

# Japan - New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Toru Hashimoto

Friday 25 May 2012, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#), [HARLAN Chico](#), [Japan Today](#), [Kyodo News](#), [Mainichi Shimbun](#), [NISHIYAMA Kotaro](#), [PONS Philippe](#), [SUGITA Yoshifumi](#), [SUZUKI Yuichi](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2012).

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## **Behind Hashimoto, Osaka's telegenic mayor, a sign of Japan's discontent**

OSAKA, Japan - Toru Hashimoto is the product of a fed-up country. He is also its chief rabble-rouser.

The telegenic Osaka mayor wants wholesale changes to Japan's sleepy status quo. He would like to transfer power from Tokyo to a collection of new regional fiefdoms, bigger than the existing prefectures, that would collect taxes and make streamlined decisions. He holds a tea-partyish small-government philosophy, but he speaks about it in such forceful terms that critics here have given it a different name: Hashism.

"It will be a creative destruction," Hashimoto said, describing his vision for reform in a television appearance this year. "Dismantle everything and start from scratch."

From his perch in this eroding industrial city in Japan's heartland, Hashimoto, 42, has as much name recognition as Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and an approval rating nearly three times as high. Hashimoto's calls for change play to a country that is anxious about its economy, disheartened by years of weak leadership and increasingly disgusted with the central government's inability to make decisions - about tax increases, about disaster reconstruction, about energy policy.

Japanese politicians, Hashimoto said in the same television appearance, "cannot decide on anything." Without an overhaul of the way the nation's government is structured, he said, "Japan will sink within three to five years."

Even before entering politics, Hashimoto, who trained as a lawyer, was nationally famous for giving legal advice on television. But his political style has expanded his fame, largely because he has been prolific both in making enemies and in jousting with them.

He recently ordered his more than 30,000 city employees to disclose whether they had any tattoos - a traditional symbol here of membership in the yakuza, or Japanese mafia - and said those with the

ink should quit. He has also suggested that elected officials should have something approaching “carte-blanche power,” near-heresy in a country wary of unrestrained authority, part of its recoil from World War II militarism.

Tsuneo Watanabe, the powerful Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings chairman, recently said of Hashimoto, “I’m reminded of Adolf Hitler.”

On Twitter, Hashimoto reminded Watanabe that he was in charge of the country’s largest newspaper and its most popular baseball team.

“He is a far more magnificent despot,” Hashimoto wrote.

Supporters say Hashimoto is a threat merely to the established political parties, not the nation. Persuaded by his complaints of Tokyo’s failings, many here hope Hashimoto will use his made-from-scratch political party, formed in 2010, to catapult to the prime minister’s seat.

But Tokyo’s political scene has been notoriously closed to outside challengers and minor parties. The Liberal Democratic Party controlled the country nearly uninterrupted for a half-century. It was ousted by the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009, but the DPJ’s promised reforms never took root.

By both policy and behavior, the two major parties are now nearly indistinguishable. Both have approval ratings under 20 percent.

**Chico Harlan**, Published: May 23

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/behind-hashimoto-osakas-telegenic-mayor-a-sign-of-japans-discontent/2012/05/22/gIQAo5sJjU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/behind-hashimoto-osakas-telegenic-mayor-a-sign-of-japans-discontent/2012/05/22/gIQAo5sJjU_story.html)

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## **New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Osaka mayor to deny promotion if workers fail to answer tattoo survey**

OSAKA (Kyodo) — Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto has informed the city’s executive officials in an e-mail that he will not authorize promotions for workers who do not respond to the city government’s survey asking employees whether they have tattoos, sources familiar with the matter said Tuesday.

The e-mail, dated May 19, followed the collection of replies for the city’s survey, to which 513 workers had not responded as of May 16.

On Hashimoto’s order, the city government called on section chiefs to urge those who refused to answer the survey or provided blank responses to provide replies.

In the e-mail, Hashimoto said regarding the tattoo survey, “In line with a thorough legal review, we have appropriately worked out administrative details and implemented them.”

