

# Republican activists launch petition against Japan's imperial calendar

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**Activists opposed to the emperor system in Japan have launched a petition calling for the abolition of regnal years (in Japanese, *gengō* or *nengō*). What does this tell us about republicanism in Japan?**

Japan uses two systems to indicate the year: the Gregorian calendar and an era name system counted by the number of years since an emperor accession without a year zero (the current era is Heisei and 2018 is Heisei 30). Today the era system is fully regnal but historically one emperor's reign might divide into multiple eras.

Arguing that the era name system is obsolete and quoting a 2017 NHK poll that notes the majority of people in Japan do not use it, the petition is organised by Hantenren (Han-Tennōsei Undō Renraku Kai, or Anti-Emperor Activities Network), Hi no Maru Kimigayo no Hōseika to Kyōsei ni Hantai suru Kanagawa no Kai (Kanagawa Group Opposed to the Legislation and Enforcement of the Japanese National Flag and Anthem), Yasukuni Tennōsei Mondai Jōhō Sentā (Yasukuni Emperor System Problem Information Centre), and Tennōsei Iranai Demo Jikkō Iinkai (officially in English, the Executive Committee of Demonstration for No More Emperor System), which has mobilised several prominent marches recently. Organisers have announced that their goal is a modest 5,000 signatories by 30 April, exactly one year before the end of the emperor's reign. The petition is addressed to the prime minister and, due to petition law in Japan, must be accepted when presented.

The incumbent sovereign, Akihito, is set to abdicate and hand over the throne of the world's oldest continuous monarchy to his son, Naruhito, marking the start of a new, as yet unnamed era from 1 May 2019. The Heisei period, with all its hobgoblins of economic uncertainty, will come to an end. The petition specifically opposes this transition in era name, which is a process obscured in mystery in terms of the selection, and somewhat complex and expensive in the changes it necessitates to legal and business documents. When Akihito himself succeeded Hirohito in 1989, the enthronement was also accompanied by a wave of small yet feisty protests. Naruhito's reign, as constitutionally powerless as it can only be, will undoubtedly begin the same way, though police will keep a tight grip on the demonstrations and prevent them from spoiling the festivities.

As previously discussed, the announcement in August 2016 by Akihito of his wish to abdicate has galvanised the anti-emperor movement in Japan, prompting protests, books and a film festival. A rally and march organised by Hantenren and others was held in central Tokyo on 11 February, an annual event opposing the date that is now National Foundation Day but has its roots in Kigenetsu, a holiday inaugurated during the Meiji Emperor's reign celebrating the sovereign as part of a sacred line stretching back to the legendary Jimmu's accession. As always, the march had a significant police escort.

Republicanism in various forms has long existed in Japan but is scattered across various areas, such as the parliamentary (the Japanese Communist Party), the remaining fragments of the formerly

militant New Left in Japan, and smaller single-issue groups such as Hantenren committed to campaigning against the emperor system. These latter groups have commonly held demonstrations and marches on significant days, such as 15 August, which marks Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, a conflict in which the previous emperor, Hirohito, is frequently held partially responsible by the left.

It should be noted that anti-emperor activism is a genuinely dangerous enterprise. The Chrysanthemum taboo still holds sway, meaning that the mainstream media holds back on discussing anything sensitive about the Imperial Family, much less criticism. In the past, ultra-nationalists have attacked and even murdered people they believed had slandered the emperor and what he represents.

While this goes some way to explaining why anti-emperor activism attracts so little press attention, and what it does is usually not sympathetic, there is another, simpler cause: the republican movement runs counter to the majority of public opinion. Akihito and the system in general is popular, and polls suggest that most citizens supported his intention to abdicate after decades of service for the nation. Even the JCP has softened its stance in recent years, though stopping short of actually accepting the emperor as head of state in official policy. To be against the emperor system, then, is almost about as unorthodox, provocative and countercultural as it is possible to be in Japan.

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