

# Citizens or Residents?

By Nakano Osamu



Photo: Kyodo News Service

Jubilant as opponents celebrate victory: The majority were not in favor of construction of a U.S. heliport

Residents of Nago city in Okinawa voted in a plebiscite on Dec. 22 last year to oppose a government proposal to construct a United States military heliport off the eastern coast of the town. The offshore facility would replace a heliport at the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station, which is located in the middle of an urbanized area in central Okinawa. The rape of a young girl by U.S. servicemen living on the base prompted local residents to demand its removal, and the government promised to relocate it on condition that an alternate site could be found.

The plebiscite results were not binding, and there were the pros and cons of whether or not the government should respect the opinion of the Nago

residents. But Mayor Higa Tetsuya suddenly resigned after expressing his intention to accept the government proposal in exchange for a central government package of measures to develop the local economy. His decision seemed incomprehensible, but is convincing enough if the situation in Okinawa is taken into account.

In a subsequent mayoral election, Kishimoto Tateo, a former deputy mayor who favored the heliport construction, beat his rival who opposed the project. Kishimoto won the victory despite Okinawa Governor Ota Masahide's rejection of the heliport relocation plan. In the election, Nago residents faced a choice of sticking to a time-honored Okinawa credo against the bases or yielding to the temptation

of central government aid which would promise future prosperity.

Contradictions over the Nago heliport issue, with residents voting "No" in the plebiscite and "Yes" in the mayoral election, reflected the delicate interaction of various events that took place from the time of the rape incident to the mayoral election.

In a brief period of one month, residents of Nago showed ambivalence about the heliport construction. Politicians tend to say that respect of residents (or people) takes precedence in democracy. But does a decision by residents, positive or negative, conform to the principle of democracy? At the moment, no logical decision can be made on the level of Nago city.

This was not the first time in the country that residents of a municipality had made different decisions in a short

period of time. There are a large number of such precedents over development projects. It is conventional wisdom for residents of a community to deftly express approval or objection at different times in order to lift the amount of compensation they will receive in connection with construction of a dam, railway, airport or nuclear plant. Their logic is that if it is difficult to override a government decision at all, they might as well seek as high an amount of compensation as possible. In a way, this logic is convincing.

But the scope and site of the project as well as the amount of compensation are mostly decided in delicate backstage deals between representatives of local residents and local administration, details of which are seldom revealed.



The process leading to the decision is not democratic, because it is carried out behind the scenes.

For a society shackled by traditional customs and by complicated interests, such a process may be, or at least used to be, better if future regional consolidation and the individual interests of the residents are taken into account.

However, things are different in Okinawa, which is dogged by military base problems. At a time when Japan is implementing political and administrative reforms, there are increasing voices against the anachronistic backstage decision-making process. Backstage deals between the authorities on one hand and regional bosses and fixers on the other are unacceptable to the people of Okinawa. This is probably one reason why the heliport issue was put to a plebiscite in Nago.

The results of the Nago plebiscite, former Mayor Higa's acceptance of the heliport plan, his sudden resignation and a pro-heliport candidate's victory in the mayoral election have validated both approval of and objection to the heliport relocation project. Both opponents and supporters of the project will be bound by the results of the plebiscite and of the election, and so they will find it impossible to make a compromise by the traditional decision-making approach. They cannot make a decision either way. It is taken for granted that the central government has struck a deal with Washington over the return of Futenma Air Station and the construction of an alternate heliport off Nago. The government will undoubtedly pressure Okinawa Prefecture and Nago city into accepting the heliport relocation plan in exchange for government aid to develop the local economy. On the other hand, opponents, armed with the results of the plebiscite, will continue the anti-heliport campaign and urge prefectural and city leaders to commit themselves to opposing the project. What decision will be made on the issue, then? I am very interested in how Nago residents, who broke away from traditional approaches, will make their final decision.

Heliport opponents won the plebiscite

and supporters won the mayoral election, both by narrow margins. This indicates that only a few Nago people voted "no" in the plebiscite and then "yes" in the mayoral election; that is, most people did not shift their stance in the two votes. In all likelihood, the different outcomes resulted from different voter turnouts.