“Please be advised that you should draw up lists urgently of those workers who have not responded in each section,” the e-mail said.

On Tuesday, Hashimoto told reporters at the city hall, “This is a survey necessary for labor affairs management. If someone does not publicly follow the order (to reply), there’s no need for me to

promote them.”

The survey, conducted between May 1 and 10, covered around 33,000 employees, excluding those working for the education board. About 110 responded that they had tattoos, according to the city.

Meanwhile, the Osaka municipal board of education put off making a decision Tuesday on a proposal to check for teachers with tattoos. The proposal was made by the board’s secretariat but met opposition from board members.

Osaka city’s tattoo survey on employees was conducted in response to the wishes of Hashimoto, who was infuriated by the revelation in March that a worker at a children’s home threatened children by showing his tattoos.

Hashimoto has said, “Citizens feel uneasy or intimidated if they see tattoos (on workers) in services and it undermines trust in the city. We need to grasp what the situation is (regarding tattoos) and need to reposition personnel.”

The survey asked employees if they have tattoos on the neck and above, on the arms and hands, and from the knee down to the toes. Those with tattoos are required to indicate their location and size. Workers were also asked to respond voluntarily if they have tattoos on parts of the body covered by clothing and when they got them — before or after they started working for the city.

**Kyodo Press**, May 22, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120522p2g00m0dm121000c.html>

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### **New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Osaka mayor’s group may seek to become party by poaching lawmakers**

OSAKA (Kyodo) — An increasingly visible political group led by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto has begun considering becoming a full-fledged party in time for the next general election by headhunting lawmakers of existing parties, sources within the group said Thursday.

Senior officials of the group, called “Osaka Ishin no Kai,” have already held informal contacts with lower and upper house members of both the ruling and opposition parties in case Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda dissolves the House of Representatives and calls a general election.

With some lawmakers expressing interest in running on the Hashimoto group’s ticket, it could trigger a change in the political landscape if it decides to openly solicit election candidates.

The group currently has no sitting lawmakers. A group must have at least five lawmakers as members to be recognized as a political party eligible for subsidies and capable of fielding candidates who simultaneously run for single-seat constituencies and proportional representation blocks in a lower house election.

The Public Office Election Law and other laws give preferential treatment to political parties, allowing them to make campaign broadcasts and receive corporate donations.

Osaka Ishin no Kai, which is seeking to field 300 candidates and win 200 lower house seats in the

next general election, has judged it will be unable to beat existing political parties in the election if it remains a political group, one of the group's senior officials said.

The group plans to wage a battle against the ruling Democratic Party of Japan, while it has suggested that it would be difficult for it to work with the main opposition Liberal Democratic Party at the moment.

"If sitting lawmakers apply during open solicitation, we'll be able to see whether they are serious about leaving their parties," another senior group official said, while expressing confidence that it would be able to muster at least five lawmakers should the need arise.

Another senior official is hoping to seek a partnership with some members of the LDP who voted against a postal service bill in April contrary to the party's stance.

There are also reservations within the group about turning it into a political party because the group has thus far appealed to voters as a community-based grouping.

Candidates might be solicited openly if elections are to be held in the summer of 2013 for both the upper and lower houses of parliament, and the group finds it necessary to field a large number of candidates in them, the sources said.

**Kyodo Press**, May 11, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120511p2g00m0dm016000c.html>

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### **New-right-wing Osaka mayor: Osaka city employees could face prison for political activities under new ordinance**

OSAKA — The Osaka Municipal Government has compiled a draft ordinance that contains stipulations to impose criminal punishment on its employees for their political activities, with envisioned rules as strict as those for national government employees, it has been learned.

Under the proposed ordinance, employees of the Osaka Municipal Government face up to two years in prison if they are involved in political activities. The Osaka Municipal Government is considering submitting the proposed ordinance to the city assembly in July after consulting with public prosecutors and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

According to the local government, if enacted, it will be the first ordinance of its kind in Japan that carries stipulations to punish local government employees for their political activities. But some critics say, "It could infringe on the freedom of political activities guaranteed by the Constitution."

