

Japan's New Leader, Suga Yoshihide, Will Maintain the Old Regime

Monday 28 September 2020, by [McCORMACK Gavan](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2020).

Suga Yoshihide, longtime aide to Abe Shinzo, has now replaced him as Japan's prime minister. Suga will preserve the main features of Abe's long stint in power: creeping militarism, subordination to the US, and a high-handed approach to political opposition.

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On September 14, Suga Yoshihide replaced Abe Shinzo as Japan's prime minister after nearly eight years as Abe's chief cabinet secretary — during which time he had, in effect, jointly run the government.

Suga has promised to continue the policies of his predecessor. The scandals, cover-ups, and probable criminal behavior in which the old administration found itself ensnared are also likely to bedevil the new Japanese premier. To understand the “new” regime, we thus need to look closely at the “old.”

A Family Affair

If anyone in modern Japan could be said to have a political pedigree, it would have to be Abe Shinzo (prime minister 2006–7 and 2012–2020). His father Abe Shintaro held various state posts, including that of foreign minister between 1977 and 1986; his great-uncle Satō Eisaku was prime minister between 1964 and 1972; his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, was prime minister from 1957 to 1960; and his younger brother, Kishi Nobuo, has now become foreign minister in the Suga cabinet of 2020.

Of these family figures, it seemed to be his grandfather to whom Abe felt especially close. Both wrestled at significant moments in history with the same core problem: how to reconcile American and Japanese national interests.

Kishi, having been a member of the cabinet that declared war on the United States in 1941, was imprisoned as a war crime suspect when the war ended. However, he emerged from prison in 1948 to become one of two “most influential agents the United States has ever recruited,” in the words of

CIA historian Tim Weiner.

He was a principal architect of Japan's relationships, both pre- and post-war. With the recent retirement of one grandson from the prime minister's office and the appointment of another as foreign minister, Kishi Nobusuke still casts a long shadow.

Abe entered the Diet in 1993 and held the prime ministerial office for crucial periods in the post-Cold War era. He may not have fluctuated as wildly as his grandfather, but his 100 percent embrace of Trumpian "America First" dogma is unlikely to offer any long-term Japanese advantage.

Running for Cover?

Having set the record for the longest-serving Japanese prime minister and longest-lasting government of modern times, on August 28, 2020, Abe suddenly resigned from office. The reason for his departure was the same in 2020 as it had been after his first term in 2007: an attack of ulcerative colitis.

Generally speaking, Abe bowed out to acclaim, with the image that he has presented to multiple audiences — including the United Nations and the US Congress — of a democratic, law-governed, constitutional state widely accepted. But there were still doubts.

Might his decision have been driven by other considerations — namely, that he had exhausted his range of policies and had no further idea on how to respond to the country's chronic problems (not least COVID-19)? Or that it was becoming too difficult to keep the lid on the various scandals he was involved in, and he therefore needed to do a deal with potential successors while he still had the power to do so?

One severe critic, Shirai Satoshi, took the view that the Abe era had been "a seven-plus-year-long stain on Japanese history." These were strong words, but as Japan ruminated on Abe's record, they were not thought extreme.

A Client State

Throughout both of his terms in office, Abe attached the highest priority to consolidating and refining Japan's servile, subordinate relationship to the United States — what I have referred to as its status as a "client state." The question he leaves is whether such subordination is going to be viable in the long term, especially but not only during the time of the erratic President Trump — whether "Japan the Beautiful" (the title of a 2006 Abe book) can coexist with "America First."

The state of which Abe's grandfather took the helm in 1957 was, by its 1947 constitution, pacifist. Article 9 renounced "force or threat of force as means of settling international disputes," and pledged that Japan would not possess "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential." But at the same time, the Japanese state was tied by the fabric of a security treaty (inaugurated in 1951, with subsequent revisions) to the world's greatest military power.

John Foster Dulles had insisted in 1951 that the United States must have "the right to station as many troops in Japan as we want where we want and for as long as we want," and Washington's wishes have remained paramount ever since. From 1960, the US-Japan Security Treaty, railroaded through the Diet by Kishi Nobusuke, took precedence over the constitution.

