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Japan: Land of the Rising Right

Kristin Surak

This chapter explores the political developments in Japan under Shinzo Abe and the lessons they may hold for Brexit Britain, as well as renationalization tendencies elsewhere. Abenomics, a combination of monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reform, aimed to lift inflation to 2 percent and produce a virtuous cycle of business expansion and consumer spending, but has seen only limited success. Despite relatively low unemployment numbers, inequality has grown substantially, with Japan now one of the most unequal countries in the OECD. Under the pressures of a volatile international system, and a fraught Japanese-US relationship, Abe's Japan has reasserted nationalistic policies. Abe's legislative record, pushed through fast-track legislative powers he has demanded, is reminiscent of illiberal developments elsewhere: the erosion of freedom of the press, the turn to militarization, the circumvention of institutional checks, and the use of security laws to squelch opposition. Meanwhile, through allies in civil society, right-wing revisionist forces are reasserting the centrality of the emperor to the nation, calling for greater pride and sovereignty in Japan and seeking to reinstitute traditional family values.

Introduction[1]

On May 1, 2019, Japan welcomed a new emperor. The aging Akihito allowed his 59 year-old son, Naruhito, to take over a lineage reputed to be the oldest unbroken line of royals in the world. In comparison to its European counterparts, Japan's imperial family is at once more unassuming and more withdrawn from the people it represents. Nowhere are the extramarital affairs, drug scandals, offensive statements, and awkward sexual proclivities that feed the media machine around the Windsors. The top gossip in recent years has been a potential marriage between a royal granddaughter and a law school student with a (gasp) indebted mother. The in-coming monarch yields little additional fodder. He is a royal with a reputation for steadfast competence, international curiosity, and the incongruous desire to never really stand out. His two-year stint at Oxford University resulted in a book on waterways bracingly titled, *The Thames and I*. He even switched from the violin to the viola, explaining that the

larger instrument, which typically supplies a support role rather than the melody, is more appropriate for his tastes.

May 1 marked the beginning of a new era, and quite literally: the imperial calendar, used in much bureaucratic and official business, changed from the 31st year of Heisei to the 1st year of Reiwa.

At the same point a generation ago, the future of Japan could not have looked brighter. When Emperor Akihito began his reign in 1989, the economy was the second largest in the world. Nominal per capita GDP outstretched that of the US by a margin. The country was producing the most cutting-edge consumer technology of the day, including Nintendo entertainment systems, Sanyo stereos, Canon cameras, and Panasonic VCRs. Pundits predicted, and sometimes feared, a new Japan-led era of global growth (Vogel 1979). Within months, however, the stock market crashed, the economy flatlined, and the country never recovered. Though Japan remains economically more powerful than any country in Europe, it is now easy to forget that fact in the shadow of its much larger neighbour, China, which is reason for pause. Indeed, many of the issues that Japan faces are not so different to those of another set of islands, off the coast a more powerful EU (even if the aging British monarch has proved far more tenacious).

Abenomics and Japan's Low-yield Economy

Japan is a sobering test case of just how obstinate a low-yield economy can be. The GDP has barely budged over the past thirty years and economic growth rarely breaks 2 percent.

Initially, the government attempted to end the malaise through deregulation, particularly of the labour market. In the country once known for lifetime employment, 40 percent of the labour force now works on temporary contracts. With job security a thing of the past for many, so are the generous pensions, health coverage, and unemployment insurance that came with lifetime employment. The precarious future has driven marriage and fertility rates to record lows. One in three people in their twenties expects to work until they die.

Guiding Japan through these challenges is Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. A strategic conservative, he is the jammy heir to two powerful political dynasties: his father was a minister, his paternal grandfather an MP, and his great-uncle was one of the longest-serving prime ministers. But the most conspicuous ornament in the family tree is his maternal grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who ran the brutal conscript labour system in Japanese-occupied Manchuria (Driscoll 2010). Held for war crimes, he was released before trial and eventually became prime minister, calling—unsuccessfully—for revision of the Constitution and the expansion of Japanese military capabilities. However, the hound-faced Abe lacks the social skills of his extrovert grandfather, whom he lauds in speeches. Indeed, when he took power in 2013, few expected him to last long or accomplish much. They had seen him in the role before, in 2006, but he held on for less than a year before resigning in the face of gaffes, money scandals, and parliamentary losses. His second go, however, could hardly be more different in perseverance, with Abe set to become the country's longest-serving prime minister (on Abe's family past see Hayakashi 2014).

