

## Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (Final Part)

# The Significance of the Year 1999 in Contemporary Japanese History

By Nakano Osamu

## 1. Significance of Planned Reduction in Number of Parliamentary Seats

The 1999 regular Diet session has come to an end after approving a string of bills the government regarded as "very important." Toward the closing of the session in late July, opposition parties even resorted to "ox walk" tactics when casting ballots on these bills in the House of Councilors (the upper house) to block their passage. It was the first time in seven years that opposition parties had used such delaying tactics in the Japanese parliament.

Provoked by the opposition move, a male member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party even shouted a sexually harassing remark at a female opposition speaker delivering a lengthy speech against the bills.

It can be said, however, that the regular Diet session, in a way, signified a return to the familiar Japanese parliamentary process. Opposition parties resorted to delaying tactics, hoping to have the bills scrapped by preventing a vote in the final hours of the session, even though the passage was a foregone conclusion. The ruling coalition fought back by forcibly curtailing deliberations with the opposition then resorting to last-minute resistance with "ox walks."

Needless to say, such behavior at the Diet, the country's highest legislative body, was ugly, since it represented an awful deviation from the public image of parliament, which is supposed to abide by reason and words, and the principle and rule of democracy.



Handing over a bill to reduce the number of seats in the House of Representatives

Photo: The Liberal Party

Politics never fails to serve up an interesting or appalling spectacle in any country, regardless of the degree of maturity of its democracy, though it still may not be as bad as the Japanese farce. While Japanese politics is not necessarily outstandingly backward in the world, the parliamentary fuss in the closing days of the regular session disgusted me. It seems that nothing has changed so little since the end of World War II in Japan as the Diet.

The "important bills" passed by the Diet are the Organized Crime Countermeasure Bill, which authorizes wiretapping in investigations into organized crime; an amendment to the Basic Resident Registers Bill, which assigns a 10-digit number to all

Japanese nationals; and the National Flag and Anthem Bill, which legally recognized the Hinomaru (Rising Sun) as Japan's national flag and "Kimigayo" as its national anthem. Another controversial bill, the National Civil Service Ethics Law, though not categorized as "important," was also passed by the Diet.

I was filled with deep emotion as I observed the passage of the four bills in such a short period of time in 1999. The passage of the four bills, it seems to me, symbolized Japan's solution and liquidation of its 20th century problems in one way or another.

The passage of the four bills was directly preconditioned by an alliance among the Liberal Democratic Party,

its coalition partner the Liberal Party and the No.2 opposition New Komeito.

The proposed three-way coalition among the parties, which have different ideals and policies, is being criticized by various quarters. There seemed to be various factors that prompted the tripartite alliance. The alliance came about as a means for some to remain in power, for others to win the next general election, and for still some individual politicians to become cabinet ministers. Some others may have wanted to seize initiatives in the current complicated political situations that have resulted from the tripartite alliance.

In other words, the three parties had no common political ideal in passing the four bills. It is even doubtful whether they had any political ideals at all.

Whether or not each of the three parties had its own motives to pass the four bills, the solution and liquidation of Japan's 20th century problems through their alliance is of no small historical significance. In other words, the three political parties played important roles in Japan's contemporary history at the turn of the century. Whether what they did was right or wrong is another question.

How did the passage of the four bills liquidate Japan's 20th century problems? What meaning does it have? What perspective does it offer for the future?

As this article is the last part of a two-year series, I found it adequate to take up this issue as the last theme.

But before discussing this issue, I would like to briefly discuss a bill proposed by the Liberal Party for reducing the number of House of Representatives (lower house) seats allocated through proportional representation. The Liberal Party, most members of which were elected from single-seat districts, was the first to propose cuts in the number of such seats on the grounds that proportional representation has structural defects and proposed reductions in the number of seats in the lower chamber cannot be

implemented if proportional representation is left intact. The Liberal Party proposal has met stiff opposition from the New Komeito, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, most members of which were elected from proportional representation districts.

Japan is facing a serious problem of escalating social burdens in the 21st century due to the aging of society, a decrease in the number of children, a sharp increase in welfare costs, and cultural maturity.

