Obuchi raises the banner of Japanese nationalism

Peter Symonds
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Just over a week ago the lower house of the Japanese Diet or parliament voted overwhelmingly—403 to 86—to grant official legal status to the country's defacto national flag and national anthem. The bill is likely to be ratified in the upper house before the end of the current session due to end on August 13.

In a country where symbolism plays an important role in political life, the push by the Obuchi government for the formal recognition of the Rising Sun emblem and the "Kimigayo" anthem has a broader significance. The flag and the song are widely regarded as symbols of the emperor worship and Japanese militarism of the 1930s and 1940s. Their promotion is connected to government moves to bolster Japan's military and to modify the constitutional constraints on its operations.

The Diet's decision on July 22 was met with demonstrations outside the parliament by student and other groups who have pledged to continue their opposition. One protester was forcibly removed from the public gallery. Keiko Tsuwa of the Japanese Women's Caucus Against War commented: "No one can be proud of them as national symbols without true remorse and apology for the wartime aggression against Asia."

The flag and the anthem have been used ceremonially in the past. But the ambition of conservative politicians and right-wing groups to give these symbols legal recognition has previously been thwarted by a widespread hostility to Japanese militarism and the wartime military regime. Throughout the post-war period, the US-Japan Defence Pact signed in 1952 has repeatedly been a target of opposition and protests.

In Japan's schools, the use of the Rising Sun flag and the singing of the Kimigayo, which calls for "the reign of the Emperor to continue for 1,000 generations," has been a source of sharp conflict between school administrations and the teachers' union. In February, a school principal in southern Japan hanged himself after being caught in the middle of a disagreement between the school board and teachers over the singing of the anthem at graduation ceremonies.

Obuchi seized on the incident to push for legal recognition of the flag and anthem. The legislation, he claimed, was necessary to eliminate any ambiguity in their use and thus prevent any repetition of the suicide in Hiroshima. Following the vote, the Tokyo City Board of Education announced that it was disciplining a primary school music teacher for refusing to provide the piano accompaniment for the anthem during school entrance ceremonies in March.

In the course of the Diet debate, Obuchi spoke cautiously insisting that the emperor was simply "the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power". But, as Obuchi is well aware, any elevation of the status of the emperor has deeper political implications.

The issue goes back to the US occupation of Japan and the negotiations over the country's post-war constitution. Sections of the Japanese ruling class prevailed upon the US administration to retain the emperor as a constitutional monarch arguing that he served as a key ideological linchpin for national identity and the ruling elites. Emperor Hirohito was absolved of any war crimes and retained his position even though stripped of his former powers and his quasi-divine status.

For the last 50 years, right-wing Japanese nationalism has always been bound up with the promotion of the emperor and the defence of his wartime regime. Last month Obuchi himself provoked criticism at home when, in an essay in the US edition of *Time* magazine,

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he nominated Hirohito as “Person of the Century”. Two years ago, he was head of a parliamentary grouping that promotes pilgrimages to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, which is dedicated to Japan's war dead and is a focus for right-wing nationalists.

As in other countries, the rise of nationalist sentiment in Japan is connected to a deepening social and economic crisis which has produced the highest levels of unemployment since the 1940s and growing social polarisation and dislocation. Incapable of resolving any of the problems facing working people, Japanese politicians of all stripes have increasingly resorted to nationalist appeals and, in the absence of any progressive alternative, have won significant support. Just three months ago, Ishihara Shintaro, author of the book *The Japan That Can Say No*, who argues for a more vigorous assertion of Japan's interests against the US and other rivals, won the prestigious post of Tokyo governor against major party candidates. The latest opinion polls show that around 60 percent supports the legislation to recognise the Japanese flag and anthem.

Obuchi's immediate political aims in pressing the flag issue are to bolster his position within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, particularly in the lead-up to the party presidential elections to take place on September 15. He is likely to win the position and retain the prime ministership. Obuchi has also strengthened the ruling coalition by incorporating the Buddhist-based New Komeito party. New Komeito, which in the past has taken an avowedly pacifist stance, has supported the flag law and also government legislation aimed at expanding the role of the military.

The Japanese constitution formulated under the US occupation authorities contains a so-called pacifist clause ruling out the use of military force. Following the collapse of the Chinese nationalist regime in 1949, the US pressed Japan to reforge its military under the guise of “self-defence forces”. As a result Japan presently has substantial armed forces, but the government remains constrained by the constitution in its development of overtly offensive weapons and the overseas deployment of the military.

The resurrection of Japanese nationalism is closely linked to the expansion of the military. Earlier this year, in the face of considerable opposition, the Obuchi government passed legislation permitting the Japanese military to play a more active role within the Asian region in support of US armed forces—something the US administration has been demanding for some time. Now the Japanese Diet is moving to establish a committee to study revising the constitution—its pacifist clause in particular.

The Obuchi government has seized on several incidents involving North Korea—its test firing of a ballistic missile last year, and the incursion of a North Korean vessel into Japanese waters—to create an air of panic and mold public opinion into accepting an expanded military. North Korea, an economically crippled country, is being transformed in the media into a major military threat to Japan.

In recent weeks, Japan along with the US has issued strong warnings to Pyongyang against any new test firing of a ballistic missile. Both Obuchi and Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura have warned that Japan could cut off funds earmarked for the building of two new light-water nuclear reactors in North Korea if Pyongyang proceeds with the launch. Such a move would call into question the US-North Korea agreed framework pact signed in 1994 to lessen tensions on the Korean peninsula.

A 500-page report recently published by the Japanese Defence Agency also focuses on North Korea, arguing that Japan should not only have the right to defend itself but to use pre-emptive military strikes in the case of likely attacks. It calls for the establishment of a network of spy satellites to enable Japan to independently monitor North Korea, for continued development of a missile defence system and for more advanced weaponry, such as air-to-air refueling tankers.

In the aftermath of the NATO bombing campaign of Yugoslavia, dominated by the US, discussion took place in the various European capitals over the need for the expansion of an independent military capacity to defend European economic and strategic interests. Undoubtedly similar conclusions are being drawn in Tokyo as the Japanese ruling class seeks to further its aims against those of its major rivals in the increasingly volatile Asian Pacific region.

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