

Conservatism and historical interpretation in Japan: coercion in recruitment of 'comfort women'

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Since Shinzo Abe began his second stint as prime minister, observers in both Japan and abroad have been on high alert over Japan's political swing to the right. In this series, we ask politicians and intellectuals where they think the Abe administration is headed, and whether the direction aligns with national interests.

This installment features Nobuo Ishihara, chairman of the Research Institute for Local Government (RILG), who previously served as administrative vice minister for home affairs, and deputy chief Cabinet secretary. In 1993, when then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono made the Kono Statement on "comfort women," Ishihara was his deputy.

Mainichi: Japan Restoration Party co-head Toru Hashimoto's statements about "comfort women" have sparked controversy.

Ishihara: Hashimoto criticizes the government for being vague about whether coercion was involved in the recruitment of "comfort women." But from the standpoint of someone who was involved in composing the Kono Statement, the government has recognized that there was coercion.

We dispatched investigators who chose former "comfort women" who were not engaged in political activity to interview under neutral conditions. As a result, we determined there was no denying that people were taken against their will.

Mainichi: The government, however, did not find any physical evidence, such as written notices.

Ishihara: There is no literature or other written evidence showing that the Japanese government or military instructed the forced recruitment of "comfort women." Some people say such evidence was burned, but I don't think that's the case. There's no way the military, even at the time, would have issued written orders to gather people against their will.

The military did not directly recruit "comfort women"; rather it paid businesses to do it. To fulfill their quotas, businesses turned to police officers in the office of the governor-general of Korea, who forcibly recruited women. Some women said they were tricked into believing they were going to be members of factory volunteer corps, only to be taken to "comfort stations."

Mainichi: Some criticize the Japanese government's acknowledgement of coercion when no physical evidence has been found.

Ishihara: Even at the time the statement was made, there was criticism that it was a mistake to officially acknowledge the coercive nature of the recruitment process based on the testimony of former "comfort women." Such criticism remains today. However, the Cabinet of then Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa wanted to resolve the issue of wartime misfortunes and negative legacies

to build a forward-looking relationship with South Korea.

Mainichi: What do you think about recent moves to justify “comfort women” and the Pacific War?

Ishihara: Following World War II, Japan opened itself to Western-style democracy. Successive administrations have tried to maintain good relations with the U.S. as a partner in the free world.

Meanwhile, people such as Japan Restoration Party co-head Shintaro Ishihara view the U.S.’s approach to Japan as an extension of its occupation policy. They argue that the government should assert the Japanese race’s independence and uniqueness, which from the American point of view appears as a push to review the framework of bilateral cooperation.

Mainichi: Do Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Shintaro Ishihara have anything in common?

Ishihara: Because of his position as Japan’s top political leader, I don’t think Abe is looking to change the cooperative relationship between Japan and the U.S., or questioning it. Before he became prime minister, Abe appeared to make somewhat hawkish statements, but since he’s become prime minister, he’s been more cautious.

I respect former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. He was for the abandonment of the Japan-U.S. security alliance, but changed course after he became prime minister. I think that’s what being a prime minister is about.

Interview by Tamotsu Takatsuka, Tokyo Political News Department

P.S.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130619p2a00m0na012000c.html>