A senior member of the Osaka Municipal Transport Union was found to have taken part in a union-sponsored gathering dubbed "appreciation for support in the election" while on duty following the November 2011 Osaka mayoral election in which incumbent Kunio Hiramatsu, backed by the union, suffered defeat.

The city government's third-party team conducted a follow-up investigation and suggested that senior municipal government officials and others had supported Hiramatsu. Osaka Mayor Toru

Hashimoto had expressed his plan to draft a proposed ordinance, saying, "A distinction should be drawn between politics and administration."

The Local Public Service Act restricts political activities by local government employees, but it has no punitive provisions for such activities. National government employees, on the other hand, are forbidden from a wider variety of activities under the National Public Service Act than those for local government employees, and they face up to three years in prison or a fine of up to 1 million yen if they violate the law. The proposed ordinance being drafted by the Osaka Municipal Government forbids its employees from publishing and distributing newsletters for political groups such as political parties.

Shiro Okubo, professor at Ritsumeikan University School of Law, said that although public servants must not be forgiven for neglecting their official duty to engage in political activities, it is not necessary to restrict their off-duty political activities. He also said that a number of theories point out that punitive provisions in the National Public Service Act violate the Constitution as they infringe upon the freedom of political activities, adding that there have been court rulings that declared such provisions are unconstitutional. He went on to say that local government employees are subject to disciplinary action, but they must not be subject to criminal punishment.

*Mainichi Shimbun*, May 23, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120523p2a00m0na010000c.html>

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## **Toru Hashimoto: Mayor of Osaka**

Amid a moribund political scene of bland ageing males, Osaka's youthful reformist mayor and former governor Toru Hashimoto stands apart as possibly the closest Japan has to a rock-star politician. Hashimoto's personal crusade to consolidate the city and prefecture of Japan's second city and commercial centre saw him become a household name as Japan's youngest governor, until his early resignation to seek the city mayoralty in 2011. While his popularity has sustained the momentum that has seen his star rise to become one of the most powerful and divisive figures in Japanese politics, others suspect his motives as seeking to become a dictator-like figure.

That the flamboyant Hashimoto provides colour to an otherwise grey and lacklustre political system there is no doubt. Much has been written on his radical posture and possible threat to the existing political order, but to understand his apparent rise and status outsiders must first consider the reduced status Osaka now enjoys as the country's once powerful commercial and industrial powerhouse, seeking to reassert itself in the global economy but considering itself hindered by unhelpful overlapping local government arrangements and wasteful bureaucracy between the prefecture and its cities. For instance, Yokohama outranks Osaka in city population terms despite being part of the Tokyo overspill. Hashimoto's prescription of a reordered and refocused Osaka, though unpopular with the vested interests of the establishment, is an emotive and potent remedy in the eyes of city voters.

The Hashimoto phenomenon began ahead of his political career, when he became a popular television personality on a regional show offering legal advice. His media-savvy image was already tempting to Japan's ailing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as far back as 2007 during which time his name became banded around as a successor to the retiring governor of Osaka Prefecture,

Hashimoto already having turned down the chance to run for Osaka City mayor that year. In the January 2008 poll Hashimoto took 54 per cent of the vote (against the centre-left candidate's 29 per cent) and at 37 became the youngest governor in Japan. His rapid popularity as governor remained so pervasive that the beleaguered LDP government sought his candidature for national office ahead of its historic 2009 election defeat. However, his popularity and willingness to shatter the establishment consensus around policy saw the national political duopoly and its press sympathisers begin to turn against Hashimoto amid claims his support was somehow fabricated and his policymaking style dictator-like.

