

As Hashimoto self-destructs, Japan Restoration Party also reels

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Recent remarks by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto justifying the Imperial Japanese Army's "comfort women" brothel system have upset relations with the United States and South Korea and enraged human rights activists both at home and abroad.

The impact on domestic politics has also been great, as major parties distance themselves from Hashimoto's Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party). Right-leaning politicians, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, also now find it harder to address historical issues, including the comfort women, Japan's euphemism for the wartime sex slaves.

Polls show support for Nippon Ishin, which Hashimoto is a coleader of, have plummeted, clouding the party's prospects for the Upper House election in July and the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election in June.

"Nippon Ishin candidates must feel like they are sitting on thorns," election campaign analyst Hiroshi Miura wrote in a recent blog post.

The damage to Nippon Ishin's chances in the Upper House election could be "critical," Miura, president of consulting firm Ask Co., said in a phone interview with *The Japan Times*, particularly because Hashimoto has yet to offer a straightforward apology.

"The end of this party may have just started," Miura said of Nippon Ishin, which is now the second-largest opposition force in the Diet, after the Democratic Party of Japan.

A lawyer who gained fame on TV and was elected Osaka governor in 2008, Hashimoto was once a rising political star with his calls for more efficient and powerful local governments. He was even sometimes touted as a possible candidate for prime minister.

Before the Lower House election in December, almost everybody in politics tried to hitch their wagon to Hashimoto and Nippon Ishin.

Many in the DPJ, which was ousted from power by Abe's Liberal Democratic Party in the December poll, defected to Nippon Ishin, which was perceived as a rising force to be reckoned with; Your Party came close to a merger, seeking common ground on policy pledges; it was even rumored that Abe considered jumping ship before he was elected LDP president in September.

In November, Taiyo no To (Sunrise Party) did join with Nippon Ishin, and its leader, the nationalistic ex-Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, became Nippon Ishin's coleader.

But what a difference six months makes.

Now DPJ Secretary General Goshi Hosono is bashing Nippon Ishin as "an ultraright party" to paint his own as a moderate center-left alternative.

Once the closest ally, Your Party called off plans to cooperate in elections, going so far as to harshly criticize Hashimoto.

Even New Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner, and a close ally in the Osaka Municipal and Prefectural assemblies, has begun bashing Hashimoto in public.

Yet even before the comfort women debacle, support for Nippon Ishin was falling, as the party suffered setbacks in a number of recent local-level elections.

According to NHK polls, support for Nippon Ishin fell from 6.5 percent in January to 2.4 percent in the May 10-12 poll, conducted before Hashimoto's flameout.

On May 11, just two days before he raised the comfort women issue in public, Hashimoto reportedly warned party members that Nippon Ishin "could disappear by the end of the year" because it was simply running in elections for the sake of running and all the while losing voter support.

It is that dwindling popularity, Miura observed, that may have prompted Hashimoto's ill-advised bid to get into the news at any cost.

"Media won't pick up remarks (by Hashimoto) unless they have some news value," Miura said.

But Hashimoto's bombshell has only succeeded in amplifying voter disaffection.

According to the latest weekend poll by the *Asahi Shimbun*, some 75 percent agree Hashimoto's remarks were "very problematic" or "problematic to some extent," while 50 percent said their impression of his party has worsened.

The Cabinet, led by Abe, who is also viewed as a historical revisionist, is now trying to distance itself from Hashimoto, by reaffirming the long-standing policy of fully upholding two key official statements of apology for Japan's wartime aggression and responsibility for the comfort women.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga recently announced the Cabinet would not consider revisiting either the 1995 war apology statement by then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama or the 1993 statement by then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono that was taken as a direct apology to the comfort women.

Abe himself had previously caused a stir by claiming that no records have ever been found to prove that the Imperial Japanese Army or administrative authorities were directly involved in "forcibly recruiting" females.

Scholars claim that as far as the situation on the Korean Peninsula is concerned, Abe may be technically correct because private brokers, not the Japanese military or government, rounded up the women and girls.

However, they point out that Japanese authorities, by turning a blind eye to the deceptive recruitment practices of those agents, were complicit.

Abe initially tried to focus on the recruitment process while apologizing for the misery suffered by the females forced to work at the military brothels. But now he has stopped discussing the comfort women in public after facing harsh criticism from Western nations and other parts of Asia.

"It's quite difficult to win the understanding of foreign countries on the comfort women issue because it's an emotional issue," said a senior official close to Abe.

To put an end to controversies over historical issues, Abe's Cabinet has decided to parrot approved phrases to explain the government's stance, the official said.

Indeed, when pressed on war-related issues, Cabinet members simply repeat that they uphold the traditional views of past Cabinets.

Reiji Yoshida, *Japan Times* Staff Writer, May 23, 2013

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