

Mori's 'gaffes' point to a revival of right-wing Japanese nationalism

Peter Symonds
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A series of remarks by the newly installed Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori have set off a furore over his defence of the chauvinist ideology which underpinned the militarist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s that led Japan into World War II. His comments have generally been portrayed in the media—in Japan and internationally—as unfortunate gaffes and the prime minister as a blunderer. Put in their context, however, Mori's remarks point to a deliberate attempt in ruling circles to revive and refashion right-wing wartime nationalism under conditions of growing political and economic crisis.

On May 15, speaking at a meeting to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Parliamentary Association for Shinto Politics, Mori commented: “I have promoted ideas which the government tended to avoid and have continued to affirm to the Japanese people that Japan is a divine nation headed by the emperor.”

The final phrase “a divine nation headed by the emperor” immediately provoked opposition when it was reported in the media. It directly echoes the official ideology of the wartime regime—a combination of militarism and nationalism welded together by the Shinto religion—which was used to justify Japanese imperialist expansion into China and South East Asia. The emperor had the status of a living god with wide political powers.

Following Japan's defeat, sections of the ruling class prevailed upon the US administration to retain the emperor, even if only as a constitutional monarch, arguing that he served as a key ideological linchpin for the Japanese state. But the extreme right-wing never accepted Japan's defeat, the constitution or the demotion of the emperor. The leading LDP figures publicly accepted the changes but occasionally publicly blurted out their real thoughts in remarks justifying Japan's wartime role.

Significant numbers of MPs continued to make pilgrimages to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine dedicated to Japan's war dead and a focus for right-wing nationalists. In fact, the former prime minister Keizo Obuchi, who died after a stroke on April 2, headed a parliamentary grouping that promoted such trips to the shrine. It is significant that the hundreds of politicians attended the gathering of the Parliamentary Association for Shinto Politics addressed by Mori, including 230 members of the LDP.

Mori attempted to justify his remark by denying that he had been advocating a state religion or worship of the emperor. He has issued vague apologies but has not retracted the remarks saying that he had been misinterpreted—all he had meant to say was that the emperor was a popular and cherished national symbol. Mori

has been backed by conservative LDP policy chief Shizuka Kamei who said: “It is very obvious that Mori used the word ‘divine’ to mean a wide-ranging spiritual existence.”

A little over a week later on June 2, the LDP released its election manifesto apparently justifying Mori's comment about the “divine nation” and the revival of Japanese nationalism. The preface stated: “Our country is one in which many religions have flourished including a belief that the gods reside in the mountains, rivers, grass and trees and that there is something which supercedes human recognition, and we have a flourishing spiritual culture respected worldwide... But now the hearts of the Japanese people are weary, and patriotism that respects the ancient and good Japanese tradition and culture has weakened.” The statement called for renewed efforts to ensure that official visits were made to the Yasukuni Shrine. These phrases were only inserted after Mori's speech and delayed the release of the document.

The following night Mori again created a furore during a campaign speech in Nara, the former ancient capital of Japan. In attacking the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) for rejecting the emperor's current constitutional role as a symbol of the state, he exclaimed: “Can [such a party] ensure Japan's security and defend the national polity?” The term used by Mori for “national polity”—*kokutai*—has not been in common use since the war when it referred to the Japanese nation-state ruled by a divine emperor.

Mori immediately came under attack in the press and by opposition leaders. Naoto Kan, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan, pointed out: “It's a term originally based on the idea of rule by the emperor. Why did he use it specifically?” JCP spokesman Hideyo Fudehisa was rather equivocal, saying only: “That kind of language may be acceptable from any person of his age, but it's not acceptable from the prime minister of this country.”

But Mori was unrepentant. After appearing to apologise for the use of the term, he later backtracked and told reporters last Monday: “It was not a slip of the tongue. I didn't say I have retracted it.” Shizuka Kamei again defended Mori both publicly and within the party, at the same time making more explicit the political rationale for the remarks. He was reported in the *Christian Science Monitor* as saying that Mori's controversial comments “will function as a kamikaze [divine wind] that will help the LDP.”

Clearly some factions within the LDP are calculating that the best means of boosting the party's flagging chances in the coming

elections is to make a more open and direct appeal to nationalist sentiment. As in Europe, the US and elsewhere, the emergence of extreme right-wing tendencies takes place in Japan under conditions where successive government policies have led to a deepening social polarisation, the highest levels of unemployment in the post-war period and widespread alienation with the entire political establishment.