As governor of the Osaka Prefecture, Hashimoto quickly moved on from his early beginnings as a typical local administrator backed by the hegemonic LDP into the figurehead of his own regional political bloc 'One Osaka'. Ostensibly One Osaka's primary goal is the realisation of Hashimoto's signature policy of a consolidated merger between Osaka Prefecture and its constituent cities, including Osaka itself but also the neighbouring 'designated city' of Sakai. But the party has also sought to provide a distinctive platform around education reform, seeking to emulate the Thatcherite reforms of 1980s Britain where stronger standards and local autonomy were encouraged. Such policies are anathema to Japan's education ministry, which prizes the substantial levers of control it retains through the channelling of national subsidies to largely supine local boards of education.

As a result of the country's on-going nuclear crisis following the events of 3/11, Hashimoto has also used his party's regional influence to assert One Osaka's stance against reliance on nuclear energy, spying the votes available in being willing to take on the faceless regional energy monopoly KEPCO. One Osaka's policy of promoting more localised and alternative energy sources has set it on course for a clash with the once powerful but discredited energy giant, albeit with massive public support for the policy.

Hashimoto's decision to quit the governorship early in order to seek the Osaka mayoralty and realise One Osaka's vision, although not unexpected, was criticised for its timing. In standing down ahead of the 2012 gubernatorial elections, Hashimoto's standing in November 2011 against the incumbent Osaka mayor Kunio Hiramatsu was brushed off by One Osaka as unavoidable given the election scheduling. Others pondered why Hashimoto, at the height of his powers as the executive of a prefecture of 8.9m people and sought out for national office, would settle for being a mere mayor. In the event, a highly polarised city race which became a national event ensued, with the incumbent 'fuddy-duddy' Hiramatsu supported by all the main parties but forced on the back-foot against the momentum of One Osaka, which took not only the mayoralty but retained the governorship on increased turnouts and by substantial margins (59 and 54 per cent respectively). The enviable mandates of Hashimoto and his One Osaka ally Ichiro Matsui, now governor, were keenly studied and felt in the capital Tokyo as national politicians prepared themselves to cope with the reality of both local government reorganisation and national political realignment at the behest of jaded voters.

In spite of voter affinity for Hashimoto and his One Osaka being able to appeal to disillusioned voters beyond the reach of ordinary parties, obstacles remain in its ability to realise its goals, in the short term at least. While local chapters of the mainstream parties attempted to galvanise support for the underdog Hiramatsu campaign in the November poll (at governor level the vast field of candidates meant a One Osaka victory was always likely), following the result such considerations quickly evaporated and shifted into varying degrees of purported backing for the new mayor and his bloc by the national party machines. However, while in the US the movement towards city-county consolidations has largely depended on local and state political will supporting their creation, in Japan such a radical departure from the uniform system of nationally-prescribed 'local autonomy' would require parliamentary legislation to be enacted in its favour. It is here that Hashimoto and

One Osaka hope to be able to leverage their not unsubstantial regional clout by threatening to enter the national arena and thus divert votes away from the already unpopular main parties.

Inevitably perhaps, those cities, which would be absorbed into a unified single-tier Osaka, such as neighbouring Sakai, do not view their mooted disappearance with much sympathy. But amid economic slump, Hashimoto and his allies are able to easily portray such resistance to their proposal as romantic attachment to old administrative boundaries, which fly in the face of economic reality and rest on the cosy consensus-orientated establishment thinking, which avoids difficult decisions and stifles leadership. The prize, as they see it, is Osaka's emergence as a significant metropolis amid the Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka mega-region globally and as part of a Kansai megalopolis of 20m people within Japan, whose economy is as significant as that of regional competitors such as Singapore. However, the current set-up sees much duplication and waste among constrained administrative units, which views the city of Osaka as just one of several 'municipalities' in the prefecture. Elsewhere in Japan, the cities and prefectures of Nagoya (Aichi) and Niigata (Niigata) hope to follow Osaka's lead following the election of reformist leaders proposing consolidation.