This problem is too serious to be solved by such simple measures as reductions in defense spending, curbing of public works and saving of administration costs. To put it straight, there will be no option other than raising the social burdens borne by each citizen. Furthermore, we have to take note of the nation's deteriorating financial situation resulting from the massive pump-priming measures implemented over the past few years. This malaise is the most serious issue for the nation, though it will take time before it comes to the surface. In other words, significant national burdens await Japan in the 21st century, burdens as high as in Scandinavian countries or maybe even higher.

Even now, people grumble about high taxes, and political parties can garner votes in elections by pledging tax cuts. How will voters react to the unavoidable rise in social burdens?

The Liberal Party, most members of which are realists, finds it inevitable early in the 21st century to raise people's burdens to the highest level in modern history. But how will the government finance the exorbitant costs and persuade people to accept such burdens? It seems that the Liberal Party's proposal to cut the number of parliamentary seats is conceived as a small but reliable strategic gambit in preparation for higher burdens. Needless to say, reductions in the number of parliamentary seats alone will not be enough. People will find increases in their burdens unavoidable to a certain

extent.

But, in order to keep their burdens within acceptable levels, the government and the Diet will have to undertake thorough restructuring measures, not merely limited to numerical reductions. It may be inevitable even to see state and local finances go bust and welfare projects partially suspended. It is, therefore, not appropriate to criticize outright the motive of the Liberal Party's proposal for reducing the number of parliamentary seats. The issue of increasing national burdens far outweighs the national anthem, the national flag, resident registers and wiretapping in that it will predestine Japan's 21st century history. I fail to understand those people who oppose reductions in the number of parliamentary seats yet are incapable of offering realistically effective and feasible policies for dealing with higher burdens.

Behind the Liberal Party's proposal for reducing parliamentary seats lie its vulgar motives, such as pursuit of partisan interests and initiatives in the coalition government. Even so, the proposal has great significance regardless of its motive, whether or not party members are conscious of that significance. It is particularly worth noting that the Liberal Party submitted the proposal to its archrival the Liberal Democratic Party, as a condition for forming a coalition toward the end of the 20th century. The coalition between the two parties has brought about other important results — parliamentary approval of a set of bills implementing the new defense cooperation guidelines and the establishment of a council to review the 52-year-old Constitution. The establishment of the Constitution Study Council is important in the sense that it has finally freed Japan from one of its most rigid postwar national taboos. Some people express anxiety over the formation of a conservative grand coalition and what is emerging from the coalition. On the other hand, there are people who view such a political move as a sign

that Japan is finally becoming a "normal" country.

The logical consequence of reductions of parliamentary seats will definitely be higher taxation, though it may take the form of indirect tax. While most people would theoretically acknowledge the necessity of such higher taxation as a reason, few would actually support it. But they will be forgiven, because Japanese are not the only people in the world who seek high welfare levels but resist correspondingly high burdens.

The coalition between the Liberal Democrats and the Liberals has sought in some way a liquidation of what Japan achieved in the 20th century or after the end of World War II to prepare Japan for the start of the 21st century. The significance of the coalition lies here. The coalition, occurring toward the close of the 20th century, is quite symbolic in this regard.

## 2. Effect of Public Service Ethics Law

Now I refer to the Basic Residence Registers Law.

Before matters related to the consumption tax and other indirect taxes surfaced, the mass media and opposition parties seized on the issue of the unfairness of taxation, particularly different calculation formulas, unequal deductions and varying formulas of reporting by accountants for different professions. The media use the phrase "100-50-30," meaning that while salary earners have all of their income subject to taxation, self-employed persons have only 50% to 30% of their earnings taxed.

For example, self-employed persons can have laundry costs authorized as necessary expenses, but salary earners cannot. If salary earners were allowed to claim necessary expenses just like self-employed persons do, their taxable incomes would drastically fall, to say nothing of their tax payments. Such unfairness in taxation has been talked about for more than 30 years but has remained uncorrected. During this period,



*The coalition between the Liberal Democrats and the Liberals is quite symbolic*

salary earners have had massive sums of income unfairly usurped in taxation.

