

# Japan : The crisis of democracy and the present situation of social movements

lundi 15 février 2016, par [YAZAWA Shujiro](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 16 juillet 2015).

**Japan is on the brink of changing from a pacifist state to one prepared to go to war if necessary. Now, more than ever, we must refocus international scrutiny on the country's social movements.**

## Sommaire

- [The five contexts behind \(...\)](#)
- [The present situation of \(...\)](#)
- [An open democracy in Japan](#)

What do you know about Japan ? Answers to this question vary, but I can guess how familiar someone is with Japan by paying attention to the Japanese loanwords he or she uses. I am sure you know the following words : *sukiyaki*, *tofu*, *tempura*, *sushi* (foods), *karaoke*, *bonsai*, *manga*, *otaku* (cultural terms), *kaizen*, *kanban*, *karoshi* (business terms), and various other words such as *tsunami*, *kamikaze*, and *hikikomori*. Japan's delicious foods, interesting culture, management, hard work, and sometimes even its disasters and discord are the main components of its image in other countries.

Unfortunately democracy and social movements in Japan have rarely been under close international scrutiny. Now we have the time and an indispensable chance to do so, because today, Japan is on the brink of changing from a pacifist state to one prepared to go to war if necessary.

Shinzo Abe's government, the Liberal Democratic Party, and their allies have maintained close and intimate relationships with nationalist right-wing movements and organizations such as the Japan Conference (*Nihonkaigi*) and the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership (*Shinto Seiji Renmei*). They feel that in order to revitalise Japan, it must be perceived as a beautiful country not only in the natural and geographical senses, but also in the social, cultural, and historical senses. Japan's 'true, original characteristics' such as the monarchy are beautiful.

They do not wish to discuss painful issues connected to World War II such as 'comfort women' or the Nanjing massacre, and they do not want to accept Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, preferring to think of Japan as having liberated Asia from western imperialism. They feel that education should not teach imported notions of western human rights, but should instead stress the Japanese people's duties to the state and to the emperor.

## The five contexts behind social movements in Japan today

### 1. Shifts in national hegemony and power

The USA's power and hegemony are in decline while China's are rising ; therefore the USA needs all kinds of help from its allies. Especially in East Asia, it is essential for the USA to strengthen its ties

with and get assistance from Japan, not only politically and militarily but also economically and ideologically.

The government is now hurrying to relocate the American military base in Futenma to Henoko, in Nago City, against the will of the majority of the Okinawan people. The will of the people of Okinawa is crystal clear : Okinawan people would like to relocate the Futenma base to somewhere else outside of Okinawa prefecture, hopefully outside Japan. But the Abe government has been accelerating preparations for building a new base in Henoko. Many Okinawans are protesting these relocation preparation activities by staging sit-ins at the construction site.

## **2. Security-related bills**

The immediate goal of the current government is to create a 'normal country'. By that, it means one capable of engaging in war. It has enacted the State Secrets Law that imposes penalties for leaking classified information that could endanger national security, and makes it possible to export arms.

The coalition government of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party and the centre-right Clean Party is trying to enact security-related bills which will allow Japan's military to fight abroad for the first time since World War II. This is a drastic shift in security policy. Prime Minister Abe's cabinet already adopted a resolution last July, reinterpreting the pacifist Constitution to drop the self-imposed ban on exercising the right of collective self-defence and providing military support to a friendly country under attack [\[1\]](#).

The government and National Diet have changed the interpretation of the provisions of the Constitution - and its meaning and content - without going through the formal procedure of amending it in order to allow Japan's Self-Defence Forces to actively participate in military self-defence activities. These security-related bills, however, allow Japan's Self-Defence Forces to exercise the right of collective self-defence, thus clearly violating the Constitution. Approximately 200 constitutional law scholars have declared that these bills are unconstitutional, and the media surmise that only 10 constitutional law scholars support the assertion that these bills are constitutional. Nevertheless, the government is trying to persuade Parliament to pass the bills.