Such resolute leadership in a system, which prizes modest effort and consensus is not appreciated by everyone. During the November election, Hashimoto's opponents coined the phrase 'Hashism' as a play on his surname and perceived autocratic style. Hashimoto has also, by his own actions, drawn comparisons to his elder counterpart Shintaro Ishihara in Tokyo, who has spoken glowingly of his 'protege'. As governor, Hashimoto closely emulated Ishihara's combative stance on constitutional issues, disciplining teachers who failed to stand for the national anthem at ceremonies. Negotiations between Hashimoto and Ishihara following the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami saw a joint plan for Osaka to become a 'back up' capital for Japan amid any future emergency, which may devastate Tokyo. Since then, their political cooperation has deepened, with Ishihara seeking support for his own new rightist party to be launched in 2012, while backing Hashimoto's newly created Ishin Seiji Juku ('Political Restoration Academy') which aims to dislodge vulnerable DPJ legislators in the coming national elections. Hashimoto's new party goes beyond the aims of One Osaka, seeking sweeping constitutional reforms such as abolition of the upper house of parliament, a directly elected prime minister and radical regional decentralisation.

Hashimoto's appeal as an outsider was further underscored by revelations, which emerged during the 2011 mayoral election, when it was revealed that his biological father was a member of an organised crime syndicate. Although once unthinkable perhaps, in a system populated by dull technocrats or scions of wealthy dynasties, such revelations merely served to embolden his earthy electoral appeal, not least as the resources of the establishment being pitted against him ultimately played well with city voters. In any case, the mayor is the father of seven children, having met his wife in high school, as far from the gangster image as could be.

Osaka's new mayor has set himself on a collision course with city labor unions, pledging to remove them from the city hall and tackle incompetence among 'job for life' bureaucrats, as well as push through radical (by Japanese standards) plans to privatise the city transport system. He is certainly not afraid to court controversy or stray from polite discourse either, with such statements as calling for Osaka to embrace its sleazy reputation and revive its economy through sex tourism and gambling. While the jury remains out on whether One Osaka's reforms will be realised against the legislative and political obstacles which remain, or if the bloc will lead to the kind of national realignment and upset predicted, in a country where leadership and vision is in short supply, the Hashimoto phenomenon shows little sign of petering out any time soon.

*\* Profile by City Mayors' East Asia Correspondent, 18 April 2012\**

<http://www.citymayors.com/mayors/osaka-mayor-hashimoto.html>



## **Hashimoto giving central government jitters**

### ***Osaka mayor criticizes process toward restart of Oi reactors with eye on next lower house election***

Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, right foreground left, and Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, left foreground, leave the Prime Minister's Office after talks with Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura on Tuesday.

Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto is probably sending shivers down the central government's spine.

Hashimoto on Tuesday sharply criticized the administration of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda over its decision-making process concerning the reactivation of the Nos. 3 and 4 reactors at the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture.

The mayor, leader of Osaka Ishin no Kai (Osaka restoration group), is apparently aiming to make the restart of the reactors a contentious issue in the next House of Representatives election. He has submitted an eight-point proposal on the restart.

His ultimate motive appears to be closely linked to his party's election strategy.

On Tuesday, Hashimoto held a 25-minute meeting with Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura during which he spent most of the time lambasting the government over its safety confirmation procedures.

In raising questions over the lack of explicit safety assurances by the Cabinet Office's Nuclear Safety Commission, Hashimoto said: "People won't be convinced...It's wrong for politicians to merely declare [the reactors] are safe."

Procedures for the restart of the reactors will be decided by Noda and three ministers concerned.

However, Fujimura told Hashimoto confirmation of safety was based on experts' views.

Even though Fujimura called the Osaka mayor's argument "somewhat shortsighted," the chief cabinet secretary said afterward the meeting was not hostile.

However, Hashimoto was relentless, telling reporters after the meeting, "It's a serious crisis in which the management of this country is at stake."

The eight-point proposal is highly demanding not only for the central government but also for electric power companies.

The proposal calls for a system under which prefectural governments within 100 kilometers of nuclear power plants would reach safety agreements with the central government and establish final disposal systems for spent nuclear fuel.



