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Electing a Town Mayor in Okinawa: Report from the Nago Trenches [Updated] [Korean translation available]

Urashima Etsuko with an introduction, translation and postscript by Gavan McCormack

Town hall Japanese politics is rarely of much interest beyond the town, much less beyond the country. The election of a new mayor in Nago City in Okinawa on 24 January, however, is something very much out of the ordinary. It would be no exaggeration to say that no local election in postwar Japan has carried such weight.

Thirteen years ago a former mayor carried to Tokyo the verdict of this city in a local plebiscite. The people had voted clearly against the then proposal to build a base for the US Marines in the city at Henoko. Delivering the outcome, however, the mayor rejected it, declaring that Nago City was ready to accept and cooperate in the base project, and then resigned. Since then the city has lived a bitter struggle between those who represent special interests (basically construction-related groups and those who see no hope for Okinawa's depressed economy other than jobs and fees from the construction state) and those who insist on priority to economic policies geared to locally sustainable jobs in harmony with the environment.

During that 13 years, the pro-base elements, till 2009 centered in the Liberal-Democratic Party-based system that ran national, prefectural and city governments, developed a complex structure of persuasion and "buy-off" designed to neutralize, divide and defeat the anti-base citizen groups. Monies under a "Northern Districts Development" formula (tied to submission to the base project) were poured into Nago City and surrounding districts (80 billion yen in 2000 to 2009), filling the coffers of construction and public works-related groups and easing the fiscal crisis of local governments. At elections, the LDP made every effort to avoid a focus on the base issue, while stressing its ability to provide jobs and money. The resistance never gave up, however, and opinion surveys showed that support for their cause scarcely wavered.

Anti-base demonstration, December 2009.

In August 2009 the citizens of Nago saw the ousting of the old regime in the national elections as the turning of the tide in their favor. Since then the US government has persisted in extraordinary pressure on Prime Minister Hatoyama to proceed with the deals pushed through in the last days of the LDP regime by an anxious Obama administration, i.e., to construct the promised Marine base at Henoko (Nago City). In December, the Tokyo government postponed a final decision till May 2010. One of the factors to which it has said it will attach particular weight is the outcome of this election. In Washington, too, there can be no doubt that it is watched with especial interest.

Through these 13 years, "conservative" (pro-base) groups have always insisted that they can be relied on to handle economic problems better and to produce better outcomes in terms of jobs and services because they enjoy better "pipelines" of connection to the national government and to national business. The record, however, is that over the years from 2000 to 2009 dependence deepened, unemployment in Nago City rose to 12.5 per cent, well above the prefectural average and more than double the national average, jobs and incomes shrank, shops and business closed, and the economic performance of the city was significantly worse than that of others that did not "enjoy" special subsidies.

Nago's performance was among the worst not only in Okinawa but in the country. It has recently been shown that, far from there being a "benefit" attached to base-related income, towns and villages without bases in general fare much better than those with them, and those that have managed to recover parcels of base land have found that productivity and income tends to shoot up, sometimes by as much as twenty, thirty, or even forty times, after reversion from military to civilian use (figures from a study conducted by the prefecture quoted in Maedomari Hiromori, "'Kichi izon keizai' to iu shinwa" The myth of a 'base-dependent economy', Sekai, February 2010, pp. 203-209, especially p. 207).

The three opinion poll surveys on Nago City published on 19 January (Yomiuri shimbun, Okinawa Times and Asahi shimbun, and Ryukyu shimpo and Okinawa TV) found that around 70 per cent of Nago citizens do not want any new base in their city. Those wanting the Futenma base relocated somewhere else out of the prefecture were 73, 65, and 69 per cent respectively, while those ready to accept it at Henoko were 16, 16, and 9 per cent. But it is necessary to stress that the election involves multiple local issues as well as the base. It is not a referendum on the Henoko base issue, indeed the Ryukyu shimpo poll also showed, remarkably, that only a minority saw the base as the key issue of the election.

On 24 January, the people of Nago (45,000 eligible voters) have one more chance to deliver to Tokyo the message they tried and failed to deliver in 1997. The stakes are high and the struggle fierce, as Urashima Etsuko, Nago-resident and long-term citizen-activist-author, writes in this short essay, scheduled for publication immediately after the election but written several days before it. (GMcC)

Nago City is now in the throes of a mayoral election (24 January) whose outcome will affect not only the future of the city and its citizens but the future of Japan itself.

The challenger, Inamine Susumu, who stands for an end to the base problem that has held the city in its thrall now for 13 years, promises to put an end to the special interests tied up with the base that have destroyed the city's finances and to implement a city politics based on citizens, faces the incumbent, Shimabukuro Yoshikazu, who favours accepting the American base and continuing with the city politics mired in "Zenekon" general construction company special interests.

