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The Flag and the Anthem: Enforcing Japanese Patriotism

by Asahi Shimbun

Both Japan and the United States are embroiled in controversies over state enforcement of rituals of patriotism. In the U.S., the controversy now before the Supreme Court centers on the appropriateness of requiring students to daily recite a pledge of allegiance containing the words "under God". The Japanese controversy centers on state enforcement of recently imposed provisions requiring all teachers and students to stand and sing Kimigayo, the national anthem in praise of the emperor with its strong associations with colonialism and war. The controversy erupted when Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro began imposing harsh penalties on defiant teachers. The issues have particular significance as Japan sends its Self-Defense Force (army) into Iraq, a major step toward eliminating the no war clause (Article 9) in the Constitution. The following two editorials in the Asahi Shimbun call into question the use of punishment to enforce patriotic ritual. But in Japan, as in the United States, there are virtually no voices challenging the practice of pledging allegiance or singing the national anthem on public occasions.

The Hinomaru and the anthem. Forcing people to show respect goes too far.

The board of education of the Tokyo metropolitan government has decided to reprimand about 180 teachers at metropolitan senior high schools and schools for disabled children. The government claims the teachers disobeyed the board's orders and behaved "unprofessionally" during graduation ceremonies held in March-simply by refusing to stand while the national anthem was being sung and other actions.

A mass punishment like this is unheard of. In addition, the circumstances that led up to it were exceptional.

Here is a list of things the board required of all metropolitan schools: The national flag must be placed at the front of the auditorium stage; all teachers must stand and face the flag; all must sing the national anthem.

To check whether its rules were observed to the letter, the board sent officials to schools to monitor the graduation ceremonies. These official eyes certainly carried out their mission diligently, having identified so many "offenders."

A quick scan of the auditorium is all that is needed to see if anyone remains seated when everyone is supposed to be standing. But the Tokyo school board was thorough enough to demand every school submit a seating plan of where each teacher was to sit. This made it easy for the board's officials to identify each silent offender.

It is one thing to reprimand teachers if they were to disrupt a ceremony. But to punish them merely for remaining seated? Must everyone be forced to stand while the Hinomaru flag is hoisted and the "Kimigayo" anthem is sung? Surely not. That is going too far, and this attitude is depressing.

Nearly all public primary, middle and high schools across the country, not only in Tokyo, bring out the flag and sing the anthem on graduation day.

But the Tokyo board of education apparently thought "nearly" was still not good enough. The board obviously envisioned everyone facing the flag as a centerpiece, standing and singing the anthem together.

Here's what happened at one school this year: The pupils belted out Kimigayo more loudly than ever before, having practised it over and over because the principal had told them, "If you don't sing well, your teachers could be punished."

What sort of lesson is learned for laying a guilt trip on students by telling them that if they don't sing well, their teachers could get into serious trouble? What if a teacher who taught gym or whatever for three years was punished because students didn't stand while the anthem was sung? After a graduation ceremony like that, what opinion would any child have of adults? Does forced standing and singing teach to truly love and cherish the flag and the anthem?

Punishing teachers is not as simple as the Tokyo board seems to think. This kind of action will affect young minds in many ways.

The population has many different feelings about the Hinomaru flag and Kimigayo.

Some people insist children ought to be taught to respect the flag and anthem from a young age. But some others are not comfortable with what Hinomaru and Kimigayo represent. And in the middle are those who think the anthem and the flag are just fine, but refuse to be treated like puppets, forced to sing or stand up when they don't feel like it.

With so many differences of opinion, would it not be going overboard to force every single person at any school ceremony to stand facing the flag and sing the anthem?

The Tokyo board of education is already aiming for an even stricter enforcement of the flag-and-anthem routine during school enrollment ceremonies in April.

This is hardly the right way to start the new school year-with more threat of punishment for anyone who chooses not to fall in line with the Tokyo board of education's rigid rules.

The Asahi Shimbun, March 31 (IHT/Asahi: April 1, 2004)

Flag and anthem. Talking of choice does not discredit our symbols.

Twice last month (on March 18 and 31), our editorials opposed the Tokyo metropolitan government's moves to enforce protocols for the national flag and "Kimigayo" anthem at public school ceremonies. Unexpectedly, we were criticized for this in other newspapers.

On April 1, the Sankei Shimbun pointedly criticized The Asahi Shimbun by saying, "It is quite sad that they would argue so vehemently in order to discredit the national flag and anthem." The Yomiuri Shimbun in a March 31 editorial said the flag and anthem are "a normal thing at Koshien stadium" (where the spring senior high school baseball tournament is now going on), and pointed out that in Koshien, in both spring and summer games, the flag is raised and the anthem is sung during opening ceremonies, reminding all "how much the national flag and anthem are deeply enmeshed in our daily lives." This reference no doubt was made because The Asahi Shimbun is one of the organizers of the summer Koshien tournament.

So what is our position? Are we saying, "Don't raise the flag" or "Don't sing the anthem at graduation ceremonies"? No, not at all. Simply put, it is going too far to force "respect" for the flag and anthem with the threat of punishment hanging over everyone's heads. How could anyone interpret this in any way as an attempt to discredit the flag and anthem?

It is a fact that some Japanese have mixed feelings about the flag and anthem, either as a result of what happened before and during World War II or because of their personal religious or other beliefs. It is a sorry state of affairs when a democratic country must force respect for the flag and anthem on those who just cannot accept them. That is what we are saying.

At the Koshien opening ceremonies, it is true, the flag is raised and the anthem is sung, the officials and players are asked to take off their hats or caps and the audience is also asked to cooperate. But these actions are not forced on anyone. No one is going to be punished if they don't comply. And no one is looking around to check offenders; there is no penalty. In fact, there are many in the audience who don't stand up or sing; they would never be told to leave.

That is not the case with the Tokyo metropolitan board of education's treatment of its teachers. The board has reprimanded more than 170 teachers and cancelled contract renewals for five teachers on short-term contracts. It is not as if these teachers caused mayhem and blatantly obstructed the ceremonies. They just refused to stand or sing, and some simply left. Is that grounds for disciplinary action or for depriving someone of their job? We strongly believe the board's actions infringe upon the people's constitutional right of "freedom of thought and conscience."

When the national anthem and flag law was put forth in 1999, then-Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi explained to the Diet that the application of the law within schools would "not be about categorically ordering or enforcing or things like that." Then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka also said, "What is required is not that this (legislation) be carried out by force, but that we strive to foster, naturally and philosophically, (the spirit of the law) within people." We urge people to show these quotes to students and ask them, "Does your school honor the promises made by the prime minister?"

In the multi-ethnic United States, the Stars and Stripes flag is a strong emotional symbol of national solidarity. Public schools require students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. Yet, even in the United States, the Federal Supreme Court recognized in 1943 the citizen's right to refuse to say the pledge, and subsequent judicial decisions have supported this. It is almost as if to say, this is the fine line that a state must protect and respect.

First-graders in Japan's elementary schools are taught a song about the Hinomaru flag: "Red upon white, the sun circle is dyed / Oh, how beautiful indeed is the flag of Japan." You can teach the song, but you cannot instill an appreciation of the Hinomaru's beauty by force.

The Asahi Shimbun, April 2 (IHT/Asahi: April 3, 2004)

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