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The Okinawan Election and Resistance to Japan's Military First Politics

By Gavan McCormack

The election for Governor of Okinawa on 19 November is unique among prefectural elections in Japan in its national, regional and even global implications. The Japanese state has been struggling for more than a decade to secure the compliance of Okinawan people with an agenda whose core is priority to the US alliance over the constitution and priority to military (songun) over civil or democratic principle, something that it abhors when practiced by North Korea.

Struggling to resist, the Okinawan people tire and grow old, while the state continually rejuvenates, as most recently under the Abe Shinzo government. If their resistance is defeated now, the nation-wide processes of constitutional revision and military reorganization will gain momentum. If they are victorious, the deals done under Bush and Koizumi will have to be renegotiated.

Throughout the postwar era, Okinawa has been the quintessential child of the US-Japan relationship. In it, the nature of both is best revealed. As the rest of Japan faces the implications of US pressure to become a fully-fledged ally, the "Great Britain of the Far East," and as forces associated with the Liberal Democratic Party relish and seek to advance this prospect, Okinawa presents a frame within which possible national futures are contested: in the one, Japan's "war state" and "peace state," sundered since 1945, would be rejoined with Okinawa leading the country along the path of militarized dependence on the United States, alienation from Asia, priority of military over civil affairs, and retreat from constitutional democracy; in the other, Japan's civil society and its committed democrats would assert constitutional sovereignty and regain the initiative in determining state policy from the United States and its servants in Tokyo, with important consequences for Japan's role within an emerging Asian community. The November 19 election will not determine the outcome of this process, but it will certainly modify its outcome. It will also constitute a major test of whether the Rumsfeld doctrine of military reorganization will survive the firing of its leader.

In modern Japanese history, no locality has ever contested authority with the national government in anything like the determined way in which Okinawa contests it, and has contested it, with considerable success, for the past decade. While Tokyo insists that the constitution is outdated and must be revised, Okinawa protests that it has yet to be implemented and demands attention especially to its clauses on peace (Article 9) and local self-government (Articles 92 to 95). The stakes in this contest are large.

Modernity and Always Being Disposed Of

Within the modern Japanese state, the status of Okinawa has always been ambiguous. It was essentially an attachment" and therefore "expendable, under duress, if thereby the interests of the home islands can be served advantageously."[1] Okinawa's modern history has been seen by Okinawans as a series of acts of shobun, or disposal, in which they had no say and their interests were disregarded, first in 1879, when the Ryukyu kingdom was abolished and the islands incorporated, as Okinawa, in the Japanese state; second in 1952, when sovereignty was restored to the rest of Japan but Okinawa was turned into a US military colony, "Keystone of the Pacific," a center for the cultivation of "war potential," and preparation for "the threat or use of force" such as was forbidden under Article 9 of the Japanese constitution; third in 1972, when the islands were returned to Japan, but with bases intact; and fourth in 1996, when the return of Futenma base was promised "within five to seven years," but with the catch that it would have to be replaced, the replacement facilities would also have to be located in Okinawa, and Japan would have to foot the bill.

Today, ten years on from that promise, absolutely nothing has changed. The huge and sprawling Futenma Marine Air Station, which has played a major role over half a century in wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, still sits incongruously in the middle of the densely populated township of Ginowan, close to Okinawa's capital, Naha and Okinawans continue to resist the proposed base extension at Henoko. The November 2006 election constitutes a renewed attempt to solve the festering Futenma problem. Will Okinawa be "disposed of" a fifth time?

Futenma and environs

The Futenma Ten Year War

Okinawa has experienced the past decade as one of unrelenting struggle to redeem the original base removal promise, and to free itself from the burden of enforced militarism. The central government in Tokyo tried by every means to break the Okinawan will, confronting a

coalition of local fishermen and farmers, teachers, shopkeepers, small businesspeople, elected representatives of local governments, and, by no means least, the ojii and obaa (the old men and women of Okinawa), now in their 80s and 90s, whose experience of the calamity of war in 1945 made them resolute opponents of any military role for Okinawa. When one focuses on the contest between those at the center of power in the Japanese state and the men and women who make up the Okinawan opposition alliance, the "Association to Defend Life," the fabric of Japanese democracy has a distinctly imperial look. The members of the local movement must look to Tokyo somewhat as "Asterix" and "Obelisk" (of Goscinny and Uderzo's comic series on ancient Gaul) to the rulers of the Roman empire, a maddening, provincial nuisance rather than a serious threat. Yet they have held the Japanese state at bay for more than a decade, and when the polls open on 19 November, it is their voice that Tokyo most fears.