Some Nago residents may have stayed away from both the plebiscite and the mayoral election. Some others may have voted in one or the other. Others still may have voted in consideration of their ties with candidates or their supporters. However, the motivations of voters, based on personal matters, are seldom taken into account in the assessment of the voting results or in the actual political process. In other words, the will of the relative majority, regardless of the margin of victory, is regarded as the will of Nago residents. It may be inevitable, and understandable, for political parties and their affiliate organizations and groups to interpret the results to their own advantage. But from objective and academic viewpoints, or from the viewpoints of social science, things are different, because the people of Nago opted for a decision-making approach different from the traditional approach, which precludes any decision.

Even though an entity called "citizens" (the composite concept "citizens" must be used for "residents" in social science) exists in Nago, it is difficult to determine the substance and content of the will of Nago residents in the results of the recent votes. If the two outcomes were not exceptions, then can the will of all the residents of a community be said to exist? Or, is it reasonable to suppose the existence of an entity called "residents?" Or, does reality incorporating the composite concepts "residents" or "citizens" really exist? These matters, which are all related to each other, emerged from the recent events in Okinawa. Further, these events pose a question: Whether the people who cast different votes in the plebiscite and mayoral election almost at the same time are "citizens" or "residents?" Or is it right to continue to

interpret the category (or paradigm) "citizens" or "residents" in the same light?

Newspapers, TV stations and other mass media generally gave a favorable and positive evaluation to the results of the Nago plebiscite. They regarded Nago townspeople's rejection of the heliport relocation project as showing growth and maturity of democracy in Japan and contended that whether the administrative authorities would respect the plebiscite would show whether democracy is taking hold in the country. None of the media considered the very same residents' support of the project supporter in the mayoral election as indicating growth and maturity of democracy. They only anticipated confusion as a result of the residents' ambivalent voting patterns. They covered the election as if they felt a heliport supporter's victory in the election resulted from different voting behavior by entirely different voters. It is not surprising that the Japanese mass media, which had taken a negative view of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and U.S. military bases, evaluated positively the outcome of the plebiscite and responded negatively to that of the mayoral election.

Now that community residents can express their wishes through various channels and in various forms, the contradictory results in the Okinawa votes are no longer exceptional, and I anticipate that similar cases will occur regularly in the future. The mass media and school teachers have long insisted that it is good and right for people to honestly do what they want to. And, such an opinion has been accepted socially. When people are asked what they think of and are going to do about something, few would answer rationally on the basis of coherent logic. Most of them would answer emotionally whether they like it or not, or whether they are favorably impressed with it or not. They do so because they were taught it is right to do so. Such a trend is apparently gaining momentum.

Nago residents rejected the heliport construction project in the plebiscite because they feared that the project



would destroy the ecological system of the ocean, which was bad. On the other hand, they elected a heliport project proponent as mayor because they feared that they could possibly see government development assistance suspended, which was also bad. They put aside the issues of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and U.S. military bases in Okinawa. The mass media should have considered the changes in the people's frame of mind, that is changes in the substance of "citizens" or "residents," that have taken place over the past 20 years.

I had a similar impression of the results of a plebiscite held in Maki town, Niigata Prefecture, in August 1996, as to the advisability of building a nuclear plant. With 88% of town residents turning out in the vote, 60% said "no" to the project. As was the case with Nago, most of the mass media rated highly the holding of the plebiscite in Maki as a sign of the maturity of democracy in Japan, partly because people voted against the nuclear plant. I wonder if the mass media would have responded similarly if people had instead voted for the nuclear plant. Some of the media took exception to allowing residents of a specific community to decide on an important national issue. However, the mass media as well as commentators and academics were overwhelmingly favorable to the plebiscite and its results.

Those who have advocated democracy as a principle, ideologically affirm democratic processes, and consequently argue for respect of minority opinions and the necessity of direct voting are forgiven for giving high ratings to a plebiscite. This raises the question of whether or not it is right to put important national policy at the mercy of the whim of local residents. However, if they insist on respect for minority opinions, they must explain what they are going to do about the minority group which voted for the nuclear plant. Those who evaluated the results of the Maki town plebiscite favorably did not provide a convincing explanation. What I am concerned about is that most Maki

people voted against the nuclear plant because they did not like nuclear plants or wanted nuclear plants built somewhere else. They failed to make a reasonable judgment on the long-term energy demand-supply situation, the country's energy policy, the role of nuclear plants, the sites where nuclear plants are built, safety management of nuclear plants, etc. I am not criticizing residents for having made their judgment emotionally. I am only saying that it is a matter of course that when decision-making by residents of a community turns out that way, these residents cannot make rational judgments, and so there is a need to redefine "citizens" or "residents" who make judgments. Before expressing support for the maturity of democracy, critics, academics and the mass media should fully grasp the changes of "citizens" and "residents."