Distinguishing his first stint from his second is 'Abenomics,' a powerful economic salvo that was to jolt the Japanese economy back to life. The combination of monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reform aimed to lift inflation to 2 percent and produce a virtuous

cycle of business expansion and consumer spending. But instead, the economy rebounded like a dropped dead cat: a small bounce, then nothing. The effect on the national debt has been far greater. It now stands at an eye-watering 250 percent of GDP (Pilling). (By contrast even Greece at the height of its economic crisis in 2012-13 never broke 180 percent.) A long-planned sales tax hike, meant to pay for the mammoth borrowing, is likely to be delayed yet again as economists fear it will drag the fragile economy back into recession. As in the UK, economic stagnation has not been accompanied by mass unemployment—just mass under-employment, if measured by the amount of money people have to live on. Though over 97% of people who want jobs are working, inequality has grown substantially, with Japan now one of the most unequal countries in the OECD (OECD 2019). Compared to Europe, only in Lithuania and Latvia is the poverty rate higher. More than 1.5 million Japanese households survive on welfare. And the future is not promising: one in six Japanese children lives in poverty (Foreign Press Center Japan 2017).

Still the meagre economic growth is remarkable when one considers the shrinking population, which has been on the decline since 2008. The fertility rate in both Japan and the UK—1.45 and 1.80 respectively—are below replacement levels of 2.1 percent. But in the British case, immigration helps maintain the population growth at a mild 0.6%, due to both the influx of people and their higher average birth rates (Independent 2017). If Brexit removes this strut, policy makers might turn to Japan to gauge the effects. From the point of view of economic growth and social provision, it's not a very attractive prospect. Japan is losing more than 400,000 people per year, and the rate is accelerating as the baby boomers wane. Bureaucrats hope to sustain the total population at 100 million, a fifth smaller than its present size (Tsuya 2015). But no one knows how this will work—or how the pension and public health care systems will be kept afloat—without significant immigration. Even as the

government looks into robotics to plug some of the gaps, it is clear that in many industries, such as elderly care, there are limits to how far machines can substitute for human services. Plus, robots do not pay taxes or pension contributions (Pilling 2014).

Nativists in the West may hail Japan, with its foreign population of around 2%, as a model to follow. But on the edge of the Pacific, even arch-conservatives realize the system is untenable. Prime Minister Shinzo—Abe, known more for his chauvinism than multiculturalism, has been expanding migration channels, rather than closing them down. In the past year, the government was gratified to see foreign workers increase by nearly 15 percent to 1.5 million, a total that has tripled over the past decade (Ministry of Justice, Immigration Control Report 2018). Driving this growth are not only innocuous programs to attract highly skilled workers; the government now courts low- and medium-skilled foreign workers to fill labour gaps in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and care work. It's even opened the way for settlement and family reunion, options previously unavailable to low-paid workers meant to leave once their labour was unwanted (Endoh 2019). The conservative state is still hesitant to call the mix anything like "immigration," and Japan is hardly a choice destination of migrants (it ranks below Estonia and Taiwan on its ability to attract and develop talent; see IMD World Competitiveness Center). But the Minister of Justice has described the new system as a way to accept foreign workers to fill labour shortages, and the government expects it will attract an additional 345,000 foreign workers over the next five years.

A Nationalist Reawakening

In the wake of the Allied victory in World War II, the American occupying army ensured that economic ties with a communist China were not revived and that Japan's economic lot was thrown in with the capitalist West. Its Prime Minister at the time, Yoshida Shigeru, gave his name to the system under which Japan would hand over responsibility for its defence and foreign policy to the Americans, while focusing its efforts on economic growth (Dower 2000). And with remarkable success. In the space of a decade, Japan's GDP doubled. In return, Japan relinquished large swaths of the country to the American military. The greatest surrender is in Okinawa, where US bases cover over 15 percent of the main island—and where locals have most fervently resisted the foreign presence, both at the ballot box and through spectacular demonstrations. Yet Tokyo has turned a deaf ear to the protests of the Okinawan people, many of whom are of aboriginal Ryūkyū extraction, who themselves were colonized by Japan in the nineteenth century (McCormack and Norimatsu 2012). Still today, around two-dozen bases and 50,000 US soldiers remain in the state that is also host to America's Seventh Fleet, the largest abroad. It pays for this, too: Japan shoulders three-quarters of the cost for America to extend its military reach deep into Asia. If the UK has a "special relationship" with the US, it is not alone.

