

Photo: Kyodo News



*Noriko Sakai, a 38-year-old pop diva-turned actress indicted for stimulant possession and use, wipes off tears during a press conference in Tokyo after her release on bail on Sept. 17, 2009.*

## Showbiz Drug Abuse Fades Election Reporting

By Masakazu HOSODA

It is certain that the summer of 2009 will be recorded in Japan's political chronology in bold letters as a historic one when a landmark national election drastically changed the nation's political landscape that had lasted for more than 50 years since the end of World War II.

However, for members of the general public who obtain much of their daily information from television (mostly from talk shows and news programs of commercial networks rather than public-funded NHK), this summer will be remembered as one that saw a spate of drug addiction scandals in show business. (The number of people recalling this summer like this is perhaps much greater than readers of this column would imagine.)

Involved in the sleaze were 38-year-old actress/singer Noriko Sakai (her profession is known as "talent" in Japan) and 31-year-old popular actor Manabu Oshio. Sakai was indicted on a charge of violating the Stimulant Drug Control Law, while Oshio was charged with having taken the drug MDMA, better known as the illegal recreational drug Ecstasy, in violation of the Narcotics and Psychotropics Control Law.

Being neither a jurist nor a crime reporter, I shall refrain from stating which of the two cases is more heinous. Yet, I gather from what I have read in news reports that not a few people felt more disgusted toward Oshio's behavior: he took MDMA at a plush condominium and made a report to police about his unconscious 30-year-old girlfriend about three hours after he noticed something went wrong with her (confirmed dead later).

But TV gossip shows and tabloid newspapers focused much more on the Sakai case. The pop idol-turned actress cut a brilliant figure in the showbiz world for many years and was indeed a politically correct personality, singing with sign language and appearing in an enlightening film sponsored by judicial authorities. So, when she suddenly went missing shortly after her husband, a self-proclaimed professional surfer, was

arrested on suspicion of possessing a stimulant drug, it became a scandal serious enough to produce an adrenaline rush for entertainment reporters.

When I learned of her disappearance, I was concerned that Sakai, then known as an honest housewife-cum-entertainer, despaired of life so much after her husband's arrest that she might commit suicide. The president of an entertainment company to which she belonged held a televised press conference and urged her to contact him. The footage of his appeal to her was broadcast every day.

As I was watching a noon TV news program one day, I saw a news crawl on the screen reporting that Sakai herself was arrested. I think I was not the only person to utter a voice of surprise at the report because Sakai, portrayed as a miserable victim of her husband's drug abuse, suddenly became a criminal suspect who abandoned her husband and son in order to escape the police dragnet.

Subsequent incidents, such as her surrender to police, arrest, detention and release on bail, stirred up a frenzy of media attention. TV programs and weekly magazines continued to expose her background, her family relations and recent behavior of the couple. The thoroughness of the reporting was to such an extent as to eclipse even a car chase between Oshio and media people that took place after he was released on bail.

Scandals, which serve as the strongest stimulant of showbiz news, thus dominated TV screens in Japan throughout August. Serious reporting on what to choose for the nation's future was left out in the cold. It would be meaningless to discuss the morality of such TV reporting because it reflected the realities of Japan's mass information society.

Incidentally, the major daily Asahi Shimbun carried in its September 11 morning edition an interesting report with the headline "Drug Affairs Dampen TV Election Reports: Election News Hours Reduced by Half."

A study by media researchers showed that the broadcasting time for the drug cases in one week in early August totaled about 55 hours, three times more than the 18 hours for election reports. Political analysts say that if there had been more TV reports on the general election, the victorious Democratic Party of Japan may have won even more votes. In other words, the Liberal Democratic Party averted a more disastrous beating thanks to the drug scandals.

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