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How has the coronavirus pandemic affected the civil society in Japan?

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The biggest non-news story of the year in Japan was surely the announcement of the “word of the year” as [san mitsu](#), or the “three Cs” (confined and enclosed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings).

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The civil society is fragile enough already in Japan, with its various restrictions on the process of protesting as well as other hindrances (ranging from police surveillance to negative press coverage or no press coverage at all) all discouraging movements from growing or newcomers from participating. In 2020, COVID-19 added yet another hurdle to the mix, though it has not created a complete vacuum on the streets like in many other countries. That said, the disproportionate presence of baby boomers in protest movements means the risk of coronavirus infection is particularly acute. But with certain measures or approaches in place, the civil society was nonetheless able to carry on over the course of the year.

One popular [online listing](#) of upcoming anti-war and anti-neoliberalism demonstrations remained filled with information on protests, though the schedule was sparser and featured almost no large-scale events. Just to make a very crude numerical comparison, the listing had 157 events of various sizes for July 2019, but just 67 for July this year.

The Yoshihide Suga government’s actions, not least pushing forward with the Go To Travel domestic tourism campaign, and the investigation into alleged misdoings by former prime minister Shinzō Abe’s office have ignited anger, but much of this has had nowhere to go except online as hashtags. With the stakes so high, we might have expected a significant rally over the autumn — but the very nature of target of the indignation (government incompetence in the face of the crisis) makes any major street action illogical at this juncture: to protest this in large numbers would only aggravate the situation.

Surprisingly to some, though, meetings and demonstrations have nonetheless continued, indoors and out, especially after the first wave of infections proved quite moderate. Activists are not blasé by any means, but nor were they panicking. This at times led to conflict with partners based overseas, who could not comprehend any form public gathering given their immediate circumstances.

Social Movements in 2020

What were people protesting? While the news coverage was consumed almost entirely by a single story over the year, a diverse range of movements emerged in response to different issues.

Many protested the government's policies in regard to the pandemic, such as the national state of emergency invoked by Abe in the spring. The poorly made and ineptly distributed "Abenomasks" were also mocked and people posted images online showcasing unorthodox uses of the masks, or even refused to accept delivery or détourned the mass giveaway by forwarding to organisations that instead distributed the masks to the unhoused or socially vulnerable.

The government also incited anger over the [expensive funeral](#) for former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, half of which was paid for by the government, and alleged interference in appointments to the Science Council of Japan.

Black Lives Matter events [attracted thousands](#) across the country in a series of marches, forming part of a growing awareness in Japan of issues related to race and inclusiveness, and given further exposure in the public eye by biracial figures recently prominent in sport. Alleged police brutality against a Kurdish migrant also mobilised several hundred people at antifa-linked protests in Shibuya on 30 May and 6 June.

Gender issues were notable, with the case of the female legislator in Kusatsu who accused the mayor of rape and then found herself ousted from the town assembly prompting [national and international media attention](#) and protests, and a petition calling for improved access to emergency contraceptive pills for women (currently requiring a prescription) effectively rode a wave of anger after the male vice president of the Japan Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists voiced his opinion on television that easier access would make women take contraception less seriously.

The killing in November of a homeless woman in Shibuya ward highlighted the oft-ignored plight of the socially vulnerable, especially in a district of Tokyo hell-bent on redevelopment and gentrification (necessitating the displacement of the unhoused community that made use of Miyashita Park prior to its transformation into a hotel and retail complex). A street protest attracted significant media coverage.

The main groups campaigning against the Tokyo Olympics, which are closely related to advocacy movements for the unhoused in Shibuya and elsewhere, have also kept up their activism, calling for the postponed Games to be cancelled outright, and holding a series of street protests and other events in Tokyo and Osaka in July when the Olympics were scheduled to take place. The activists' transnational partners around the world were unable to travel to Japan to support these events but offered support online.

Jishuku

In general, until the government launched the nation into the Go To Travel campaign, Japan was doing relatively well due to *jishuku*, or self-restraint. At a local level, people, organisations and businesses are good at figuring out workarounds, and calls for self-restraint are familiar from disasters. Over the spring and summer, during the first and second waves of infections, events (including public protests and even just meetings) were cancelled or postponed voluntarily. This has had a devastating effect economically on certain industries like the performing arts and music, but the civil society found ways to carry on.

Changing Formats

These included adopting new formats. Face masks are ubiquitous, of course, though they are already common in Japan, particularly in certain seasons of the year. They were also frequently worn by protesters pre-pandemic (especially those as on the New Left) to conceal identity from police surveillance.

Events have been socially distanced in terms of seating (for indoor events) and standing (at outdoor rallies).

Some groups switched to holding online events when they would have ordinarily have organised in-person ones at venues or on the streets. Known for its boisterous demonstrations with sound trucks, Aequitas, a youth group that campaigns to raise the minimum wage, held an event instead on the DOMMUNE streaming platform.

