

Okinawans explore secession option: Academics see need for people to regain pride, identity, culture

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NAHA, OKINAWA PREF. — Okinawans are losing patience with Tokyo's repeated vows to reduce the prefecture's burden of hosting U.S. military installations and other hollow pledges, and some are seriously looking into the possibility of having the territory secede from Japan.

On May 15, the 41st anniversary of Okinawa's belated 1972 reversion to Japan from U.S. control, five Okinawans established an academic society to study potential paths to regaining Ryukyu independence.

Before Japan took control of the territory in 1879 and incorporated it as Okinawa, the islands were known as the Ryukyu Kingdom, which had a thriving sea trade with China and Southeast Asia, as well as links with Japan.

The academic society – the Association of Comprehensive Studies for Independence of the Lew Chewans (local-language pronunciation of Ryukyans) – made headlines and drew popular backing from many Okinawans, including Social Democratic Party lawmaker Kantoku Teruya, who praised the group in his blog, headlined “Okinawa, from Yamato to independence at last,” on April 1.

After a local newspaper reported the group's plan, they said their membership grew to nearly 150 people in less than three months.

“Japan made Okinawa its colony, and discrimination and colonial rule continues to this day. If nothing is done, the future will be the same, and (secession may be) one of the answers to resolve that,” said Masaki Tomochi, 40, an associate professor of economics at Okinawa International University and a founding member of the academic group.

The group will study how other nations gained independence and explore ways for Okinawa to attain and justify it from different angles, including politics, culture, linguistics and economics. In the process, it also plans to collaborate with Guam and Taiwan, which have also sought independence, and hold two membership meetings a year. The first will be held in October.

“Our ultimate goal is to re-establish the right to self-determination, to gain independence and decide (policies) on our own,” Tomochi said. “We are not here to discuss whether we can or can't realize independence. We will discuss how to achieve independence under the premise that we can.”

Independence isn't a new concept in Okinawa. The topic has been battled about since the Meiji government seized the islands in 1879 and tried to eradicate the Ryukyu culture, language and identity.

Shinako Oyakawa, 32, a sociolinguistics graduate student at Ryukyu University and founding member of the academic group, said she used to hear adults talking about Ryukyu independence when she was a child. She always thought it was a pipe dream.

But after living under the heavy U.S. military presence and digging deep into Okinawa's linguistic history, she concluded the islands must once again be independent.

"Being a colony is not a healthy status. It's natural to return to the original state as an independent nation," Oyakawa said.

When the Meiji government took over the kingdom, it attempted to eradicate its culture by, for instance, prohibiting children from speaking Okinawan at school. When they did, they were forced to wear "dialect cards" as punishment.

According to a November 2011 poll of 1,137 adult residents conducted by the daily Ryukyu Shimpō, about 45 percent can still speak Okinawan, down 11.1 points from 2001. The rate among those in their 20s and 30s, however, reveals that assimilation is gaining ground: About 90 percent can't speak the Ryukyuan languages, also known as the Okinawan dialects.

Recovering the language and regaining self-esteem are part of the process of regaining independence, members of the academic group said.

"Some think everything can be translated. But there are so many things that cannot be translated. (Okinawan languages) embody a sense of value that Okinawans hold," Oyakawa said. "It's about retrieving the view of the world the language had."

In the 1945 Battle of Okinawa, 1 out of every 4 Okinawans died. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the U.S. military took over the prefecture and didn't cede control of it until 1972 – long after the rest of Japan had become independent again. That delayed return has cast a cloud over Japan's independence celebrations.

Since 1972, Okinawa has essentially remained a U.S. military outpost, hosting some 74 percent of all American installations in Japan. Noise pollution and the specter of aircraft accidents remain part of everyday life on the islands, which also have Self-Defense Forces elements present.

Ag(Okinawa) was sacrificed in World War II to protect the mainland. When we look back in history, we realize this was due to discriminatory colonial rule," Tomochi said.

Many Okinawans say they understand the sentiment behind the Ryukyu independence movement but have reservations when asked if they are really willing to part with Japan.

According to the Ryukyu Shimpō poll, 4.7 percent said they want Okinawa to become independent again and 61.8 percent said they want it to remain part of Japan.

Although the figures may be low, the founding members of the academic group believe that deep down, most Okinawans desire independence.

"We've been a colony for a long time. We need a process to regain" our identity, Tomochi said.

"This is a new movement to think about Ryukyu by Ryukyuans. Up until today, we have done things jointly with Japan, but it didn't work," he said. "We have a responsibility to the next generation (to stop being a colony)."

Mizuho Aoki, *Japan Times* Staff Writer, July 11, 2013

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