"If the government accepted the proposal, no nuclear reactor could be reactivated," a government source said.

Hashimoto made the proposal knowing the central government could never accept it, the source said.

By coming up with the eight-point proposal as a condition to restart the Oi reactors, which are operated by Kansai Electric Power Co., Hashimoto apparently aims to ask people in the next lower house election whether the reactors should be reactivated.

Ishin no Kai is trying to direct attention to the reactivation as a major election issue, with one senior party official saying, "We can expect to win considerable support over the issue."

Meanwhile, Hashimoto and people close to him are evaluating rival political parties in connection with the mayor's pet idea of creating an Osaka metropolis.

On April 17, Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui backed a revision plan for the Local Government Law jointly compiled by the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito, instead of separate plans by Your Party, which wants to form an alliance with Ishin no Kai, and the ruling Democratic Party of Japan. The ruling and opposition parties are looking into possible legal arrangements concerning the envisioned Osaka metropolis.

Matsui, an Ishin no Kai member, said defiantly, "If the DPJ opposes the LDP-Komeito plan, the decentralization reform promoted by the DPJ would be a sham."

Ishin no Kai wants to show the public it is ready to listen to complaints about conventional political parties. Its members have made efforts to have political parties approach them as they are aware they have the full attention of both DPJ and LDP because of Hashimoto's popularity. Indeed, the LDP and Komeito have approached Ishin no Kai to discuss the Osaka metropolis idea.

Ishin no Kai appears to be closer to the LDP than the DPJ as the main opposition party's policies are not that different to that of the regional party. Some Ishin no Kai members speculate the LDP would gain the upper hand in the next general election if the lower house was dissolved early.

Some observers say Hashimoto aims to gain decisive power when the strength of the two parties becomes equal.

**Yuichi Suzuki, Yoshifumi Sugita and Kotaro Nishiyama** - *Yomiuri Shimbun* Staff Writers, Apr. 26, 2012

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120425005884.htm>

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## **Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto outlines 8 conditions for Oi reactors**

Tokyo — Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto and Osaka Gov Ichiro Matsui on Tuesday met with Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura in Tokyo to explain their opposition to an early restart of two reactors at the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture.

Hashimoto has been a strong vocal critic of the central government's claim that it has the sole right

to make a final decision on whether or not to restart nuclear reactors. The government says that if at least two of the Oi reactors are not restarted, the Kansai area will experience a power shortage during the summer.

Hashimoto said that the ruling Democratic Party of Japan must not withhold information from the public about the nuclear reactors and urged the public not to be fooled, TV Asahi reported.

Hashimoto told Fujimura that eight conditions, drawn up by a panel of experts at an energy summit in Osaka earlier this month, must be met before the Oi reactors can be restarted. They include widening the area of consent, in which Kansai Electric must get local residents' approval, to 100 kilometers around the Oi plant. That would encompass Osaka and parts of Shiga, Kyoto and Nara prefectures.

Other conditions state that stress tests must be based on more stringent criteria, a nuclear regulatory agency must be independent of the government and a permanent disposal site for spent nuclear fuel needs to be found.

Hashimoto reaffirmed that the Osaka government, which owns 8.9% of Kansai Electric Co, is planning to exercise its shareholder rights at the utility's general meeting in June to propose a total abolition of nuclear power in the area.

The Osaka mayor also indicated that if the central government ignores the views of local residents in areas where there are nuclear power plants, his political party, the Osaka Ishin no Kai, will run in the next upper house election on an anti-nuclear platform.

Meanwhile, Fukui Gov Issei Nishikawa said Tuesday that the local communities which host nuclear power plants must make the final decision on their restart. He called for an independent panel of researchers to check the government's claims, TV Asahi reported.

Earlier Tuesday, the governors of Shiga and Kyoto prefectures called on the central government to provide a clear explanation as to how it arrived at the conclusion that the Oi reactors meet the government's safety levels.

