1 and 2 million yen. With such low wages, they cannot even support themselves, much less expect to marry and start a family. Birthrates continue to decline and now the average number of children a woman gives birth to in her lifetime stands at 1.29. The widening gap in income is giving rise to gaps in children's education, levels of health care and even in young people's hopes for the future.

Popular anxiety is being amplified by the inadequacy of the social security system, which utterly fails to cope with such changes in employment. Social insurance programs are hollowing out because a growing number of people, deprived of stable jobs, refuse to, or are unable to, pay the required premiums. As a result, since 2003, health insurance, pension, nursing insurance and medical systems have been revised for the worse, and welfare benefits have been drastically cut.

Japan has taken pride in its national health insurance programs that cover all people and allow them to receive benefits any time, anywhere at a small cost to the consumer. But now, even that system is starting to change. While the redistribution of income is important, the maximum rate for the progressive tax dropped from 70 percent to 37 percent. Corporate tax rates have also been lowered.

In order to overcome this situation, new laws are needed. For example, why not establish a "part-time and fixed-term contract workers law" that guarantees equal pay for equal work, a "public contract law" that guarantees workers' wages and contracts, and a "workers contract law" that bans discrimination based on age and spells out requirements for layoffs and dismissals? We need to rebuild a stronger employment system with such regulations in order to maintain fairness among workers regardless of their type of employment.

While Diet debate on pension reform has stalled, bold reform is necessary to secure a fair pension system for everyone to have a stable living. Specifically, it should be an individually based double-tier system made up of a basic pension completely paid for by taxes and a pension proportionate to income.

Peace that has supported Japan's prosperity is also starting to waver. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution bans the maintenance of war potential and renounces war.

The article came into being at the cost of more than 20 million lives in World War II in Asia alone, and more than 30 million lives lost around the world. The Constitution is Japan's public pledge not only to ourselves but to the people who died in the war and to the people of Asia and the world.

Japan has U.S. military bases. The U.S. military presence is forcing Japanese citizens to accept a heavy burden in the form of budgets and crime. Without exception, local governments where U.S. troops are stationed are strongly critical of the Japan-U.S. interim report concerning the transformation of U.S. forces.

Measures to alleviate the burden of Okinawa, which suffered heavy losses in World War II, are making no progress whatsoever. When I visited the United States, I met with high-ranking U.S. government officials and reiterated that it is unreasonable to expect the Japanese public to accept the interim report, which was put together without consulting the local communities that host the bases.

It is true the United States is an important partner for Japan. Still, we refuse to have Japan act as one with the United States and serve as a world military force. What we want is for every country in the world to protect human rights and provide a healthy environment based on democracy, create an economy and society for people to work with a sense of security, and make an international contribution together with others in order to help people who are suffering from environmental and natural disasters.
Japan cannot move from Asia. We must strive to make up for the failure of Koizumi diplomacy, which has needlessly strained relations with South Korea and China, and build stable relations in Northeast Asia.

Last year, I visited South Korea and China to advance discussion. The problems that lie between us can only be settled when the parties concerned frankly talk with each other with a sincere attitude hoping to advance together. To that end, we must not change the Japanese Constitution, which is Japan's public pledge to Asia and the world.

I wish to put my all into realizing a peaceful social democratic nation that allows everyone to live with a sense of security, and which is supported by the Japanese Constitution, not only for the future of Japan but also for Asia and the world.

Fukushima Mizuho is the leader of the Social Democratic Party and an Upper House member.

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