We will increasingly face cases in which residents of a region will counter or resist government plans in a plebiscite, regardless of its advisability. In such instances, residents will be influenced by emotion and individual interests, and they will express their will in a straightforward manner. Such a trend has nothing to do with the maturity of democracy. It is neither a matter of political and ethical right or wrong, nor a matter of good or evil.

To put it very simply, it will be theoretically possible for just one person to revolt against the government in an emotional way. It boils down to the question of how best a group of people with different interests (from the international community to a regional community) can make a decision on a matter which concerns all

members of the group.

Few politicians or bureaucrats, if any, would oppose administrative reform itself. At least, they are not courageous enough to openly express objection to administrative reform. However, they raise vehement objections to a restructuring of the ministries they are directly or indirectly involved with. They are in favor of reform as a matter of generality but are against it when it comes to specifics. Administrative reform will never materialize if all individual opinions are to be taken into account.

Proposals for curtailing emissions of carbon dioxide to prevent greenhouse



*The final action: People at Makimachi protest with flags stating "Vote Not In Favor"*

Photo: Kyodo News Service



effects are supported by all countries. However, certain industries in certain countries are opposed to restrictions. Reductions in carbon dioxide emissions require qualitative changes in the lifestyle of people of industrialized countries. But, as I see it, people of industrialized countries find such changes extremely difficult and impossible to bring about.

Few would oppose promotion of broader welfare in regional communities. But proposals for the construction of waste disposal dumps, construction of roads, or expansion of parking lots promptly trigger protest campaigns among residents of the communities involved. Lately, even the construction of schools, baby nursing facilities and welfare facilities for the elderly have run into objections.

As mentioned earlier, regional communities have accepted various facilities in exchange for maximum compensation through "generality yes, specifics no" tactics. Particularly since the 1960s, these tactics, adopted by regional communities in accepting infrastructure improvement projects related to industries, welfare and life, played a certain role in improving regional infrastructure. These appear to be the tactics used recently by Maki and Nago. When regional communities accept national projects in the future, they too will likely adopt the same tactics. Are people who support such tactics "citizens" or "residents?" In this context, we must also consider diversification and relativization of values, which are the order of the day. No value can be almighty. It is impossible for all the members of a community to accept a certain value as theirs. Therefore, we cannot condemn persons (and their judgment) who object a welfare facility which, if viewed objectively or by a third person, will contribute to the welfare of the community.

Relativization of freedom, individualism and values is fine in itself. But it is not so when it comes to politics. Due partly to a keep-up-with-the-Joneses mentality, as many as 14 political parties are now represented in the Diet (parliament). If factions within the rul-



*A vote by citizens, or a vote by residents, or simply following the crowd?: The reason for the plebiscite and its outcome may be open to question*

ing Liberal Democratic Party are counted, political groups far outnumber that figure. It is not surprising that because political parties are formed to reflect unlimitedly subdividable individual interests, their number totals so many. There can be any number of political groups, but the current political subdivision hardly makes it possible to decide and implement policies which conform to the welfare of all people.

Such a situation is the logical outcome of modernization and it is too late to buck the trend. We must, therefore, devise a system whereby necessary decisions can be made effectively in such circumstances. In so doing, we will abandon the illusion of nurturing "citizens endowed with reason."

Not a few pundits attribute Japan's involvement and defeat in World War II to its failure to nurture citizens endowed with reason. When Japan made a fresh start with modernization from scratch after the war, one of the

most pressing tasks was to formulate "citizens" and a "civic society."

Japan's modernization did incorporate, to a certain degree, a vector of formulating "citizens" and a "civic society." But the vector of nurturing "residents" and affirming their feelings, thoughts and behavior outweighed the vector of formulating "citizens" and a "civic society."

"Society" initially meant a "civic society," in which a shared value, solidarity and structural integration are essential. If so, a "residents' society" is significantly different from what is supposed to be "society." A grouping of people called a "residents' society" may belong to a category different from "traditional society." □

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