The design for the Futenma replacement base in its initial, 1996, version was for something described as a "heliport." The word was suggestive of something like a city rooftop in area, but the plan was for something that would rival Osaka's Kansai airport in size, with a runway 1,500 meters long and 600 meters wide, on an offshore, pontoon floating base, resting on steel poles encased in the seabed. [2] Assuming any opposition could be either bought off or bullied, Tokyo resorted to grand-scale financial inducements and political pressures. Yet, when the people of Nago City conducted a plebiscite in 1997, the outcome was a resounding "No." Despite the unambiguous outcome, the pressure from Tokyo was implacable. Bizarrely, the mayor promptly flew to Tokyo, pledged his support for the construction (i.e. overruling his constituents), and then resigned. Two months later, when prefectural Governor Ota endorsed the plebiscite, overruled Nago City's administration, and declared there would be no heliport, relations between his administration and Tokyo plummeted. Prime Minister Hashimoto refused to see him again, and the Tokyo "cold shoulder" and withdrawal of resources was a key factor in his electoral defeat ten months later.

The first phase of the 10-year war ended with the "Ota rebellion" crushed and the customary dependent relationship between Tokyo and Naha restored. But it was to prove merely an introductory skirmish in the epic Futenma struggle.

Believing that the opposition could be blunted by economic incentives, i.e. that Okinawans must have their price, Tokyo showered blessings upon the new Governor, Inamine Keiichi, a local Okinawan businessman. Money was poured into special "Okinawan Development" and "Northern Districts Development" funds, the latter concentrated on "social and economic revitalization" projects in the vicinity of the planned new base, in and around Nago City.

It was 1999, however, before Inamine agreed to the planned new (Futenma replacement) base construction, and then only on three conditions: it would have to be a joint civil-military use airport, US military use would be restricted to 15 years, and there must be appropriate assurances that the construction and usage of the airport would not result in environmental damage. By this time, the airport itself had become a grander structure than originally conceived. Its runway had grown to 2,500 meters; it would take over a decade to complete at prodigious expense (estimated at around one trillion yen), and sit astride the relatively unspoiled coral off Okinawa's northeastern shores. A serious environmental assessment should have been enough to kill the plan, because the seas were known to be home to the internationally-protected dugong, the shores to a colony of sea turtles, and the reef to comprise some of the island's few remaining live, relatively healthy, coral colonies. But Tokyo assumed the survey would be perfunctory, and that it would be enough to come up with a scheme to "protect" the dugongs and turtles and to plant more coral. Futenma would only be returned when the new facilities were all in place, and the Japanese taxpayer had met all costs. Not until 2002 did the two governments even sign off on a basic plan for construction. Rumsfeld grew impatient.

Local resident and opposition groups, however, mobilized once again to thwart the government plans. When government survey vessels appeared off Henoko just after sunrise on 19 April 2004, to commence test-drilling etc, [3] a sit-in protest was launched, which then continued without let-up for over one and a half years at the site. At a makeshift tent headquarters, Okinawan elders, some in their 80s or even 90s, mingled with fishermen and townspeople from around the island, while fishing boats, canoes, and even hardy swimmers, conducted an offshore "blockade". All that the state's survey team could manage to accomplish in that time was to count the dugongs (between 30 and 50) and erect four lighting beacons, which had to be dismantled with each typhoon. [4]

Henoko protest boats

In October 2005, faced with the continuing opposition blockade at Henoko, Prime Minister Koizumi acknowledged that the government had been "unable to implement the (initial) relocation (plan) because of a lot of opposition." [5] The Henoko offshore plan, like the heliport before it, was dropped. It was an admission of defeat by the state, and a tribute to the determination and persistence of the local coalition. It deserves to be recorded as one of the remarkable events in recent Japanese history: in a decade-long contest, Okinawa's "Asterix" and "Obelisk" had defeated the nation state.