Gradually, the constitutional peace state became the world's eighth-ranking military power. Its armed ("Self Defense") forces are larger than those of the UK, Germany, or France, and its subsidy to the Pentagon's global mission far exceeds that of any other country. Its territory is home to more than a hundred of the one thousand or so US military bases dotted around the world. They include Yokosuka, home port for the nuclear-powered Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, the massive Kadena US Air Force base, and Futenma, where the Marine Corps are stationed.

Abe in the Trump Era

For Abe, the functional equivalent of the CIA guidance enjoyed by Kishi in the 1940s and 1950s was the policy direction emanating from the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). In several policy papers published between 1995 and 2018, these "Japan handlers" have spelled out the legal and institutional reforms they deem necessary to reinforce the Alliance and consolidate Japan's servility. It is difficult to think of any parallel in inter-state relations for such a determined charter of dominance and submission between two states.

In its 2012 report, CSIS cautioned Japan to think carefully about whether it wanted to remain a "tier-one" nation. In saying this, the think tank meant that Japan, in order to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with the United States, would have to send naval groups to the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea, relax its restrictions on arms exports, and increase its defense budget and numbers of military personnel.

It would also have to maintain (or increase) its annual subsidy to the Pentagon, press ahead with construction of new base facilities in Okinawa, Guam, and the Mariana Islands, and revise its constitution (or the way that document is interpreted) so as to facilitate "collective self-defense." Following his December 2012 electoral triumph, Abe hastened to Washington to assure his hosts that his government would do as it was told.

Following Donald Trump's advent to the presidency in 2017, Abe went further than any world leader by declaring total (100 percent) support and striving for a new level of incorporation in the global projection of US hegemony over land, sea, space, and cyberspace. This would involve Japan building its first aircraft carrier, despatching the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) to the South China Sea three thousand kilometers away, and even setting up its first post-1945 overseas naval base, at Djibouti, ten thousand kilometers away.

It also meant giving the highest priority to building and refurbishing bases for US forces in Okinawa and in Guam, while retaining the presence of fifty thousand US troops who are given free rein as to how and where they function. Abe has scrapped the long-standing self-imposed military expenditure limit of 1 percent of GDP. In 2018, his party organization called on the government to double that expenditure to the (nominal) NATO level of 2 percent of GDP.

Despite intense public opposition that has often stood at levels of 70 percent or more, his governments have enacted major legislation — often by forcing it through the Diet — with serious implications for security, human rights, and freedom of expression. Such bills include the Revised Education Basic Law of 2006, the Secrets Law of 2013, the Security Law package of 2015, and the Conspiracy Law of 2017.

The country's constitutional scholars overwhelmingly declared the 2015 Security Law package to be unconstitutional. Japan has also loosened the ban on arms exports and steadily raised its defense expenditure. Under Abe's stewardship, it was Suga Yoshihide who exercised the force needed to advance this illiberal agenda.

Unkept Promises

The focus on satisfying the United States came at a cost. Despite a long and continuous spell in government, by the time he retired from office in 2020, Abe had still not been able to deliver on his key projects, from constitutional revision to a territorial settlement with Russia and the return of the southern Kurile Islands.

Abe had not secured the repatriation of a dozen or so Japanese citizens believed to have been abducted by North Korea. Nor had he achieved any wider normalization of ties with the North Korean state. Meanwhile, Japanese relations with its South Korean neighbor have never been worse. By promising to continue Abe's policies, Suga has in effect pledged that such matters will remain unresolved.

The Olympic Games, to which Abe had attached great importance, looked increasingly unlikely to happen. Nine years after the Fukushima disaster, radioactive wastes continue to pile up around that city or are quietly leaked into the sea. And COVID-19 still defies efforts to decisively "flatten the curve."

