

# Japan renames holiday to honour wartime Emperor Hirohito

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On May 13, the Japanese parliament passed a bill to rename a national holiday in honour of the late Emperor Hirohito, in whose name Japanese imperialism carried out a brutal campaign of colonial expansion and militarism from 1931 to 1945.

By an overwhelming vote of 202 to 14 in the upper house of parliament, the national holiday on April 29—Hirohito’s birthday—will change from Greenery Day to Showa Day in 2007. The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the New Komeito Party supported the decision by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, while the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) opposed it.

Until 1945, April 29 was called *Tenchosetsu*—the day to pray for the long life of the emperor. Hirohito’s birthday only continued to be observed following the World War due to the actions of US imperialism. As part of the measures to revive Japanese capitalism, the American occupation authority exempted Hirohito from charges of war crimes and left the emperor in place as the symbolic head of state.

Following Hirohito’s death in 1989, April 29 was established as a national holiday, but was called Greenery Day ostensibly due to the emperor’s interests in biology. Greenery Day, implying a holiday celebrating nature, was proposed in opposition to a right-wing nationalist campaign, which insisted on “Showa”, the title given to the period of Hirohito’s reign from 1926.

While the word Showa means “enlightened peace”, for the Japanese working class and the people of Asia there was nothing enlightened or peaceful about the first two decades of Hirohito’s reign. They produced dictatorship, colonial invasions, unspeakable atrocities and the horrors of World War II.

Attempts in 2001 and 2003 to rename April 29 as Showa Day were defeated, primarily by the votes of JCP

and SDP legislators in the upper house of parliament. These two social reformist parties are thoroughly discredited, however, and suffered a debacle in last year’s elections. With Democratic Party support, Koizumi has now been able to push through the change.

The official commemoration of Hirohito’s reign is another attempt by Koizumi to promote Japanese nationalism and glorify its militarist past. Just last month, amid the anti-Japanese protests in China and South Korea, Tokyo deliberately approved school history textbooks authored by the right-wing Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which whitewash the wartime atrocities of Japanese military.

Seiji Mataichi, a SDP lawmaker who opposed the bill, told reporters: “The ruling Liberal Democratic Party wants to promote nationalism through this. Why, in this year, the 60th anniversary of the end of the war, do we have to create a Showa Day? This is inviting opposition from neighbouring countries such as China and South Korea.”

Since Koizumi came to power in April 2001, both he and members of his government have provoked tensions with Japan’s neighbours by worshipping at the Yasukuni Shrine where convicted war criminals are buried, including the wartime Japanese prime minister Hideki Tojo.

Other symbols of imperial Japan are being revived and patriotism pushed in the schools. Despite considerable opposition, the right-wing nationalist Tokyo governor, Shintaro Ishihara, has forced teachers and students in the Japanese capital to stand for the raising of the national flag and the singing of the national anthem. In violation of basic democratic rights, Ishihara disciplined 180 teachers in the city’s high schools last year who refused to do so. Ishihara is a long-time proponent of Japanese remilitarisation and maintains that Japan’s expansionism in World War II sought to liberate Asia from European

colonial rule.

The promotion of nationalism and efforts to rehabilitate Japan's wartime past have accompanied Koizumi's strategy of using the Bush administration's "war on terror" to assert a more aggressive international posture by Japanese imperialism.

Koizumi's government sent warships to support the US military operation against Afghanistan, and has deployed troops to take part in the US-led occupation of Iraq—the first time since the end of World War II that Japanese troops have entered a war zone. The DPJ and the LDP's coalition partner, New Komeito, supported these measures.

New Komeito's support for Koizumi's agenda has been a particularly revealing indication of the political shift within the Japanese ruling class. The party previously formally denounced militarism and opposed commemoration of the wartime era. It derives much of its support from Japanese Buddhists, who were suppressed under the wartime regime.

The opposition Democratic Party has also shifted to support militarism. In its statement supporting Koizumi's recent order to extend the deployment of Japanese troops in Iraq, for example, the DPJ declared: "The DPJ has maintained its attitude that anti-terrorism measures are important and that use of Self-Defence Forces (SDF) is an option if truly necessary as long as civilian control by the Diet is absolutely maintained."

The view in Japanese ruling circles that military power is now a necessary foreign policy instrument stems from the intractable economic crisis of Japanese capitalism and the conflicts with other powers for markets and sources of raw materials. Japan's economy has stagnated for close to 15 years, and inequality and social divisions are accumulating within the country.

Tensions between Japan and its neighbours are already high. The South Korean government has publicly declared its opposition to Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Sino-Japanese rivalries are even more acute, with territorial disputes over control of potential oil and gas fields in the East China Sea. The conflicts extend further afield as well. Last month, Koizumi visited India immediately after Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao left. In order to undercut China's overtures to New Delhi, Koizumi promised increased investment.

There are parallels in the present situation with the processes that took place during the 1930s. As the weakest among the major imperialist states, the Japanese bourgeoisie increasingly turned to militarism abroad and

ruthless political repression at home, in order to secure its interests. Intense nationalist ideology was employed to tie the Japanese masses to the ruling class as they embarked on a series of colonial conquests and eventually war with their main rival, the United States.

Bitter memories of Japanese militarism still exist in the region. The Korean peninsula and the areas of China occupied by the Japanese military were transformed into exclusive business zones, with their resources and markets set aside for exploitation by Japanese corporations. Millions of Chinese, Koreans and others were forced to work as slave labour in mines and factories owned by companies like Mitsubishi. Tens of thousands died due to the brutal conditions. In all, as many as 15 million Chinese lost their lives under Japanese imperialist rule.

The Japanese government is still operating disposal plants in China to eliminate the estimated 700,000 chemical weapons the Japanese Army abandoned in the country. Last year, two children in north-eastern Jilin province were injured by leftover poisonous gas. Some 2,000 Chinese have been killed by these chemical agents since the war.

To honour the emperor in whose name this was carried out smacks of another calculated provocation by Koizumi, aimed at generating conflict with South Korea and China and using it to whip up nationalist sentiment at home. Despite the protests from Seoul and Beijing, Koizumi declared again on Monday that he would also continue his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine: "I will decide appropriately when to go. Other countries should not interfere with ways countries pay tribute to the war dead."



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