With few exceptions, Japan has toed the line when it comes to American demands. It's easy to see what is forthcoming in Japanese military developments by reading reports drawn up by the Harvard political scientist and influential foreign policy mandarin, Joseph Nye, and his associates in Washington (Armitage and Nye 2012). These have called for legalizing "collective security" or collective self-defence, revising the Japanese Constitution, increasing military spending, allowing Japanese forces to be regularly dispatched overseas, and integrating Japanese military systems into US ones.

The same pliability holds for the economy, despite Japan's reputation for hardball. When Americans began buying up Japanese consumer products in the 1980s, the Japanese simply lent the dollars back by purchasing US debt—a tactic that China has learned from. And perhaps too well. In 2010, China overtook its neighbor to become world's second largest economy, a tango turn that has been complicated for Japan. Though China is the country's largest trading partner, the island nation still cleaves close to the US (McCormack 2007). After Trump was elected, Abe raced to New York to become the first foreign leader to meet the president-to-be. But since then he has found that the Americans are not as reliable as they once were. The US jumped ship on his treasured Trans-Pacific Partnership (the "everyone but China club"); Japan has been shut out of meetings with North Korea, much to Abe's chagrin; and the most recent round of trade negotiations with America has proceeded only haltingly. If nationalist resurgence has rendered rapprochement with China, South Korea, and Taiwan tricky, some in Japan wonder if tagging along with the US is worth the cost of turning away from the country's economically important and geopolitically powerful neighbors.

The hype around Abenomics has distracted attention from the Prime Minister's more ominous policy successes (for a substantial overview see Nakano 2016). Within a year of election, Abe side-stepped debate to pass a State Secrecy Law that greatly expands the government's remit for designating information a state secret. Now even environmental and health information can be rendered virtually inaccessible to the public. Pundits were quick to dub it an anti-whistle blower law for the steep prison penalties it levies on leakers and reporters (Repeta 2013). But the media seems unlikely to present much of a threat. Within days of taking office, Abe installed at the helm of the national broadcasting agency one of his hard-right cronies, who immediately confirmed that the most-watched television network would remain complacent: "If the government says right, we won't say left," he declared

(Uemura 2016). The following year the ouster—or surrender—of several of the top journalists and news hosts in the country. Meanwhile, the UN and Reporters Without Borders have expressed concern about the erosion of freedom of the press.

By 2014, Abe had moved on to the military. Though Article 9 of the Constitution forbids Japan from waging war, he decided to reinterpret the foundational law to allow it to take up arms for its allies. His explanation was weak: it would enable Japan to come to the aid of America—a difficult situation to imagine given that the US military is greater than that of the next seven countries combined. Over 200 legal scholars declared the interpretation unconstitutional. Still more worrying were the tactics Abe used to get it through. Rather than letting the Supreme Court adjudicate how the Constitution should be read, the Prime Minister's office made the call, in egregious example of executive overreach.

"Reiwa": Nationalist Agenda-setting and "Normalizing" Japan

Most recently, Abe employed his hallmark legislative style—ramming through Acts by short-circuiting debate and votes—to pass a new Anti-Terrorism Bill. He pitched the law, which criminalizes over 250 actions, as necessary to protect the country during the upcoming Olympics. The Japan Federation of Bar Associations has noted that many of the forbidden deeds—like sit-in protests or copying music—have not the remotest connection to terrorism, merely offering pretexts to squelch grassroots political movements.