The same held true for Abe's economic program. By 2020, few economists took the idea of "Abenomics" seriously. Adopted after years of sluggish growth, this set of policies had failed to deliver the promised 2 percent inflation and a 600 trillion yen GDP. GDP (approximately \$5.6 trillion) currently rests at just 485 trillion — 41 trillion less than when his government took office in December 2012.

Although the value of the yen has been kept low, and the stock exchange has delivered substantial gains, reduced wages and job security for many have swollen the ranks of the precariat. National debt — far outstripping levels in the rest of the world, and currently amounting to a staggering 237 percent of GDP — darkens the outlook for future generations.

The policies adopted by Abe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic involved shutting down economic activity to defeat the virus on the one hand, while stimulating it with generous helpings of public money and massive subsidies for domestic tourism on the other. This has simply fostered confusion as social distancing measures came into effect.

Trampling Over Okinawa

Throughout Abe's term as prime minister, he attached the highest priority to the construction of a new and comprehensive (land-sea-air) base for the Marine Corps in northern Okinawa. Nominally, this would be as a substitute for the existing Futenma base — said to be the most dangerous in the world, because of its location in a crowded urban area — but the new site would be more technically advanced and multifunctional.

Okinawans have repeatedly rejected this plan, ever since a Henoko reclamation site was first proposed in 1996. Their first rejection came in the form of a Nago City plebiscite, then through numerous resolutions of the Okinawan parliament and successive Okinawan governors, and eventually a prefectural referendum (72 percent opposition in February 2019).

But Japanese governments paid no heed, and the project simply grew. The "heliport" of the earliest designs became a grand facility with twin "V"-shaped, 1,800-meter runways on a platform projecting ten meters above the sea, along with ancillary deep-sea port and storage facilities. There is no precedent in Japan's modern history for a prefecture resisting the national government for so long,

on an issue of such importance — and yet to no avail.

The expert opinion on the Henoko project is clear. In October 2018, 110 administrative law specialists put their names to a statement accusing the government of acting illegally and failing “to qualify as a state ruled by law.” In January 2019, 131 constitutional law specialists, academics, and lawyers published a similar statement, describing the government’s actions as a violation of the fundamental human rights of the people of Okinawa, and the Henoko project to be both illegal and unconstitutional.

By 2020, the project faced huge, hitherto unacknowledged technical and engineering difficulties. There was a deep, mayonnaise-textured “soft bottom” at the Bay site and a double fault line crossing it, threatening to destabilize — or possibly even collapse — any major construction project. The estimated cost nearly trebled to reach the humongous figure of 930 billion yen and the time frame for completion extended into the late 2030s.

Engineers now estimate that, at current rates of progress, the work could take about a century to complete. Okinawans acclaimed Governor Onaga Takeshi (2014–18) when he accused the national government of being “condescending,” “outrageous,” “childish,” “depraved,” and “ignoring the people’s will.”

The base-construction agenda also threatens the environment of Oura Bay and its various marine species. Japan marked 2018 the International Year of Coral, with the reclamation of much of this coral reef zone, one of the world’s most prolific and biodiverse, killing off in the process unique and precious coral colonies — not to mention marine species such as the dugong and the Okinawa woodpecker (*noguchigera*).

Under the Abe-Suga regime, it was Suga who pushed for the most hard-line policies on Okinawa. Okinawans are now bracing themselves for a tough future as he assumes the premiership.

The Moritomo Gakuen Affair

From 2017 onward, a series of scandals exposed the underlying frame of the Abe-Suga state, with its characteristic practices of irresponsibility, lying, and manipulation of the record. Let us consider one example, perhaps the most significant and — for both Abe and Suga — most threatening.

In the Moritomo Gakuen (Moritomo School) affair, the national government sold a plot of land in June 2016 to close associates of the prime minister and his wife, who were intent on establishing a primary school. The sale came at a discount of 800 million yen (\$7.5 million).

Abe’s wife Akie was to be the honorary principal of the institution, which was initially dubbed the “Abe Shinzo Commemorative Elementary School.” The 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education, a staple of pre-war emperor-worship fascism, was to supply its educational philosophy.

