

# Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni shrine legitimises Japanese militarism

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Despite his attempts to play down the significance of the ceremony, Monday's visit by Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni shrine for the country's war-dead had an unambiguous meaning. It marked a further step in the public resurrection and legitimisation of the symbols of Japan's militarist regimes, which prior to and during World War II invaded China and much of South East Asia and brutally suppressed any opposition at home and abroad.

Koizumi's visit had been scheduled for Wednesday—the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II—but was switched at the last minute in an effort to placate critics. The prime minister appeared at the shrine in central Tokyo and was led inside by a Shinto priest, to the cheers of rightwing nationalists and noisy protests by Koreans and university students. Inside was a huge wreath of flowers and a note that Koizumi sent on Sunday. He bowed once, signed the visitor's book and left.

Koizumi was at pains to present the visit as a simple act of respect to Japan's war dead. "I would like to pay homage to those who lost their lives for the country," he said. "I am going there to pledge that Japan will never go to war again and will do its best as a peace-loving nation to help promote prosperity in the world." He dismissed criticisms that the Yasukuni shrine houses memorials to a number of convicted war criminals, saying: "Why do we have to select among the dead?"

If Koizumi had simply wanted to pay his respects to the ordinary Japanese troops who died in World War II, he could have done what he did on Wednesday—visit the tomb of the unknown soldier, a memorial that has none of the political or religious associations of Yasukuni. To pay homage at Yasukuni is anything but an innocuous political act.

The Shinto shrine was built in 1869 and is said to house the souls of 2.5 million soldiers who have died in Japan's wars. During the 1930s and 1940s, it became the focus for the official state ideology—a reactionary mixture of Shintoism, emperor-worship and militarism. While the postwar constitution ended Shintoism as a state religion and reduced the emperor from the status of a god to constitutional monarch, the shrine has remained a constant centre of attention for extreme rightwing nationalist groups.

In 1978, the priests conducted a secret ceremony enshrining a

new list of war dead, among them 14 Japanese leaders convicted as Class-A war criminals by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Seven of these, including Japan's wartime prime minister Hideki Tojo, were hanged by the occupation authorities. The news leaked out some six months later, provoking widespread outrage, but the priests refused to back down. Inside the shrine, signs refer to Tojo and the others as "martyrs" who were "wrongly accused by the Allied forces".

The shrine has a small attached military museum, which includes artillery pieces, a tank and a locomotive that ran on the notorious Burma railway. Yasukuni is an object of worship for rightwing militarists and veterans, who often visit dressed in wartime military uniforms. Members of the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have routinely made a pilgrimage to Yasukuni—in "a private capacity". The only other post-war prime minister to visit Yasukuni in an official capacity was Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1985.

Like Nakasone, Koizumi made a small concession to Japan's constitutional separation of church and state. He did not participate in any formal Shinto rites during his visit. Much has been made in the press about the fact that he bowed only once rather than the customary ritual, which consists of two deep bows, then two claps to the gods, followed by another deep bow. He has refused to declare whether or not the trip was "official" but nevertheless signed the visitor's book using his full official title. But for all the finer points of etiquette, the objective political significance of the visit is to legitimise Japan's wartime militarism.

Koizumi's visit has provoked widespread protests in Japan and internationally. South Korea's government declared that it "cannot find the words to express our concern that a Japanese prime minister would pay homage to war criminals". The Chinese foreign ministry immediately summoned Japan's ambassador to Beijing to present a formal note of protest and later issued a statement saying: "The essence of the Yasukuni Shrine question is whether the Japanese side can sincerely repent that aggressive period of history."

While the governments in South Korea and China have exploited the issue to deflect opposition to their own policies at home, there is undoubtedly deeply felt hostility to the visit

among ordinary people in both countries, where there are bitter memories of Japanese atrocities. Kim Tae Sun, a Korean whose father was conscripted by the Japanese Imperial army told the UK-based *Independent*: “I want to cry I am so angry... It’s an insult to Asian nations, which were victims of the Pacific War, and I view it as a revival of Japan’s militarism.”

