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The Meaning of Nationalism in Japan Today (3)

By ITO Kenichi

5. The Easiest Way to Get Votes and to Sell Paper

I have already discussed the realities of the International Peace Cooperation Law. Although very aware of the nature of that law, some Japanese politicians, beginning with Social Democratic Party Leader Doi Takako, repeatedly give speeches that ignore the real problems in favor of mere demagoguery, using slogans to undermine the International Peace Cooperation Law, such as “War? Or Peace?” “Don’t send our youth to the battlefield!” and “A path we’ve seen before! The path toward militarism!” And many commercial media, as typified by the *Asahi Shimbun*, join right in the chorus. During the Cold War period, some academics argued that if the Soviet Union were to attack, Japan should not fight, but instead raise up a white flag (of surrender) and a red flag (of communism) together. Not a few Japanese mass media actually took this up as a serious argument. If we consider why such a thing would happen in Japan, we see that there exists a widespread, strongly held anti-war sentiment that says that “we’ve had enough of war” among the Japanese – a people that saw the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed by atomic bombs and watched their nation burned to the ground. One of the easiest ways to grab a vote and to get people to buy newspapers is to shout anti-war peace slogans. This is another reality of contemporary Japan. Also, if a foreign media organization tries to write a feature article about Japan, their first source for information is the Japanese mass media. Without realizing it, they end up getting only one side of the story. As a result, information and theories generated in Japan end up creating international misunderstanding.

The cover of *Time* magazine on August 16, 1999, had a bold headline that read, “Japan Returns to Nationalism” and showed a picture of a Japanese man wearing a *kabuto*-like (warrior’s helmet) headband, holding up a *sensu* (folding fan) with the Japanese flag on it, and shouting. As a “typical example of the right-wing sentiment arising in Japan,” this picture served to lend a sense of realism to the *Time* article. However, the man in the picture, Nakanishi Takashi, was actually doing no more than cheering on the Japanese team during a 1999 World Cup Soccer match. The article itself was a long six-page feature written by Tim Larimer, but was an unsophisticated piece that tied together quotes from one-sided interviews and seemed to run out of steam with its stereotyped conclusions. The quality of Larimer’s treatment of the serious problem he called “Japan’s return to nationalism”

made it quite clear that he was not concerned with gathering the required evidence and didn't contemplate the issue thoughtfully enough. It stated, "A high school principal in Hiroshima killed himself last February rather than enforce orders that the anthem be sung at graduation ceremonies." In fact, this high school principal did want the students to sing the national anthem, but was cornered to death by the outrageous collective pressure placed on him not to do so by the Hiroshima Prefectural Teachers Union. If so, how can we accept the presentation of information that would lead all the readers of *Time* magazine to conclude that Japan is returning to a "dangerous nationalism" even though the truth was the complete opposite of what was written?

In conclusion, let me add one more thought. States and ethnic groups are born, grow, and eventually enter old age. Looking at the United Kingdom and France, we see that the former colonial empires have been dismantled and are now past the prime of their lives, calmly heading toward old age. The same is true even for Germany. Japan likewise seems to have passed its prime. With an aging society and a declining population of young people, Japan is in no position now to turn back toward the militarism of its youth. History does not repeat itself. Instead, it would seem that Chinese nationalism, which is now moving out of its youth and into adulthood, should be catching our attention, since it is now entering what arguably may be the most dangerous opportunity for that nationalism to tend toward expansionism and the pursuit of the status of a military superpower. (End)

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