## **3. A strategy to revitalise Japan**

Japan's government, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and the leaders of big corporations believe that implementing neo-liberal economic policies and innovations based on the Silicon Valley model is the way to escape from economic stagnation over two decades and revitalize Japan.

Prior to the issue of collective self-defence, there were heated debates over and movements protesting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) promoted by the US government. It is estimated that the TPP would generate USD\$5 billion in economic benefits in the US in 2015, and \$14 billion by 2025, but the treaty was negotiated in secret. Organised labour, farmers, professionals, activists, environmentalists, intellectuals, and elected officials have all criticised and protested the treaty. As Noam Chomsky warned, the TPP is "designed to carry forward the neoliberal project to maximise profit and domination" of giant corporations.

In Japan, many people fear that giant American corporations will be able to exploit Japan's new markets [\[2\]](#). Japanese agriculture in particular would be damaged by giant US agribusinesses. However, the Liberal Democratic Party is trying to reform the National Federation of Agricultural Cooperative Associations into a new organization designed to increase agricultural productivity and enhance the international competitiveness of Japan's agriculture.

Some people might think that Abe's policy to revitalise Japan is new and will solve some of Japan's

problems. In reality, however, he does not include a gender perspective in his policy to revitalise Japan – on the contrary, his policy uses women arbitrarily rather than aiming for a gender-equal society. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2014) ranked Japan 104 out of 142 countries with regard to gender equality. Since the 1980s, persistent women's liberation movements have emerged in the areas of employment, family, local community, and politics. Japan's low ranking is mainly due to the low performances of political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity.

In July 2014, the Abe government announced its 'Japan revitalization strategy', which included the establishment of a legal framework designed to achieve the goal of women holding 30 percent of leadership positions by 2020. Based on this grand design, the Abe administration launched a series of promotion policies for women. However, these policies focus on improving the national economy and taking measures to reverse the decline of birth rate ; in practice, it does not concern itself with the issue of gender inequality.

They may help elite women, but it is uncertain how they could improve the problems of irregular employment [3]. Irregular workers (a three-year contract maximum) and temporary workers (an under-one-year contract) are increasing rapidly since the 1990s. Many female workers belong to irregular and temporary categories [4]. The revised Dispatch Worker Bill, now at the House of Councillors, will probably worsen the working conditions for them.

#### **4. Recovery from disaster**

Four years have passed since a severe earthquake and tsunami struck the northern coast of Honshu on 11 March 2011. Due to the combination of the natural disaster and the man-made Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident, Japan has experienced unprecedented suffering. Despite Abe's promise to do his best to achieve a quick and full recovery from the disaster, 2,576 people are still missing and more than 2,100,000 remain displaced. After the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident, all nuclear power plants stopped operation and several old nuclear power plants were decommissioned, but the nuclear accident itself was not brought under control.

Even so, the Liberal Democratic Party's attitude to nuclear power plants has shifted from opposition to support, because nuclear energy is inexpensive and no alternative to it has been found to support Japan's revival. The Abe government has even been working to export Japan's nuclear power plant abroad. Several proposals for reopening the nuclear power plants have already been presented. The Koshu Electric Company's proposal to revive the Sendai nuclear power plant was processed favourably without regard to the lessons of the disaster, and the plant will restart operations this summer.

There are of course many strong and persistent anti-nuclear movements, but the problem is that the local communities among which nuclear power plants are located receive so much money from the power companies that they now find it difficult to live without this money. It is very hard for anti-nuclear environmental movements to break this local power structure. The Nuclear Power Safety Commission, the national government, and relevant local and prefectural governments can all approve a company's request to reopen a nuclear power plant.