In Seoul, about 80 elderly Koreans burned a picture of Koizumi, hundreds of students marched and about 20 young men cut off their little fingers. Protests also took place in Hong Kong and in the Philippines, where women who were forced to act as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers said the visit “honours Japanese soldiers who raped women”. In Singapore, the TV news report of the visit was interspersed with film clips of Japanese soldiers executing Asian people by firing squad and burying them alive.

Opposition has also been expressed within Japan. Einosuki Akiya, the president of the Buddhist Soka Gakkai organisation, which was persecuted during the 1930s, said he found the visit “disturbing and deplorable”. The body is connected to the Komeito Party, which is part of the ruling coalition. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan spokesman stated: “Yasukuni is an inappropriate place for Japan’s leader to pay respects. It is specific to one religion, Shintoism. It is the former home of state Shintoism, the religious creed behind Japan’s wartime aggression.”

A poll conducted by NTV found public opinion divided on the issue with nearly 50 percent in support of Koizumi’s visit and around 40 percent opposed. Shigenori Nishikawa, who heads a group of relatives of the war dead opposed to the shrine, told the *Financial Times*: “Mr Koizumi is trying to sanction Yasukuni.” Expressing his hostility to those responsible for Japan’s wartime regime, he said: “I think it is very strange that those who ordered the invasion [in Asia] and those who were sent out to fight are all enshrined in the same place.”

Koizumi faced opposition within his own cabinet—most publicly from Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka, who expressed concern about the potential impact on Japan’s relations within the region. A comment in the *Japan Times* expressed similar fears that the visit would divert the government’s attention from more pressing matters, in particular the imposition of radical economic restructuring measures. The newspaper declared that “Mr Koizumi has committed a folly,” adding: “It only serves to make many Japanese suspect that the nation’s top official lacks integrity, a quality that is essential in steering the nation in these difficult times.”

Koizumi’s visit was not, however, a mistake or a personal foible. He was well aware of the opposition at home and abroad but went ahead anyway. Far from being a diversion from the economic tasks at hand, powerful sections of the Japanese ruling class regard the resurrection of rightwing nationalism as an essential political ingredient for implementing its program. The stirring up of patriotic fervour serves a dual purpose: to

establish a social base for the government against the opposition that will inevitably develop against the impact of the economic restructuring measures, and also for a more aggressive assertion of Japan’s interests, economically and militarily, against those of its American and European rivals.

For all of Koizumi’s protestations that his visit to the Yasukuni shrine was peaceful and innocent in intent, his stance on other issues indicates otherwise. While pledging that “Japan will never go to war again,” the prime minister has repeatedly indicated his intention of finding a way around the so-called pacifist clause in the post-war constitution restricting the role of the Japanese military. And, at the same time as saying that Japan caused “immeasurable disaster and pain” in the region during World War II, Koizumi has been embroiled in a controversy with China and South Korea over a school textbook that either covers up or justifies the most notorious aspects of Japan’s wartime role in Asia.

Such sentiments are never far below the surface in the LDP and ruling circles in Japan where there has been no fundamental break with the traditions that fostered prewar militarism. As the defeated power and, moreover, one that was heavily dependent on its alliance with the US, the ruling class in the postwar period largely kept its thoughts to itself. When senior LDP figures blurted out a justification for Japanese militarism the remarks were treated as an embarrassing aberration. Just over a year ago, Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori was portrayed as a buffoon for his “gaffes” hinting at a divine status for the emperor.

Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni and open espousal of rightwing causes thus mark a break from the past. Having come to power by challenging the LDP hierarchy and factional system, he enjoys, for the moment, a degree of popularity that the Japanese media has encouraged and promoted. Sections of the ruling elite calculate that this “maverick” can be exploited not only to implement an economic agenda that will prove to be highly unpopular, but to turn the axis of official politics sharply in a rightwing direction.



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