Shimabukuro Yoshikazu

The characteristic of this election is that six Assembly members who supported Shimabukuro in the last election are now prominent in the Inamine camp. Adding to these the members of Centre and Reform camps, 14 of 26 Assembly members now support Inamine. The Shimabukuro camp feels a sense of crisis over the fact that Inamine is getting widespread support from the Democratic Party (DPJ), Social Democratic Party (SDPJ), Kokumin Shinto, Okinawa Mass, Okinawa Social Mass, Japan Communist Party (JCP), labor unions and civic organizations, together with some small and medium, and also really small, businesses worried that they may not be able to survive the dominance of the Zenekon (big contractors), and is resorting to desperate and unscrupulous electoral measures.

Inamine Susumu

The string-puller is Higa Tetsuya, who as mayor in 1997 announced the acceptance of the base plan, thereby trampling on the will of the people who had just voted against it in the Nago City Plebiscite. After resigning, he has continued to run Nago City government as shadow mayor, with strong connections to the Zenekon construction companies. Today's mayor Shimabukuro is seen as Higa's puppet, and Inamine's support team says that "one of the main objectives of the election this time is to put paid to this string puller who runs Nago City."

The "get-togethers" (*kondankai*) held on countless occasions by the Shimabukuro camp are known as "Higa Tetsuya Get Togethers" and it is said that they involve bar crawls (get-togethers in the form of drinking sessions), golf and bowling sessions, and the distribution of expensive presents. It is also said that the Shimabukuro camp applies pressure on businesses, intimidating them so that "not even the "I" of "Inamine" should pass the lips" of employees, threatening that those that support Inamine will in future be excluded from the contract bidding process, and spreading word that "if Inamine becomes mayor, rental payments on base land will cease."

I live in the Kishi district of Henoko, along Oura Bay, which is also where Shimabukuro comes from. Thanks to 13 years of being pickled in the system of special subsidies, the heads of all 13 wards in Kishi gave up opposition to the base and switched to supporting Shimabukuro, thereby earning the fierce resentment of residents. We now struggle night and day to free ourselves from the voodoo that surrounds the base, which affects both politics and economics, and to restore city government to the people of the city.

After the election was declared on 18 January, the Shimabukuro camp, taking advantage of the provision in the election system for early voting, began a campaign to muster votes collectively, business by business, before election day. Their target is to get 10,000 votes before the 21st. From the opening day, the extraordinary scene unfolded of a steady stream of cars lining up outside the early vote polling station in front of the Nago City election commission office. People were even queuing up.

Last election (2006) 9,588 advance votes were cast, amounting to more than 30 per cent of electors. This time, there were 50 per cent more votes cast on the opening day than in 2006, so it is likely that the overall total may also be higher.

On 19 January, citizen groups supporting Inamine lodged a complaint with the Election Commission under the Public Office Election Law, arguing that the mobilization of advance votes was the antithesis of free voting.

Postscript – Election Results and Their Meaning

On 24 January Nago City duly conducted its mayoral election. By 17,950 to 16,362 (in a 77 per cent poll turnout in the city of 60,000 people, 45,000 of them eligible voters) challenger Inamine Susumu, supported by the Democratic Party and its coalition partners and labour and civic organizations, defeated incumbent Shimabukuro Yoshikazu, supported by the LDP (and its Komeito partner) and by construction related business interests.

The election was not a plebiscite, as 1997 was, but Inamine campaigned on the pledge to end city cooperation in the planned construction of a Marine base at Henoko and the outcome clearly confirmed the evidence of opinion polls, that roughly 70 per cent of citizens opposed the project. Immediately after his victory, Inamine went to pay his respects to the "sit-in" protesters at Henoko (on their 2,108th day) and to assure them that he would not let them down.

The reverberations will continue for some time, shaking governments in Tokyo and Washington and compelling them to take back to the drawing board the 2005-6 agreements on reorganization of US forces in Japan and the 2009 Guam Treaty. (On the Guam Treaty and its implications for Japan, Okinawa and US-Japan Relations see Sakurai Kunitoshi, The Guam Treaty as a Modern "Disposal" of the Ryukyus http://japanfocus.org/-Sakurai-Kunitoshi/3223. For Nago itself, the Inamine victory marked a decisive caesura. The campaign

manager and mentor for the defeated Shimabukuro was none other than Higa Tetsuya, who as mayor had betrayed the city in 1997. Inamine's 2010 victory ended the long years of division and confusion initiated by that shocking, anti-democratic gesture.