A series of huge government spending packages under Obuchi have failed to end a decade of economic stagnation in Japan and left the country with massive public debt. The turn by Mori and the LDP to the politics of nationalism is an attempt to create a social base for themselves as the next government comes under pressure to press ahead with a program of drastic economic restructuring that will further erode the living standards of the working class. As elsewhere, the targets of the right-wing agenda will be the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

No doubt they have been encouraged by the apparent popularity of Shintaro Ishihara, a long-time LDP politician, who stood as an independent in the last elections and won the position of Tokyo governor against a field of party heavyweights. Ishihara is known for his 1989 book "The Japan That Can Say No" calling for the country to more aggressively assert its interests against its rivals, particularly the US.

In early April, Ishihara made a provocative attack on foreigners, using the derogatory term *sangokujin* —a word used to describe immigrant Koreans and Chinese. In a speech to the military—the Self Defence Forces—he said: "Atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin* and other foreigners. We can expect them to riot in the event of a disastrous earthquake... Police have their limits. I hope that you will not only fight against disasters, but also maintain public security on such occasions."

Ishihara's comments are a deliberate reference to the racial attacks on Koreans following the huge earthquake that struck Tokyo and Yokohama in 1923, killing an estimated 97,000 people. In the aftermath of the quake, right-wing thugs abetted by the police attacked Koreans, claiming that they were responsible for setting fires and looting. Several thousand ethnic Koreans as well as a number of socialists were murdered.

The open espousal of such chauvinist sentiments, previously the province of right-wing extremist groups, meets up with the interests of sections of the Japanese ruling class who are demanding a more assertive stance by Japan against Europe and the US. During the post-war period, the US-Japan Security Treaty allocated a subordinate role to Japan as a junior partner in the Cold War alliance against the Soviet Union. As trade and economic tensions have sharpened, so have the pressures in ruling circles in Tokyo for changes to Japan's economic, political and military policies to defend their interests.

In comments reported in the *New York Times*, Yasuaki Onuma, professor of international law at Tokyo University, explained the changes in political rhetoric as follows: "Although many LDP members have a reactionary view of history, they were not able to express themselves, because of the overwhelming influence of the United States on the one hand and because of the restraint required by the international situation in East Asia on the other. However, with the sharp decline of the Socialist Party and the end of the

Cold War, the feeling of the majority is that we have gone too far in keeping silent on the issues of our relationships with others and national identity."

The comments of Mori and Ishihara have drawn criticism in East Asia where there are bitter memories of Japan's wartime occupation. A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman warned recently: "The Japanese side should learn a lesson from history, especially during the Second World War, to prevent history from repeating itself." A spokesman for the South Korean embassy in Tokyo described Ishihara's remarks as "inappropriate and ridiculous" and called on Japanese people to disavow them.

Concerns have also been raised in the US. An editorial in the *Washington Post* entitled "Japan's Two Nationalisms" pointed to the dangers of growing rivalry and conflict while at the same time reiterating the Clinton administration's policy of encouraging Japan to play a larger role in the Asian region—as long as it is in line with US interests.

"[Mori's] remarks show the power of nationalist feeling in Japan; and despite the prime minister's strenuous efforts at damage control, they show that this nationalism includes nostalgia for the mystical chauvinism that drove Japan's expansionist drive into Asia and ultimately its war with America. Even after a decade of financial woes, Japan remains the world's second biggest economy as well as the United States' key ally in Asia. If nationalist sentiment were ever to develop in a way that weakened Japan's relations with the United States, the damage would be substantial."

The editorial then warned: "But Japan's new assertiveness could also take an anti-American direction. Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's recent remarks are especially striking, because they come at a time when he is anxious to present himself as a good internationalist ahead of next month's G-8 summit, which Japan is hosting. Moreover, they follow calls for a national holiday to honour Hirohito, the wartime emperor, and last year's legalisation of the flag and anthem that recall the war effort..."

"Japan, in sum, is caught between two nationalisms: one welcome and one threatening. What's more, US actions could help tip the balance between these dueling moods. If the next president takes care to court Japan—to consult it and cooperate with it regularly—Japan is likely to channel its assertiveness into playing a more constructive role in the alliance. But if the Japanese feel ignored, old resentments of the West may be revived; and Japan may start to doubt the wisdom of relying on the United States for its security."

Whatever the immediate consequences of Mori's remarks in the lead up to national elections on June 25, the prime minister's espousal of Japanese nationalism is a further symptom of growing international conflicts between the major powers and sharpening social tensions in Japan itself.



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