

Japanese government promotes “Sovereignty Restoration Day”

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government last month officially commemorated, for the first time, the anniversary of the day that Japan recovered its sovereignty from American occupation, following its defeat in World War II.

“Restoration of Sovereignty Day,” proclaimed on April 28, saw a celebration of Japanese nationalism and militarism, with the prime minister and other cabinet members leading cheers of “Banzai!”—or “Long live!”—to Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko.

Some 400 members of parliament and other officials, as well as by the emperor and empress, attended the ceremony, held at a parliamentary museum in Tokyo. In the past, gatherings to mark April 28, 1952—the day the San Francisco Peace Treaty took effect and the US occupation of Japan ended—were only held privately among conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members and right-wing groups. This time, however, the LDP harnessed the power of the state and imperial authority behind its nationalist agenda.

At the ceremony, Abe declared: “I want to make this a day when we can renew our sense of hope and determination for the future.” It was a “turning point,” he added. “We have a responsibility to make Japan a strong and resolute country.”

The ceremony dovetailed with efforts by Abe’s administration to push for constitutional changes. Japan’s conservative right, and Abe himself, have long denounced the present “pacifist” constitution as one imposed by the United States, and called for amendments to allow Japan to more openly assert its interests internationally with military force.

The LDP’s proposed constitution would upgrade the emperor’s status from symbol of national unity to actual “head of state” and abolish the “pacifist” Article 9, which bans the use of force in international disputes.

As in the 1930s, the revival of Japanese militarism is bound up with legitimising repression of working-class opposition. The draft constitution would remove a clause that formally guarantees some basic democratic rights as universal and inviolable, and instead prescribe “duties,” such as submission to “public order.” The military would be empowered to maintain that “public order.”

The LDP and the newly-formed Japan Restoration Party (JRP) first want to amend Article 96, which stipulates the conditions for constitutional amendments, in order to make further changes easier.

Reuters reported growing worries in Japan that Abe’s constitutional reform would “open the door to an authoritarian state,” akin to that in which Abe’s grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, served as a wartime cabinet minister. Kishi was arrested but never tried as a war criminal. Instead, in the face of massive working-class struggles following the war, the US occupation authorities resurrected Kishi and other elements of the former regime as part of their efforts to stabilise Japanese capitalism. Kishi served as prime minister from 1957–60, but was forced to resign after huge protests against his signing of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Moves towards re-militarisation by the ruling class have historically run up against strong anti-militarist popular sentiment. Anti-war protests erupted in 2003 against the deployment of Japanese ground troops to assist the US invasion of Iraq. Abe’s last stint as prime minister ended when he was forced out in 2007, after only a year in office, largely because of popular opposition to his push for a continued Japanese naval refueling mission in the Indian Ocean to support the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

Abe is well aware of the overwhelming opposition to

his revival of Japanese militarist symbols. The government doctored the video recording of the “Restoration of Sovereignty Day” ceremony on its web site. Part of the old imperial cheer—“Long live the emperor!”—was muted to simply “Long live!” Chanting “Long live the Emperor!” three times was obligatory in the ceremony of the old Imperial Diet before 1945.

The “sovereignty restoration” ceremony followed a visit, earlier in April, by some 170 lawmakers, including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, to the Yasukuni Shrine, which houses 14 convicted Class-A war criminals, and other war dead. Abe did not personally attend but sanctioned the visit. He has also moved toward denying that Japan had invaded other Asian countries before and during World War II, saying there was no internationally accepted definition of “invasion.” He has refused to fully endorse the apology for Japan’s aggression issued by a previous government in 1995, or the 1993 apology over the Japanese use of Asian sex slaves during the war.

Abe’s jingoistic moves in recent weeks included declaring that it would be “natural” to use force to repel any Chinese attempt to land on the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets; calling for a discussion in parliament about ending military dependence on the US; and campaigning in military fatigues aboard a tank. He has even posed for photographs in a fighter jet with the number 731—the designation of a notorious, secret Japanese military unit that performed chemical and biological experiments on Chinese people during World War II.

This political climate has produced an outright apology for Japanese imperialist aggression by Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto, a member of the even more right-wing JRP. Hashimoto claimed on Tuesday that the sexual slavery imposed on tens of thousands of “comfort women” in subjugated countries during World War II was “necessary” and “understandable.”

The whipping up of Japanese nationalism has caused some apprehension in the US. Citing an unnamed American official, the *Financial Times* last month reported that the Obama administration “had privately expressed concern to Japanese diplomats” and that “Washington is particularly worried about a possible deterioration in relations between Japan and South Korea,” which was occupied by Japan between 1910 and 1945. Tensions between Japan and South Korea

would cut across US efforts to bolster the use of both as allies against China.

A US Congressional Research Service report, “Japan-US Relations: Issues for Congress,” released on May 1, noted that Abe’s cabinet reflected “ultra-nationalist views” that “have raised concern that Tokyo could upset regional relations in ways that hurt US interests.”

By encouraging Tokyo to become a militarily strong power, President Obama’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia to strengthen alliances and military partnerships to encircle China has unleashed forces that could potentially turn against American imperialism’s own interests, as in World War II.



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