Many events were held remotely or virtually, or advertise with the option to “attend” by watching the video stream. Publicity information asked people to consider the risks and their health before participating. Organisers have committed to continuing their campaigns, especially regular and long-running ones, but sometimes called on people to tweet their support rather than physically attend.

The well-known anti-nuclear protests in front of the Kantei (the prime minister’s official residence) in central Tokyo have not ceased, for example, but the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes [announced](#) that only around four or five “members of staff” would actually participate in the weekly demonstrations — a restriction that is set to remain in place through the first months of 2021.

Likewise, guest speakers at rallies occasionally opted to do so via pre-recorded video messages or by sending their speeches for a proxy to read out, rather than travel to Tokyo to attend in person. With borders closed, there were no foreign guest speakers, as is usually the case at, say, the annual Dōrō-Chiba international solidarity labour rally in Hibiya. Instead, speeches were sent in advance for locals to read out.

Police Responses

Just as the civil society did not desist completely, neither did the police. Protests and gatherings were monitored, and police did not refrain from searching sites associated with political activism. How does a police raid work in the time of the coronavirus?

In the case of probably the most prominent one in 2020, where Tokyo police in October raided Zenshinsha, the headquarters of radical left group Chūkaku-ha, officers attempted to proceed in the customary (and highly performative) way. The media was told in advance and the news cameras dutifully assembled outside the building. Riot officers lined up in all their gear and handheld metal cutter machines were put to work on the main door. This spectacle of sparks and matériel is staged for the benefit of the media, presenting the police as “being tough” on political radicals, and these remnants of the Long Sixties as “scary” and “antisocial” elements to be avoided at all costs.

This time, the rug was pulled out from underneath the police. An activist promptly emerged and, with a brusque shove, told the officer with the metal cutter to stop the charade. Instead, the residents of Zenshinsha let the police carry out the raid as long as the officers politely filed up to have their temperatures checked before entering.

This was treated by people on Twitter as comic relief — “Look, in Japan, people are so courteous and orderly that they even allow the police to raid their premises if they don’t have a temperature!” — but what was happening here was actually more complex: it was both a genuine matter of safety — especially considering the ages of many of the activists who live at Zenshinsha — and a form of protest against the police, which had launched a raid yet again on a flimsy pretext in an attempt to turn up any materials or evidence for other cases. Just as the activists usually keep the door shut and force police to cut through it, knowing this does not really make much difference but causes the officers an inconvenience, the response here was another tit for tat, another protest at what they regard as police oppression: if you’re gonna raid us, we’ll make you line up and abide by our coronavirus checks.

The Zengakuren youth activist wing of Chūkaku-ha touched on the viral incident in one of its Zenshin Channel videos with the usual self-aware, tongue-in-cheek style it has cultivated of late. Zengakuren’s affiliates had a fairly busy year, organising a series of ambitious sound demos around the country from October to December calling for the abolition of student tuition fees, and holding a rally on the campus of Kyoto University in December protesting the punishment of politically active students. In response to the recent rally, Kyoto University has persisted with its ongoing war of words with Zengakuren, issuing [an official statement](#) that such political activities cause a nuisance on campus and outside the campus entrance, and that students should avoid these events (and the ideology they represent).

Unaffected Events and Movements

Notable among the events that remained little affected by the pandemic were the weekly Shinjuku Station West Gate vigils and other silent “standing” protests. This is because they are small enough not to pose much risk of infection or intermingling in the first place, and have always made a point of continuing to assemble in their modest, unspectacular ways regardless of the weather or season.

More worrisome in terms of infection risk, though, were the events attended by large numbers of people where no masks or social distancing were in evidence. The Kumano Dormitory Festival’s now well-established clock tower roof occupation antics took place on 27 November amidst chaotic and crowded scenes on the campus of Kyoto University, which eventually resulted in police being called in (due primarily to the scuffles between staff and the building-scaling pranksters, rather than breaches to social distancing guidelines per se).

Backlash and Coronavirus Hoax Protests

Like elsewhere, Japan saw a backlash to the strictures imposed by the pandemic, most obviously in the protests by people calling the coronavirus a hoax. Always thinly attended, the demonstrations nonetheless took place in highly visible places like Shibuya and Shinjuku. A “cluster festival”, led by failed Tokyo gubernatorial election candidate Masayuki Hiratsuka, was held on 9 August with speeches for more than three hours outside Shibuya Station, culminating with a stunt in which several dozen participants “hijacked” the Yamanote Line by riding the whole loop without masks on and t-shirts with messages opposed to social distancing. Another such activist was arrested this month for trespassing when demonstrating outside the headquarters of a medical association.

With the pandemic expected to roll into 2021, we can anticipate more examples of anti-vaxxer, anti-mask and coronavirus “hoax” discourse and protests. While many will disregard such people as merely peddling conspiracy theories, they — along with the other protest movements that are

continuing — are ultimately signs that COVID-19 won't spell the end for the civil society in Japan.

William Andrews

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