Henoko protesters occupy a platform

The state, however, would not concede defeat. High-level inter-governmental (US-Japan) talks led to a two part agreement, a general statement of principles in October 2005 and a detailed "Roadmap" at the end of the following April. Futenma was a key issue. In the finalized base relocation plans of May 2006, a "roadmap" for the relocation of US facilities was agreed with a target date of 2014 set for the new facility and for the transfer of 8,000 Marines to Guam. By then, however, ten years had passed since the promise of Futenma return, and instead of return, military flights had been substantially increased, [6] while return in 2014, or any time, remained a remote prospect.

Like the reversion of 1972, the crucial point in the Futenma negotiations has been Japanese government determination to serve US military design. The Japanese government had in 1968-1972 gone to great lengths to keep the shameful details of those negotiations secret, but they amounted in essence to the payment of the vast sum of 685 million dollars for the "return" of what belonged to Japan in the first place, substantially more than it paid a few years earlier as compensation to an entire country (South Korea) for forty years of colonialism. In addition, Japan promised to continue indefinitely paying a kind of reverse rent to the US, Japanese landlord paying American tenant, for continuing to occupy Okinawan lands. Japanese officials, including then Chief Cabinet secretary and now Prime Minister Abe, lied in the parliament to cover up the deal and those who attempted to reveal what was going on were savagely prosecuted. [7] In similar vein, once again the Japanese government now promises to pay huge sums for the Futenma "reversion." In the 2006 version, the replacement facility would comprise a large new base complex, to be built at Japanese expense at Camp Schwab, an existing US facility on Cape Henoko in close proximity to the abandoned offshore site. It would include a "V"-shaped runway of 1,800 meters, partly on land reclaimed from Oura Bay and partly on the reef, plus a pier and storage facilities where US nuclear aircraft carriers could be comfortably accommodated. [8] The heliport of 1996 had thus become a vast air and marine, military complex, with its own port and two runways instead of one.

No base henoko

The reaction in Okinawa was universally negative; outrage would not be too strong a word to describe it. Hitherto, governments in Tokyo had always pledged consultation, at least gone through the motions of honoring local sentiment, and promised that no deal would go against Okinawan wishes. This new agreement was reached over the heads of Okinawans and without consultation. Governor Inamine, a conservative and supposedly a reliable ally for the LDP authorities in Tokyo, described it as "totally unacceptable" and said that, "everyone in the prefecture and in Nago City opposes it." [9] Watching Inamine's fury and bitterness, it was hard to recall that this was the man set in place by the Tokyo government only six years earlier to replace the recalcitrant Ota. Around the island, local government authorities, the mayor and local governments of Ginowan and Nago (the existing and projected base sites) prominent among them, denounced what they saw as Tokyo's unjust, high handed, and unconstitutional demands. During 2004 and until October 2005, prefectural opposition to the Futenma transfer to Henoko, or indeed to any place in Okinawa, had been running at around 80 per cent. After announcement of this Agreement, it jumped at the end of October to 85 per cent. [10]

The respected Okinawan scholar Hiyane Teruo described the islands late in 2005 as in a state similar to that of the shimagurumi toso, the island wide struggles of resistance that marked the seizure at bayonet-point of agricultural lands for base construction during the 1950s. [11] The government was reported to be considering dealing with its own Okinawan nominee, Inamine, as it had with Ota: by passing a "Special Measures Law Concerning US Bases" to bring him in line, specifically by stripping him of his constitutional authority over the open seas, and by simplifying (read: obviating) environmental assessment procedures, so that the reclamation of the waters adjacent to Cape Henoko could proceed with or without his approval. [12]

