

Japan: The Hashimoto Controversy, chauvinism and the rise the reactionary right

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The rise of Japan's reactionary right suggests that the country has yet to come to terms with its actions in World War II.

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The words were so brazen that they have created a firestorm globally. Characterized as “outspoken” and “brash” [1] in the international media, Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto has claimed that “comfort women”—the thousands of Asian women who were forced to serve as prostitutes during the Second World War—were “necessary” for the morale of Japanese troops.

“Anyone can understand that the system of comfort women was necessary to provide respite for a group of high-strung, rough and tumble crowd of men braving their lives under a storm of bullets,” Hashimoto said, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Although the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and other political figures quickly distanced themselves from Hashimoto's remarks, Hashimoto was simply putting into words what many Japanese elites—and many in the Japanese public more broadly—believe to be true.

The Osaka mayor's remarks came in the wake of another scandal: a mass visit in April by some 170 sitting legislators and members of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet to the Yasukuni Shrine [2], the home of Japan's war dead, which includes among its honorees 14 convicted war criminals. Many have condemned the ritual as a sign of the country's unrepentant attitude for its conduct during World War II.

Failure to Confront the Past

Japan's experience contrasts with that of Germany, where society was subjected to a process of “denazification,” the centerpiece of which involved embedding Nazi Germany's responsibility for the war and its unspeakable atrocities, including the genocide inflicted on the Jewish people, in the national consciousness.

In Japan, in contrast, Washington played a role in fostering historical amnesia. Instead of dethroning the emperor after the Japanese defeat, the United States kept Hirohito in power for purposes of political stability. The main symbol of Japan's imperial aspirations was thus exempted from retribution, and the meaning of that gesture was not lost on the Japanese.

Moreover, the window of opportunity that saw a flurry of U.S.-imposed reforms destroy the old imperial army and reduce the power of the bureaucratic and economic elites closed with the onset of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Seeing the defeated Japanese elite as an ally against Communism, and needing a revived Japanese industry as a base for war materiel production, the United States allowed the rehabilitation of key figures in the Japanese war machine. That process climaxed in 1957, when Nobusuke Kishi, a top official in the Manchurian puppet regime and later wartime Japan's minister of trade and industry, became prime minister. This would have been the equivalent of Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's surviving economic henchman, becoming head of post-war Germany.

Reemergence of Chauvinism

Owing to wartime suffering, pacifism has long been a widespread sentiment in Japan. But instead of building on it to get the nation to accept responsibility for its wartime crimes and atrocities, elites promoted rapid economic growth as an alternative to national soul searching—indeed, as an antidote to it, given the willing participation of almost the whole society in imperial aggression.

Conservatives committed to maintaining Japan's subordinate status to Washington have dominated the country's politics for the last six decades. But with the two-decade-long recession that the country entered in the 1990s—and the economic ascent of China, which Japan's elites see as their mortal rival—political and ideological trends in Japan have become more fluid. Right-wing elements that seek to restore Japan's imperial glory have taken advantage of the nation's lack of internalization of war guilt and responsibility for war crimes to become a political force. Meanwhile, the left, which has championed pacifism and national responsibility for war crimes, has become more and more marginal. The view that the comfort women were a myth and that the 1937 Rape of Nanking, which involved the massacre of thousands of Chinese civilians, never happened, has gained widespread popularity.

Far-right politicians such as Hashimoto and former Tokyo governor and nationalist ideologue Shintaro Ishihara have successfully fished in these troubled waters. In a move calculated to inflame relations with China, Ishihara proposed that the Tokyo city government buy the disputed Senkaku Islands. Meanwhile, Hashimoto played on the Japanese public's frustration over the government's failure to address the radioactive and political fallout from the 2011 tsunami by advocating a "dictatorship." Ishihara has advocated a nuclear-armed Japan, while Hashimoto proposes "simulating" possession of nuclear weapons while the parliament is debating whether or not to go nuclear.

Japan Moves Right

In the general elections of December 2012, Hashimoto and Ishihara's party, the Japan Restoration Party, became the country's second-largest opposition party. The conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rode back to power, this time with an avowed chauvinist, Shinzo Abe, becoming prime minister.

Abe, who was in power briefly in 2006-2007, shares with Hashimoto and Ishihara the desire to delete Article 9—the clause that outlaws war as an instrument of foreign policy—from the Japanese constitution. According to Australian analyst Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Though Abe's comments on the nuclear weapons issue have been more circumspect than Ishihara's and Hashimoto's, he has expressed the view that the development of 'small' nuclear weapons would be permissible even

under Japan's present constitution."

With the LDP and the Japan Restoration Party competing for the growing right-wing vote, the center of gravity of Japanese politics is moving right. In such a volatile context, one can only expect more incendiary statements from figures like Hashimoto as they go about their work of revising interpretations of the Japanese past in order to get to a future featuring an aggressively assertive Japan. With the previous generations' failure to come to terms with their nation's checkered past, many Japanese unsettled by contemporary conditions marked by permanent recession and demoralization now find that promised future increasingly seductive.

Walden Bello

P.S.

* Foreign Policy in Focus. May 22, 2013:

http://fpif.org/the_hashimoto_controversy_and_japans_failure_to_come_to_terms_with_its_past/

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Footnotes

[1] <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/japanese-mayor-wartime-sex-slaves-were-necessary>

[2] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-yasukuni-idUSBRE93L03120130422>