*Japan Today*, 25 Apr 2012

<http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/hashimoto-outlines-8-conditions-for-oi-reactor-restart-in-meeting-with-fujimura>

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## **Recession-hit Osaka pins its hopes on a populist hero**

Toru Hashimoto has risen to become mayor of Japan's third city by launching an all-out attack on mainstream politics

Yao is one of the gloomier spots in the urban sprawl of Osaka, Japan. Grinding monotony grips its social housing, small detached houses and pachinko halls with their glaring neon lights and wall-to-wall sounds. But by rights it should be celebrating the election last November of one its offspring, Toru Hashimoto, 42, as head of the city council. He has launched an attack on political parties, civil servants — "the termites of public finance" — and central government. He promises tax cuts (but

value-added tax is due to go up) and wants to turn his Osaka Restoration Association into a political party.

Hashimoto's gift of the gab has won wide support. He seems in tune with the discontent of Japan's third city towards mainstream politicians of whatever stripe. Osaka is a long way from the disastrous tsunami and nuclear accident of last March. The mood of the city, some 600km south of Fukushima, is very different, but it is bogged down in the recession and resentful of the concentration of business in Tokyo.

When the Democrats won the general election in 2009, it ended half a century of almost uninterrupted rule by the Liberal Democrats, raising people's hopes for change. But disillusion soon set in, opening a breach for such as Hashimoto. His victory is not so much a matter of content, more a symptom of the failure by national politicians to take account of voters' expectations, according to political commentator Jiro Yamaguchi.

In the evening the crowds in the brightly lit Namba and Umeda neighbourhoods of central Osaka hardly give the impression of a city in crisis. But everyone is : restaurateurs, cab drivers, shopkeepers and such. grumbling. "Hashimoto or whoever else, we need someone to put this city back on its feet and get rid of all these civil servants who waste our money," says the landlord of a bar. "The previous mayor lost his seat, but he's sitting pretty. He pocketed a golden handshake worth 40m yen [\$520,000]."

Osaka used to be a major trading centre, its focus firmly on prosperity and pleasure. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had become the Manchester of the Orient, a pragmatic, materialist place, celebrated for its nonconformist stance. To prove the point it elected a comedian to lead the council at the end of the 1990s, but two years later allegations of sexual harassment forced him to resign. This time, Osaka is not looking for comic relief. Poverty is on the rise, with one resident in 18 receiving welfare, the highest number of homeless in the country, and official unemployment figures (6.9%) higher than the national average. Bankruptcy is rising too.

In the past the campaign in the gutter press mounted by Hashimoto's opponents might have checked his success. A lawyer, he resigned halfway through his term of office as governor of Osaka prefecture to run for mayor. His father was a small-time gangster who committed suicide, but his family's shady background did not discourage voters. The main parties lost the city council and a one of Hashimoto's team won the governorship too. He now plans to merge the two jurisdictions to give Osaka a statute similar to the capital, a flattering initiative for a city which fancies itself as the opposite to Tokyo, a cold and haughty city of bureaucrats.

It could make sense to merge the city (population 2.6 million) and its hinterland (20 million), but Hashimoto above all enjoys the support of a growing share of the community, particularly youth which can find no political outlet for its expectations. Social mobility, once the driving force in Japan's economic success, has ground to a halt and there is a rising sense of insecurity. The stagnation is not just economic, but also social. The populism Hashimoto preys on the widening poverty gap and a sense of abandonment, but here it has a more sinister side. "Strong, almost dictatorial power is needed to change politics," he warned during the campaign. Commentators have labelled such extreme electioneering as Hashism, a pun on his name and on fascism.

Democracy in Japan has certainly suffered from the recession, and the present government's incompetence and dithering before and after Fukushima, but it remains to be seen whether other Japanese cities may take the same course.

**Philippe Pons**

\* *Guardian Weekly*, Tuesday 10 January 2012 (This article originally appeared in *Le Monde*)/  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/10/osaka-mayor-attacks-mainstream-politics>

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