In developed countries with market economies, advanced civilizations and priority placed on human rights and privacy, tax evasion through monetary manipulation and inequality in direct taxation are unavoidable. In Japan, opposition parties oppose to indirect taxation and the consumption tax, and take a dim view of consumption taxes proposed to make tax burdens fairer. So, they have stopped talking about unfairness in taxation. They were in fact hostile to salary earners. The rapid downfall of the Social Democratic Party, once a powerful presence in the parliament, is not

surprising.

The Basic Resident Registers would not only save administrative costs but also help to reduce tax evasion through monetary manipulation though it may not completely eliminate it. As in the past, the resident registers are criticized as an attempt by the government to collectively control people's lives and privacy.

Freedom and equality, which are values highly regarded in modern times, have brought about legal tax evasion and tax inequality. In other words, taxes are not collected fairly and justly in a free and equal society. Accordingly, we have two alternatives: accept tax evasion and injustice (inequality) in order to

protect freedom and equality, or accept control to lessen injustice and inequality. In a modern society, in which free competition, power and the unlimited pursuit of private interests are permitted, injustice and inequality are produced and multiply. We can no longer look to private conscience to restrain such injustice and inequality. Rather, we would better think that such conscience no longer functions in our society. Such evils as injustice and inequality can be eased or eliminated only through legal restrictions or a social system transcending individual intention, conscience, thought or action. Residence registers would be one such damper.

It seems to me that such injustice and inequality are the natural consequence of society's collective ego, which has steadily inflated in modern times.

Who would venture to have the government intervene? An administration is tasked with offering services to people. Yet, it is undeniable that power resides in the government and bureaucrats have a piece of it. It is without doubt that power corrupts. In modern times, we looked to individual conscience to play the role of forestalling this corruption. But, as I have already mentioned, we can no longer expect individual conscience to play such a role.

Legal procedures for preventing corruption were established long ago. But Japan is a society where monetary donations and gifts are a part of daily life. Once this social custom is combined with the government's daily use and abuse of power (such as licensing), injustice and inequality are taken for granted. Legal restraints have had little effect.

All would be well if injustice and inequality harmed no one. But when, for instance, public funds were infused into financial institutions during the recession that followed the burst of the asset-inflated "bubble" economy, injustice and inequality contributed to exacerbating the crisis. Indeed, several banks went bankrupt

even after the infusion of public funds, quite an incomprehensible phenomenon.

If restraints through conscience have no effect, the current virtual absence of public restraints cannot be left as it is. This is why the Public Service Ethics Law was introduced. Strictly speaking, ethics is a norm which can neither be expressed in words nor incorporated into law. Therefore, an ethics law is self-contradictory. It may be a futile exercise to find fault with a law already enacted. Anyway, the ethics question has become so serious that such a law had to be enacted. However, anyone who has visited a government office, will hardly believe that the mere introduction of an ethics law will prompt bureaucrats to change their stance and offer more friendly and fairer services.

### 3. National Flag, National Anthem and the Global Standard

La Marseillaise, the familiar French national anthem, was originally a military song sung by revolutionary forces during the French Revolution. Even in France, some people regard La Marseillaise as too bloody to be a national anthem.

In the modern world, there are people in any country who are cynical about expressing allegiance to their country via a national flag and anthem. But even those people would respond in a retaliatory way to a foreigner who affronted their national anthem or flag. They would no longer recognize him as a member of the international community. They would engage in heated debates on the pros and cons of allegiance to the national flag and anthem in their own country, and would never belittle their national anthem or flag before foreigners. Such behavior is what may be called a "global standard." We do not have to observe this global standard all the time. Since the Meiji era, Japanese intellectuals have prided themselves on criticizing their country. But when Japanese participate in the international community, they have no

alternative but to observe the global standard, whether in politics, economics, art, entertainment or sports. If they are unwilling to act that way, they have no choice but to desist from such activities. When they act in the international community, they cannot pretend that they are ignorant of the global standard.