But these are mere side stories to Abe's main agenda, which is to "normalize Japan"—shorthand for revising the constitution and creating a standing army. The Japanese

Constitution, written largely by American occupiers, has been a bugbear of the political right since inception. Abe's own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has hoped to replace it for more than sixty years. But no Prime Minister has come as close as Abe to achieving this. The reform he seeks is no light overhaul. LDP proposals call for rewriting nearly all of the 103 articles, weakening the protection of individual rights, strengthening the preeminent importance of public order, qualifying basic freedoms, and underscoring the centrality of the emperor to the nation. Central to this endeavor is the revision of Article 9, which bans Japan from maintaining an army. The government spends around 1 percent of its budget on its "self-defense forces," but the country's economic size means that these still constitute the eighth largest military in the world. Still the difference between a *de facto* and a *de jure* army leaves its once colonized neighbors—China and the Koreas—on edge. The Americans, by contrast, are in full support. They have worked for years to ensure that the Japanese forces are "interoperable" with US counterparts, rendering them an extension of the range of the Pentagon. For Washington, a well-armed Japan is both cheaper and more expedient, especially as Beijing expands its reach into the Pacific.

Variations on a Global Theme?

Abe's strong-man approach to rule might be seen as part of a broader global trend. But unlike the waves of supporters who showed up at the polls for Bolsonaro, Trump, Modi, and Duterte, voter turnout in Japan has plummeted. If there are any lessons for Britain's Labour Party, they are not from the Democratic Party of Japan, the main counterbalance to the conservative LDP over the past two decades. In the last election, this Blairite formation hoped to take down Abe by throwing in its lot with a break-away center-right group. Each

collected just 10 percent of the available seats, against the LDP's thumping 60 percent. The poverty of viable options at election time has meant that nearly half the population—and 70% of the voting-age youth—no longer bothers to cast a ballot.

Into this space of political inaction has stepped the Nippon Kaigi—the "The Japan Conference." The stated aim of this right-wing organization is to "build a nation with pride" (Tawara 2017). Its goals are not just nationalist but neo-imperial, inspired by a selective memory of Japanese "greatness" at the height of colonial expansion. The group seeks a new Constitution recalling that of the Meiji Era, when the Japanese were duty-bearing subjects rather than rights-bearing citizens. It hopes to return the emperor to the center of political power, in a throwback to the rhetoric and image-system used to rally the populace during World War II. Traditional family values—women in the kitchen, off the throne, and under their husband's family name—form another area they want to strengthen. The Conference claims nearly 40,000 members, but more important is who they are. Its reach into political offices and Shinto religious organizations is long: around 60 percent of parliamentarians are members of the Nippon Kaigi which uses its networks to rally voters to the polls. So far, the group's biggest success has been in schools. It's led the suppression of "masochistic" views of history, as well as "excessive" focus on human rights, and has pressured governments and school boards to revise curricula accordingly (on the Nippon Kaigi, see: Tawara 2016; Mizohata 2016).

Current calls for greater pride and sovereignty in Japan are as inconsistent a mash-up of imperial imaginings, if not hallucinations, as they are in the UK. It's little wonder, then, that the name for the new imperial era selected by the Abe government has unsettling overtones. Emperor Naruhito's reign will be called "Reiwa." The term, taken from classical poetry,

means “auspicious harmony.” In the official translation, it’s rendered “beautiful harmony”—a choice that recalls Abe’s own multiple appeals to create a “beautiful Japan” (Abe 2007). By itself, the character for “rei” also means “command” or “order.” In everyday speech, the semantic overlap may be innocuous—few English-speakers pause to reflect on the common Greek origin of “hospitality” and “hostility,” or that the root of “pharmacy”—*pharmakon*—contains both “remedy” and “poison” among its meanings (Derrida 1981).

How the reign-name will be understood depends a lot on how Naruhito defines his role—a job not as easy as one might think. The separation of the monarch from any political issues is so complete that when Emperor Akihito floated the possibility of stepping down, commentators debated whether he had exceeded his station. Nonetheless, the retiring royal carved out a role for himself by supporting social welfare causes. In contrast to his distant father, he went out to the streets to offer solace and consolation to the underprivileged, disaster victims, and others in need. His actions were so unexpected even the most mundane gestures—squatting to talk to an old woman sitting on the floor of an evacuation center—grabbed headlines. Outside the country (and to the chagrin of ultra-nationalists), he made a point of recognizing Japanese wartime aggression with a remorse that rang truer than Abe’s pro forma apologies (on Emperor Akihito, see Breen 2019). It remains to be seen what a path his son will take amid a landscape of continuing economic stagnation and escalating nationalism.

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