It is a paradox that, while surveys found popular opposition to the base scarcely faltering, mayors in the Higa mould, supported by special interest business groups, were elected in 1998, 2002 and 2006. Divisions in the opposition camp certainly helped the pro-base cause during this decade, but a powerful, ramified system also developed. At the top, to be sure, were the local special interests hoping to profit from construction-related contracts, but they were supported also by many who were convinced that resistance to central government plans would be futile and cooperation was the best, perhaps the only, way to achieve economic development and create jobs in Okinawa's chronically depressed economy.

LDP-supported mayors and city governments did what they could to divert attention from the base issue and to concentrate it instead on the jobs and fees and other economic benefits that were supposed to flow from such cooperation. In so far as the base was mentioned it was always in terms of qualified, conditional acceptance. Nobody would agree to a permanent, substantial US military facility, and so nobody could ever say, "What this city needs is a new US base…" It was therefore initially called a "heliport," a small, joint civil-military use structure that would float on the sea for 15 years before being demolished and completely removed. Chameleon-like, however, the project kept changing, and with each change it grew larger, more permanent, more threatening to the environment, till it became the giant reclamation, dual-runway and military port project of 2006.

The series of local government election victories during the decade initiated by Higa's betrayal gave LDP governments in Tokyo confidence that they could continue to pursue the base construction while dividing and buying off the opposition. But with the victory of the Democratic Party in the Lower House elections of August 2009, the balance of forces changed, and the Nago opposition, though tired by seemingly endless struggle against overwhelming odds, took heart.

Shimabukuro, guided by his mentor Higa, fought a desperate campaign. Though understood on all sides to be pro-base, he avoided any mention of it in his campaign, saying merely that it was something for the national government to decide and painting himself as a critic of the Guam treaty plan and as one who favoured an "offshore" option (such as had been under consideration in 1998-2005). By 2010, however, no one in Tokyo or Washington was interested in this option and Nago City people understood that he was fundamentally pro-base, ready to cooperate in whatever Tokyo decided, including the Guam Treaty option that would bring the new base to Henoko. During election week, the Shimabukuro camp took steps to muster advance votes collectively, business by business, promising lucrative construction contracts in return. An astonishing 14, 239 (31.7% of the electorate or more than 40 per cent of votes cast) were "advance" votes, 50 per cent higher even than during the controversial 2006 election. This time, however, some, perhaps many, allowed themselves to be led to the polling station but chose not to vote as they were expected to, as Urashima Etsuko suggested in an Okinawa Times article of January 27.

The January election showed that the tide had changed. By polling day, it became apparent that even many in the Nago business community had lost faith in the Higa-Shimabukuro model of submission to Tokyo and manipulation of Nago. It is true that "boxed" (*hakomono*) projects constructed with subsidy monies understood to be the "carrots" for compliance with national base-related planning were now scattered here and there throughout the city, but being generated by the central government's desire to divide and subdue local resistance rather than as part of any coherent economic plan, they had failed to lift the city out of its economic doldrums.

Inamine was the beneficiary at the local level of the growing awareness of the web of deceit and obfuscation that for 13 years had been woven around the base issue, just as Hatoyama was the beneficiary at the national level of the widespread shock and anger stirred by revelations of the secret diplomacy and lies that had long been part of the US-Japan "alliance" system culminating in the Guam Treaty.

Inamine pledged to prevent the seas of Henoko being made the site for a new military base, to put an end to the special interests (associated in particular with former mayor Higa) tied up with the base that had gradually eroded the city's finances and demoralized its citizens, and to give priority to economic policies geared to locally sustainable jobs in harmony with the environment. Beyond the specific promises, however, what Nago City electors were asking of him was that he lift the curse imposed on the city 13 years earlier by his predecessor's betrayal. In her post-election comment, Urashima Etsuko offered the hope that Nago's dawn might extend to Okinawa as a whole (where a crucial gubernatorial election is due later in the year) and then to all-Japan.

The militarization of Oura Bay, a Pentagon dream since 1966 and a much favoured Japanese bureaucratic project since the late 1990s, came close to realization under bilateral agreements in 1996, 2006, and 2009, but blocked for nearly 14 years through the terms of 8 Prime Ministers and 16 Defense Ministers by one of the most remarkable non-violent political movements in modern Japanese (or world) history, after 24 January 2010 it now teeters on the brink of collapse. GM, 26 January 2010

Urashima Etsuko is an environmental activist, author, and chronicler of Okinawan people's movements of resistance against bases and hyper-development and for nature conservation. For her analysis of the previous (2006) Nago mayoral election, see: "The Nago Mayoral Election and Okinawa's Search for a Way Beyond Bases and Dependence." The present article was written on 13 January for publication in Jaanarisuto,(No 622) journal of the Japan Journalists' Association, on 25 January.

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