When the scandal broke, Abe denied any involvement and declared that he would resign from office and from the Diet if either he or his wife were shown to have had any involvement in the site sale or the subsequent cover-up. Between February and April 2017, the Ministry of Finance undertook an extensive secret vetting process, tampering with fourteen documents related to the sale. In particular, it deleted all references to the prime minister and his wife.

The sale of government property at a knock-down price and the subsequent doctoring of public documents were both highly irregular and potentially serious criminal acts. The Ministry of Finance

is generally seen as the power center and arbiter of legitimacy in the Japanese state. Its officials came under intense pressure to cooperate with this gross illegality. One official, fifty-four-year old Akagi Toshio, committed suicide, leaving behind a suicide note that described the nature of that pressure from his superiors.

Abe's Nemesis

As the gap between the official version of events and the reality exposed by whistle-blowers steadily widened, the credibility of Abe's government collapsed. In June 2017, parliamentary opposition parties demanded a special session of the Diet to discuss the affair, invoking Article 53 of the Constitution. The Abe government stonewalled for ninety-eight days, eventually dissolving the Diet to call fresh general elections.

In August 2019, the Osaka Prosecutors Office closed the case against thirty-eight Ministry of Finance bureaucrats, declaring their conduct to have been "from the standpoint of ordinary citizens, outrageous," but without criminal intent. Although the Moritomo miasma endured, Abe managed to evade closer investigation.

Many questions remain, including the extraordinarily low purchase price, the enthusiastic association of Abe's wife with the school project, and — not least — how it was that high officials in twenty-first-century Japan came to adopt the educational philosophy of twentieth-century fascism and militarism.

In March 2020, the affair took a dramatic new turn. Akagi Masako, the widow of the official who had committed suicide in 2017, launched a suit for damages against the Ministry and her husband Toshio's then superior. The exposure of the Akagi note reopened the affair, inspiring fresh demands for a parliamentary investigation. Both Abe and Suga might have more reason to fear this woman, driven by sadness, anger, and a burning desire for justice, than any other person.

Servility With a Nationalist Veneer

When the San Francisco Treaty system was initiated in 1951, there was a certain logic behind Japan's incorporation as a dependent state within that framework. The United States was then the undisputed master of the world and had designed the treaty system to consolidate and preserve that dominance. China was divided and excluded; Korea divided and at war; Japan divided (with Okinawa severed from its jurisdiction) and occupied.

Japanese leaders accepted the apparatus of occupation, bases, and subordination to the interests of the US military as the basis for regional and global security. Nearly seventy years on, it is astonishing that a system conceived along these lines should still be in place.

Japan's post-1945 leaders, from Kishi to Abe, submitted their country to the global superpower on the understanding that US global dominance would continue and would be better for Japan than any alternative. By 2020, however, while Abe had been doing his best to serve, the United States was increasingly becoming an erratic, outlaw state, with a government disregarding its own treaty commitments and belligerently strutting the world stage.

The phenomenon sometimes described as Abe-style "nationalism" actually means placing the Japanese nation's fate in the hands of a patron who is supposedly all-powerful and benevolent, amounting to a form of clientelist pseudo-nationalism. It is also a very high-risk strategy.

Abe's government built new bases, paid more in subventions, and tailored its fiscal and economic policies to US design, even as its patron grew more and more erratic. On May 28, 2019, at the culmination of Donald Trump's four-day visit to Japan, Abe and the US president stood with their wives on the deck of the Japanese helicopter carrier Kaga, declaring the alliance to be more robust than ever. It was in essence an act of ritual submission by Japan's government and armed forces to their commander-in-chief, which called to mind another Japanese surrender, seventy-four years earlier, on the US battleship Missouri.

The paradox of the Abe state has been the way it masked the substance of servility with a nationalist veneer. Within Trump's embrace, Japan has been transformed from a country that could not go to war to one that has the capacity to do so. As Suga takes responsibility for managing the state system that he has helped craft over the best part of a decade, it remains to be seen whether that potential will now be realized.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 09.27.2020:

- <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/suga-yoshihide-abe-shinzo-japan>

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