In January 2006, when a mayoral election was held in Nago City, all three candidates took an anti-base construction stance, but the victor, LDP candidate Shimabukuro Yoshikazu, wasted little time after the election in reversing himself, like his predecessor in the aftermath of the 1996 Nago plebiscite). When he did so, sixty-eight per cent of his electorate opposed him, according to an Okinawa Times survey, [13] and the prefecture-wide opposition to the construction plan stood at 71 per cent. [14]

As after 1996, "economic incentives" were again employed in an effort to buy off or divide the opposition. Defense Agency chief, Nukaga Fukushiro, hinted at the vast economic benefits that Okinawa's business groups (Inamine's support base) could expect to flow once they had submitted: "Japan paid through taxes about 1 trillion yen at the time of the Gulf War and about 500 billion to help the reconstruction of Iraq. This time, taxes will be used to lessen the burden on the people of Okinawa." [15] The prospect of a trillion, or even half a trillion yen, must have sounded irresistible in relatively backward Okinawa. Governor Inamine shifted his position somewhat from outright rejection to studied ambiguity. He began to talk of the Agreement as "reducing Okinawa's base hosting functions," so that "as such I evaluate it highly," [16] and to suggest "the acceptance of the plan would be possible on condition the Japanese and US governments reach an agreement on a package of measures to reduce Okinawa's burden in hosting the bases," [17] while nevertheless continuing to decline the overtures to participate in a council to oversee implementation of the plan and to denounce the national government's procedure as "extremely regrettable." [18]

Okinawans were understandably confused. Some suggested that Inamine's opposition was humbug, his so-called "three principles" intended to imply opposition were understood in Tokyo as no more than a sop to his constituents, and his delay tactics during his last months in office designed merely to save face, so that his successor could inaugurate a new policy freed from any such constraints. [19]

Although Japan's Defense Agency chief ate goat soup, the equivalent of humble pie, in his efforts to impress his sincerity upon the key figures in Okinawan local governments, Governor Inamine persisted in refusing prefectural participation in the council that Tokyo had set up to supervise the construction plan. Instead, and undoubtedly to Tokyo's great annoyance, he continued to promote views they had long dismissed, specifically by trying to revive the idea of a small-scale heliport. [20]

November 2006

With Inamine completing his second term, elections for a new Governor were scheduled for 19 November 2006. [21] The 67-year old business leader and former head of Okinawa Electric Power, Nakaima Hirokazu, backed by the ruling coalition's LDP and New Komeito, confronted the 58-year old former bus guide, Itokazu Keiko, who had been elected to the Upper House in 2004 and is supported by a coalition including the Democratic Party of Japan, Social Democratic Party, Communist Party, and Okinawan Social Mass Party, together with labor and civic groups. Although running with the support of the LDP government in Tokyo, even Nakaima could not bring himself to endorse the base construction plan, calling instead for the Futenma replacement to be built somewhere outside Okinawa.

In short, opinion in Okinawa was so negative (around 70 per cent opposition) towards the officially endorsed plan that it would be political suicide for any candidate to favor it. Nakaima struggled to focus the election on non-base issues, especially the economy. In that, he replayed the 1998 Inamine campaign, which promised to reduce the Okinawan unemployment level from its near 8 per cent to the then mainland level of 4.4 per cent. After the failure of 8 years of conservative rule, Nakaima had to persuade electors that, given another four, it could be done.

Polls suggested, however, that the attempt to deflect attention from the base issue, and to rely on vague propositions about the need for "change" to the national government's plan might not be enough. From 1999 to 2006, Tokyo had simply ignored Inamine's "three principles" and the 2005-2006 "Reorganization" agreement had been reached over his head. No one expected Nakaima to take any stronger position than his predecessor. He might utter mild protest, to placate Okinawan opinion, but then he would be expected to yield and cooperate with Tokyo in return for profitable business deals for his supporters. As for Itokazu, a victory offered the prospect of a return to the 1998 standoff between national and prefectural governments. Where Ota had then attempted to compromise, at least by submitting to a Supreme Court order, it was impossible to know how Itokazu might act. Women have been the mainstay of the opposition movement, however, and Tokyo might find a woman governor even more difficult to shift than Ota had been a decade ago.