#### **5. The political process in Japan**

The origins of the present political situation lie in the failure of the Democratic Party's government from 2009 to 2011. Since the 1990s, people had become increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional politics of the Liberal Democratic Party and its governments, which relied on traditional state bureaucracy ruled by special interests and intra-party factions. The Japanese people therefore chose

the Democratic Party as the ruling party in the 2009 general election. It was the first time the Liberal Democratic Party had been out of power since the end of World War II, but people soon realised that the Democratic Party could not provide new political processes to solve so many problems. The party was composed of politicians whose political and ideological backgrounds were so diverse, ranging from conservatives to social democrats, that it was difficult to get a consensus even on basic policies.

The Democratic Party did not have a specific policy, nor the means to achieve its campaign promises. They did not deal with international questions, particularly the conflicts with China and the East Japan Great Earthquake and Tsunami disaster. The Liberal Democratic Party therefore won a landslide victory in the next election in 2011. The pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction. As a result, the House of Representatives is now dominated by big ruling party members ; opposition parties' members make up about one-third. This political structure has allowed the ruling party and its allies to initiate an amendment to the Constitution□Many newly elected members of the Lower House in the Liberal Democratic Party are very conservative, even right-wing.

Shinzo Abe became prime minister on the strength of his promise to revitalise Japan through strong leadership and taking swift political decisions. His policies have created a false economic boom that is far from the real economic situation, creating big profits for global corporations based on a weaker yen and the monetary policy of the Central Bank of Japan. 'Abenomics' relies on the trickle-down theory that "financial benefit given to big business will in turn pass down to smaller businesses and consumers" (following the Merriam-Webster definition). Even the World Bank is reluctant to endorse it [5]. Abe's economic policy is sticking to this theory, while cutting social, welfare, cultural, and educational spending.

### **The present situation of social movements in Japan**

A great many groups and organizations have been formed since the security-related bills were presented to the House of Representatives. Almost every day, demonstrations or meetings to protest the security-related bills take place in Japan. The Committee of Anti-War 1000 has been organizing meetings and demonstrations. It has gained the signatures of more than 1,650,000 people to oppose the security legislation. The Association of Scholars Opposed to the Security-Related Bills set up a website and collected over 10,000 signatures within a short period. Various women's liberation groups and organizations have held meetings and demonstrated against the bills.

Students' Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALD) organises meetings and demonstrations every Friday and Saturday just outside the Parliament building, attracting an increasing number of participants every week. This is a very important move. The student movement had been a leading part of the democracy movement until the late 1960s, but since then it has become unpopular in Japan. Many people appreciate the current movement as open, fresh, lacking an ideological bent, and featuring a sophisticated youth culture. The movement's purpose is to show that 'this is what democracy looks like'. What democracy means for them is political participation, and creating their own future by inputting student's voices into the political process. It always calls for the participation of the students' families, friends, and lovers.

While the women's liberation movement organises demonstrations and meetings for women's issues, they are demonstrating and meeting to protest against the security-related bills at the same time, as does the movement against the US military base in Okinawa. At the end of World War II, Okinawa became the only battlefield in Japan. Many Okinawan people died, and the social infrastructure was completely destroyed. After World War II, Okinawa was placed under US military rule, whose

interests were prioritised over the freedom of the Okinawan people. The movement to return Okinawa to Japanese rule intensified, and in 1972 this goal was achieved.

However, US military bases remained on the island, and the Japanese government continues to prioritise the US military over the Okinawan people. In the case of relocating the Futenma base, the Japanese government continues to give priority to US military policy over the will of the Okinawan people, and the number of people calling for Okinawa's independence from Japan is growing. Therefore, it is essential to understand the link between the movements in Okinawa and the movements against the security-related bills.

Some readers are undoubtedly curious about the role of the labour movement in Japan. Unfortunately, the power of the unions and the labour movement is declining steadily. The Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo, an organizational supporter of the Democratic Party) and the National Confederation of Trade Unions (Zenroren, an organizational supporter of the Communist Party) can still mobilise their members, but they have lost the power to act as umbrella organizations coordinating the movements in response to important political issues.

