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Resurgence of the Right and Japan's World War II Accountability

by Chung Chinsung

At major intersections throughout Japan one can see the rightist groups with patriotic banners across their chests. They use relentless microphone-amplified diatribes to drive home their message as they stand atop their black vans. Their posters declaring "Worried about the Nation" has become a fixture of the Japanese urban landscape. After the Second World War such figures were considered comical. They seemed but hot-blooded nationalists; marginal crackpots far from the norm and with minimal influence. But before we knew it, the vague sense that perhaps their ravings contained a kernel of truth spread through Japanese society. Ironically, the far right has gained considerable power in Japanese society by insistently holding up the ideal of protecting the imperial system at the very time that civil society has achieved remarkable maturity in Asian nations.

Modernization was carried out under the auspices of the Japanese government in tandem with the war preparations so central to pre-war militarism. The trend throughout the world between 1910 and 1930 was towards socialism and labor activism. Yet such movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the government in Japan. Along the way, the rightist movement that had emerged within civil society was absorbed directly into the government.

After the Second World War, democratic reforms implemented during the occupation led to the revival of the left. After a brief period of reform in the immediate post-war period, the previously progressive political course went into reverse. The outbreak of the Korean War and the ensuing conservative mood offered the opportunity for the right to retake the stage. Although the rightists came back to life, they often lacked credibility. Like many Japanese social movements, their ideological and intellectual foundation was weak.

Social activists and the student movement were transformed into the political presence known as the New Left after the Liberal Democratic Party came to power in 1955. Japan was swept by a wave of social action in the sixties and seventies. Notable among them were the citizen's movement, the anti-Vietnam war protest movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and others. Yet they soon faded from prominence, proving how short-lived citizen's movements can be. Civil society in post-war Japan developed on the two legs of economic growth and political stability. In recent years the central movements that have emerged are concerned primarily with the pursuit of quality of life. Such powerful groups as the food cooperative movement, consumer organizations and the pre-school education movement are distinctive in their ability to draw members from both the left and the right. These movements promote an improved and healthier life and consequently have a broad appeal. Consequently, the discourse of civil society in Japan has lost its ideological and theoretical dimension.

This situation started to shift again in the early 1990s when a series of international controversies rocked Japan. Korea led the nations of East Asia victimized by Japan during World War II, demanding recognition of, and settlement for, Japan's historical crimes. For example, the campaign to receive apology and reparations for the enslavement of Koreans as military comfort women grew into a Pan-Asian movement. Japan's ethical standing was seriously shaken by these charges and the climate at home rapidly became more supportive of domestic social movements. Progressive political movements that had just managed to scrape by as small-scale study groups before now teamed up with activist citizens' groups from other Asian nations. They demanded a full accounting of Japan's wartime responsibility. The social engagement thus generated was unique for post-war Japanese society in that women's groups, organizations of ethnic Koreans, peace groups, intellectuals and lawyers all joined in the campaign. They were tied together by a common thread: criticism of the imperial system.

Conservative groups launched a determined counter attack. With vast resources at their disposal, the rightists were able to bring together politicians, intellectuals and youths for their purposes. These neo-nationalist groups held that Japan was fully justified in its actions during the war. The right denigrated the citizens' groups and victims who came forth from other nations in East Asia and branded as treasonous the statements of domestic critics. Japanese political discourse lurched to the right. Although a healthy Japanese society had developed in the post-war period, ultimately, the lack of ideological foundations for the new order made possible the resurgence of the right.

In the early nineties the forces of the left and right counterbalanced each other in Japanese society. Recently, the balance has tipped increasingly in favor of the right. The rightists sharpened their rhetorical weapons in battles to suppress the demands made by former comfort women. Rightists also demonstrated their prowess in the battle over history textbooks. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Japanese government had acknowledged certain controversial actions in World War II. Revisions appeared in government-approved history textbooks. In 1994-95, however, textbook policy took a turn to the right.

The government has denied Japanese responsibility for the Second World War in recent editions of some history textbooks and restored nationalist content. In addition, the obligatory singing of the newly approved national anthem "Kimigayo" in praise of the emperor, and raising the Hinomaru flag are required by law and rigorously enforced in formal events at many schools. A string of new laws, starting with the Emergency Security Law, has been implemented and serious debate concerning revision of Japan's Peace Constitution has ensued. As a result, rightist social movements have spread their wings and flown to every corner of the country. They carry out campaigns such as the demand for the revision of history textbooks and violently attack Japan's tradition of peaceful engagement with the world. Starting with the prime minister, a long line of officials now pays public visits to the Shinto holy place Yasukuni Shrine. The leaders and martyrs associated with Japan's conquest of Asia during the Pacific War are interred and honored there. Adjacent to the Yasukuni Shrine is the Yushukan Hall, a museum featuring exhibitions for the education of Japanese visitors about the "glorious Japanese race" and the new educational system.

At the same time, many citizens' groups that demand accountability for Japan's wartime actions have turned their backs on issues such as the punishment of those responsible for the crimes of World War II and the legitimacy of the imperial system. Participants in citizens' movements nowadays are often passive figures who have given up hope of successfully combating the rightists, but continue to find a certain personal meaning in ethical activity.

The long-term stagnation of the Japanese economy has nourished a mentality receptive to the arguments offered by the rightists since the 1990s. Japan has witnessed the demise of its legendary system of life-time employment. Foreign workers have entered Japan in growing numbers. The social disruptions resulting from such cataclysmic changes have proven difficult for most Japanese to absorb. At the same time, neighboring China is aiming the heavy cannons of diplomatic warfare at Japan over unresolved historical issues. The regional configuration of East Asia today demands a new role of Japan. Political conservatism and economic

development can no longer simply work hand and hand without friction. Similarly, social movements in Japan cannot remain secondary activities subordinate to larger political priorities.

It is not immediately obvious whether the groups that once took such pride in their power such as the food cooperative movement or volunteer organizations will recognize their complicity in the swing to the right, or whether it is possible to have critical intellectuals in Japan.

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