Itokazu Keiko on the campaign trail

On the eve of the elections, a further aspect of US-Japan military cooperation occasioned outrage in Okinawa. In October 2006, Tokyo began deploying Patriot-3 anti-missile defenses around US bases in Okinawa. Local mayors declared themselves almost unanimously opposed. [22] They saw the deployment as designed to reinforce the military function of the bases, making Okinawa even more of a military target than it already was, and breaching the national government's promise to reduce the burden of the bases on them. They resented bitterly that Tokyo had once again acted without any consultation. The Mayor of Okinawa City angrily remarked that it was as if Okinawa remained under military occupation, even 61 years after the war ended. [23]

Prospect

From 1996 to 2006, the Japanese state has twice had to abandon its Okinawan airport construction plans in the face of local opposition. Tokyo officials talk of patience, persuasion, and sincerity, but their patience and their persuasive powers ran low, and their "sincerity" serves as a thin veil over a combination of browbeating and bribery and the implicit threat of force as last resort.

While the Abe government and LDP spokesmen spoke of establishing new rights and advancing regional autonomy under a new constitution, in Okinawa (and indeed in other parts of the country too) they moved to curtail local government autonomy, overcome restraints on the possession and use of force, and demand that citizens prioritize their duties to the state over their rights from it and at the same time love it (by compelling "patriotism"). The constitution that Abe and others wanted to scrap and rewrite embodied ideals for which Okinawans had been struggling for a generation.

The pressure on local communities stemming from the Tokyo determination to foist the base on hostile local communities has been unrelenting. Urashima Etsuko, the chronicler-historian of the local Northern Okinawa movement, writes: [24]

"The base problem has been the cause of unbroken anguish for us, setting parents and children, brothers and sisters, relatives and neighbors, at each other's throats. The base problem, and the "money" that goes with it, have torn to shreds human relations based on cooperation and mutual help, relationships that used to be so rich even though we were poor, or rather, because we were so poor."

Miyagi Yasuhiro, key figure in the movement responsible for the 1997 Nago Plebiscite that decisively rejected the idea of constructing a new base in his city, remarks in retrospect that he and his friends thought at that time that they had fought and won a great and principled fight, but looking back now after nine years, see that nothing has changed other than that the people have grown tired. [25]

Okinawan citizens and scholars began to argue that, only by insisting on their constitutional rights, turning to maximum advantage the Tokyo government's tentative, and so far insubstantial, talk of increased regional autonomy and ultimately pursuing the principle of

"self-government," could Okinawa begin to stand on its own feet. They talked, mostly, of "autonomy" and "self government," rather than "independence," but argued that there could be no other path for Okinawa than to end its dependence on government prioritization of the bases and to build a quite new kind of relationship, [26] with Okinawa as a kind of "super-prefecture," with enhanced self-governing rights. They pointed out that the national government was anyway currently considering such plans because of the crisis of national finances, and argued for Okinawa to seize the initiative and try to have Okinawa move one step beyond the government's plan by aiming at a higher level of self-government, special administrative status as an "autonomous prefecture," [27] as a kind of Japanese "Hong Kong," rather than wait for whatever "disposal" Tokyo might have in mind. In similar vein, Okinawan prize-winning novelist Medoruma Shun wrote that Okinawa's problems would only be resolved when its people stood up, overcoming their fear of being cut loose by Japan and the US, and themselves took active steps to remove the Japanese and US heel from their islands. [28] The 19 November outcome would be a pointer to how widely shared that understanding might be.

In Okinawa more than anywhere else in Japan, the precarious and one-sided nature of the supposedly "mature" and "second-to-none" US-Japan relationship is palpable. In his eagerness to please his Washington friend, Prime Minister Koizumi promised Bush something that he almost certainly could not deliver: a solution to the long-running dispute over relocating the Futenma base; his successor, Abe, was left with the obligation to deliver on that promise. Tokyo under Koizumi (and from late 2006 Abe) gambled that the magma of Okinawan discontent could continue to be contained, as in the past, by platitudes, promises, dollops of money, appeals to the "national interest," and in the end insistence on the prerogatives of state power. For its part, Washington risks further alienating the population that surrounds its most important Pacific base installations, "The Keystone of the Pacific." Meanwhile, it holds Okinawan feet to the fire by making its promise to relocate 8,000 Marines and their dependents from Okinawa to Guam (at huge Japanese government expense) contingent on a solution to the Futenma base problem. Okinawans face their fifth shobun, but despite their fatigue, with the confidence born of a decade of successful resistance, they might yet be able to avert it and write an Okinawan history of the future.