Therefore one of the most important problems to solve now is how to foster a confluence of protest movements. The victory of the movement against the security bills seems to depend on a sharp decline in support for the Abe administration, which now stands around 38 percent.

The security-related bills are unconstitutional, and the process of presenting and legislating them has proved undemocratic and a violation of the Constitution. Various democratic movements are criticizing the Abe government's move. Public opinion is rapidly turning against the bills. If the bills are passed by the parliament, Japan will take a big step towards becoming a totalitarian state.

Despite this, nearly 40 percent of the Japanese people still support the Abe government, although about 60 percent oppose the security-related bills. The threats from foreign countries and the artificial economic boom are two factors explaining the relatively high support for Abe. It is also said that the Japanese people are indifferent to politics – people do not like to talk about politics or religion at social gatherings. But more than that, the government and the ruling party are using advertisements to create a good image of the system. Furthermore, they put pressure on the media (TV, newspapers, magazines, and websites) not to say or write unfavourable things about the government. It is very difficult to find critical investigations of the Abe government in the Japanese media. It is left to local newspapers, tabloids, weekly journals and social media to carry critical news and commentary against the Abe government. Japan's NHK, similar to the UK's BBC, has rarely offered critical scrutiny of the government since one of Abe's friends was appointed its president.

Since the Meiji restoration, the Japanese government has been strengthening the country's national identity through education. From the end of World War II to the end of the 1970s, the democratization movement was strong. The government's introduction of the concept of national identity was somewhat counter-balanced by the democratization movement ; however, the impact of the movement on education began to decline in the 1980s, and the government's efforts to strengthen national identity prevailed. Following strong economic growth, the ideology of Japan as a great power, favourable only to the Japanese people, has emerged. Numerous cultural phenomena which strengthen and support Japanese nationalisms have been produced in the consumer market, cultural industries, and tourism. All of these trends have stressed Japan's uniqueness and national identity.

## **An open democracy in Japan**

We can observe two important points in order to develop an open democracy in Japan. Firstly, democratization movements in Japan must understand and present democracy based on Japanese history, passions, emotions, and sentiments to solve the cleavage between nationalism and democracy. Democracy is a universal spirit of world society. Secondly, we Japanese must discard the 'leave Asia and join Europe' attitude prevalent since the Meiji restoration, and re-position Japan once again as a part of Asia. We must also thoroughly change our colonial thinking.

If we can solve the problem of the fundamental cleavage or contradiction between nationalism and democracy, east and west, Japan will no longer be a mysterious country, and people will be able to understand the relationship between manga, omotenashi, kawaii, and the democratic social movement. Omotenashi, manga and Japanese culture have been deeply rooted in the lives and minds of Japanese people. But Japanese people's lives and minds have to be developed socially and politically by cooperating with others. Subjects and democratic selves can be constructed from this laborious process. Now it is clear that the role of social movements has become much more important than ever before in this age of globalization and individualization.

**Yazawa Shujiro**

---

---

### **P.-S.**

\* « The crisis of democracy in Japan ». Yazawa S. (2015) « The crisis of democracy in Japan », Open Democracy / ISA RC-47 : Open Movements, 16 July 2015.

<https://opendemocracy.net/shujiro-yazawa/crisis-of-democracy-in-japan>

\* Shujiro Yazawa is professor emeritus at Hitotsubashi University and Seijo University in Tokyo, and ex-president of the Japan Sociological Society. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the International Sociological Association from 1994 to 2002 and a board member of Research Committee 47 (Social Classes and Social Movements) of the ISA until 2014.

---

### **Notes**

[1] <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21653676-powerful-if-little-reported-group-claims-it-can-restore-pre-war-order-right-side-up>

[2] <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42344.pdf>

[3] <http://www.ajwrc.org/eng/modules/bulletin/index.php?page=article&storyid=43>

[4] <http://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00151/>

[5] <http://qz.com/429487/a-new-imf-study-debunks-trickle-down-economics/>