Postwar Japan is a complete reversal of what it was before the war. Japanese people have repeatedly shown allergic reactions to the national anthem and flag — an abnormal deviation from the global norm. In various international events, Japanese participants were criticized for failing to behave in compliance with the international norm in regard to national anthems and flags. Paradoxically, Japanese of the prewar and wartime generations, who fought in the war, are more global-minded than their compatriots of the postwar generation as far as national anthems and flags are concerned.

Japanese conservatives have tried to correct the picture since the 1960s, only to meet stiff resistance from "progressive" forces who took advantage of the general public's allergic reaction. In postwar Japan, the words "conservatives" and "renovationists" were not clearly defined. Their meaning was vague.

But the suicide in February this year of the principal of a senior high school in Hiroshima Prefecture, caught in the middle of a conflict between the two camps on the national anthem issue, prompted the conservative forces to launch a counter-offensive. They hit upon the idea of settling the issue legally and took advantage of the formation of the alliance among the Liberal Democratic, Liberal and New Komeito parties to ram the national anthem-flag bill through parliament.

My impression is that about half of the people are satisfied with the legal definition of the national anthem and flag, feeling that Japan has finally become a normal country after half a century of abnormality. The

remaining half, it seems, are those still allergic to the national anthem and flag, and their associates. But those people at the same time insist on Japan's globalization. If they want Japan to be globalized, they must recognize the structure of the international community, know international rules, understand the meaning of respecting foreign countries with different systems and cultures, and think about the meaning of national anthems and flags which symbolize countries; and learn to think and behave accordingly.

Education in a broad sense is the only means to develop such thinking and behavior. It may be too hasty to believe that the enactment of the national anthem and flag law will have a positive effect on such education. How shall we develop such thinking and behavior among students and children who were brought up in the postwar spiritual and intellectual climate? Can schools and teachers hard pressed to deal with school disorder resulting from disobedience and absenteeism really conduct such education?

I despair over this state of affairs. Only a fundamental change in the education system will make this possible. However, the national anthem and flag issue gave rise to a heated controversy in the close of the 20th century in a cynical country which has brought up an enormous number of people who are critical of nationalism yet ignorant of international rules. In this connection, the national anthem and flag issue was meaningful. I am, however, not so optimistic as to believe that Japan has finally become a normal country.

Following the string of terrorist crimes committed by the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult, Japan was involved in an anachronistic debate on whether to outlaw the cult under the



*Hinomaru, the national flag*

Antisubversive Activities Law. The Public Security Commission finally decided not to invoke the law on the grounds that there was not enough evidence supporting the allegation that the cult would resort to terrorism again in the future. The commission's decision was totally beside the point.

As expected, the cult has again caused various incidents over the past several years in various parts of the country. Not a few Western countries regarded the organized terrorist activities committed by the Aum Shinrikyo cult as a new type of terrorism and seriously considered various countermeasures. So, the legalization of wiretapping for investigations into organized crime is in conformity with the international norm. Public anxiety over possible abuse of the law by the police is understandable to a certain extent because the police tend to resort to anachronistic means. But the opposition to police wiretapping has become rather too hysterical, arising

from the allergic reaction I mentioned above.

As was the case with the Aum cult, various murders and other serious crimes have taken place over the past few years due to excessive protection of freedom and human rights. It can be said that the freedom and human rights of offenders were protected at the expense of the freedom and human rights of victims.

Such a dilemma and paradox of the modern age were brought up as early as in the 19th century, but only in the closing years of the 20th century did they become a reality. The passing into law of the wiretapping legislation law in 1999 humorously symbolizes such a reality. This is why I find grave meaning in it.

As space for this article is limited, I have to cut short detailed discussions on this issue. But the national anthem and flag issue cannot be simplified into the question of the lyrics of the anthem or the design of the flag.

It is a matter of how the organization principle of a modern state and the symbol of a state can be logically and ethically adjusted to people's consciousness.

In any event, Japan made some important decisions in 1999 — a year that would go on record as an epoch-making year in the modern ideological history of Japan.

The Managing Editor pays a tribute to Mr. Nakano for his contributions to the Journal, who concludes "Trends" with this article.

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