Notes

[1] George H. Kerr, Okinawa: The History of an Island People, New York, Tuttle 1958, p. 10.
[2] Ota Masahide, Okinawa – kichinaki shima e no michishirube, Tokyo, Shueisha, 2000, pp. 60-63.
[3] This was almost certainly illegal, in breach of the review and public notification procedures prescribed by Article 31 of the Environmental Assessment Law.
[4] Urashima Etsuko, a local activist, author, and environmentalist, has written a powerful chronicle of the local movement: Henoko – umi no tatakai, Tokyo, Impakuto shuppankai, 2005.
[5] Kanako Takahara, "Japan, U.S. agree on a new Futenma site," Japan Times, 27 October 2005.
[6] By fifty per cent, according to Ginowan mayor Iha Yoichi, addressing a meeting at Meiji University, 2 July 2006.
[7] These are matters dealt with in more detail in my Client State: Japan in the American Embrace, Verso, forthcoming May 2007.
[8] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, Security Consultative Committee Document, U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future, October 29, 2005, by Secretary of State Rice, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Minister of Foreign Affairs Machimura, and Minister of State for Defense Ohno; Japanese text in Asahi shimbun. 30 Otober 2005.
[9] Asahi shimbun, 9 November 2005.
[10] Opinion surveys, Okinawa Times, 14 September 2004; Ryukyu shimpo, 22 June 2005; and Okinawa Times, 5 November 2005.
[11] Hiyane Teruo, "Kawaru kokka zo – Okinawa no kiki," Ryukyu shimpo, 7 and 8 November 2005.
[12] "Kyoken – Okinawa neraiuchi/hanron fusatsu ni tsuyoi ikari," Okinawa Times, 27 October 2005.
[13] Okinawa Times, 19 April 2006.
[14] Ryukyu shimpo, 14 April 2006.
[15] Tatsuya Fukumoto and Takashi Imai, "Okinawa torn over base plan," Daily Yomiuri Online, 11 April 2006.
[16] Japan Times, 5 May 2006.
[17] Daily Yomiuri Online, 14 April 2006.
[18] Asahi shimbun, 30 May 2006.
[19] Sato Manabu, "Futenma no shikkoku," Gekkan jichiken, August 2006.
[20] Takashi Imai, "Uncertainty surrounds base relocation," Daily Yomiuri Online, 29 August 2006.
[21] For electoral details, Eric Johnston, "Okinawan election with US base plan in the balance," Japan Focus, 10 November 2006.
[22] "Patoriotto, 31 shucho, haibi hantai,," Ryukyu shimpo, 7 October 2006.
[23] "'Senryoka to kawarazu' chubu shucho issai ni hanpatsu," Ryukyu shimpo, 12 October 2006.
[24] Gavan McCormack, Sato Manabu, and Urashima Etsuko, "The Nago mayoral election and Okinawa's search for a way beyond bases and dependence," Japan Focus, 16 February 2006.
[25] Quoted in Kawabata Shunichi and Manabe Hiroki, "Futenma 10 nen shima no sentaku," Asahi shimbun, 23 October 2006.
[26] Ota Masahide, "Beyond hondo: Devolution and Okinawa," in Glenn D. Hook and Richard Siddle, eds, Japan and Okinawa – Structure and Subjectivity, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 114-139, at p. 127.
[27] Hamazato Masashi, Sato Manabu, and Shimabukuro Jun, Okinawa jichishu – anata wa do kangaeru? Okinawa jichi kenkyukai, Naha, 2005.
[28] Medoruma Shun, Okinawa sengo zero nen, Tokyo, NHK seikatsu shinsho, 2005, p. 189.

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