

Far-right Japan Restoration Party defends wartime abuse of “comfort women”

John Chan
23 May 2013

Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, a leader of the far-right Japan Restoration Party (JRP), set off a firestorm in Asia and within Japan last week, by declaring that the Japanese army’s policy of keeping thousands of women as sex slaves throughout Asia during World War II was necessary.

At a May 13 press conference, Hashimoto declared: “If you want them [troops fighting a war] to have a rest in such a situation, a comfort women system is necessary.” Hashimoto was defending one of Japanese imperialism’s most horrific wartime crimes. Up to 200,000 women were conscripted by the Imperial Japanese army in occupied China, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines and Indonesia, supposedly to maintain discipline among Japanese troops.

Hashimoto’s comments also enraged the population of Okinawa, a Japanese island which houses 32 US military bases. Echoing the arguments he used to justify the abuse of “comfort women,” he told reporters that earlier this month he had told a US commander in Okinawa that base-related crimes, especially sex assaults, could be reduced if US troops were encouraged to use the local sex industry. He said this would control “the sexual energy of those tough guys.”

There is substantial opposition in Japan, especially in Okinawa, to the stationing of US forces under US-Japan Security Treaty, under which US troops are not subject to Japanese law.

Hashimoto’s provocative comments reflect a broader climate created by the encouragement of far-right Japanese chauvinism by the entire political establishment, including the bourgeois opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and its pseudo-left allies. In 2010, after the removal of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, the DPJ committed itself to the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot to Asia,”

turning Japan into the premier bastion of US-led intrigue against China.

Encouraged by the US to make Japan a strong military power, DPJ Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda moved to purchase the Senkakus/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea from its private owners. This exacerbated the confrontation between China and Japan over the islands.

The JRP was established last September, as pseudo-left forces such as the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP), openly supported Noda’s claim that “Japan’s possession of the Senkaku Islands is legitimate based on history and international law.”

Hashimoto’s Osaka Ishi no Kai was initially a right-wing party focusing on slashing the state work force and carrying out free-market restructuring. His party merged with former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara’s Sunrise Party, after he resigned from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ahead of last December’s Lower House. The formation includes a dozen former lawmakers from both the LDP and the DPJ.

Proclaiming itself a “third” alternative to the two discredited main parties, the JRP won 54 seats, becoming the third-largest party in Japan in the Lower House elections. This reflected the political confusion and the rightward shift in official Japanese politics amid mass public disillusionment with the DPJ—which had broken every promise it made when elected in 2009, ousting the LDP from a half-century of nearly unbroken rule.

Far from implementing promised social spending and a pledge to remove US bases out of Okinawa, the DPJ increased the regressive consumption tax and endorsed Obama’s “pivot to Asia.” Amid mass hostility to the DPJ, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe led the LDP back into

office in December elections, winning approximately 40 percent of the total vote.

Building on the chauvinist climate created by Japan's bourgeois "left," Abe has moved to rehabilitate Japanese imperialism's bloody record in Asia during World War II. Earlier this year, he suggested he would review a 1993 official apology by then-chief cabinet secretary Yohei Kono on the issue of "comfort women." Moreover, in a parliamentary discussion last month over another major official statement in 1995 apologising for Japanese colonial rule in Asia, he said that the definition of "aggression" is not internationally established.

At the same time, several ministers of Abe's cabinet visited the Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead, including war criminals, are honoured.

Both the South Korean and Chinese governments issued strong protests against Hashimoto's comments. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki attacked Hashimoto's comments as "outrageous and offensive," as the Japanese "comfort women" policy was "clearly a grave human rights violation of enormous proportions."

Underlying Washington's protests is unease over the visible connection between US pressure on Japan to re-arm and aggressively pursue a pro-US military policy, and the explosion of the most noxious, fascist sentiments in the Japanese ruling class. In the short term, Washington is concerned that this might harm South Korean-Japanese relations and cut across US efforts to build a trilateral US-Japanese-South Korean alliance against China.

More broadly, however, the imperialist bourgeoisies on both sides of the Pacific are concerned that such open endorsement of imperialist crimes as Hashimoto's might provoke opposition in the working class.

Amid the public fury in Japan, the LDP is seeking to distance itself from Hashimoto. Abe insisted that his government "has a different position" than Hashimoto's, adding: "I feel both great sadness and the deepest regret for the pain and suffering experienced at that time by the comfort women."

LDP secretary-general Shigeru Ishiba declared that if politicians "are not careful about what they say, they will undermine Japan's interests."

Hashimoto was forced to back off last Thursday, calling the enslavement of "comfort women" a "disgraceful act" that should not be repeated. However,

he added that Japan was not alone in exploiting women or committing other crimes during the war.

The JRP was further hit by the comment by a lawmaker Shingo Nishimura, who declared last Friday that because there are "many South Korean prostitutes roaming around in Japan," "We should say, 'You must be a South Korean comfort woman' in Osaka."

The JRP cynically expelled Nishimura to save appearances, and Hashimoto said he was "extremely sorry."

The JRP is now divided. One JRP lawmaker told *Asahi Shimbun* that "the uproar has truly harmed Japan's national interest," while another proposed that Hashimoto submit his resignation.

The reaction by the JRP's top leadership made clear, however, that they are calculating that the increasingly chauvinist atmosphere created by the "pivot to Asia" and the Japanese bourgeoisie's moves to re-militarise its policies will ultimately play in their favour.

JRP co-leader Shintaro Ishihara, who supported Hashimoto's position on "comfort women," attacked him from the right, for not defending Japan's wartime policies. Ishihara publicly criticised Hashimoto for falsely referring to Japan's war as one of "aggression." He said that the "correct perspective" on the war is the official position of Japan's wartime regime, which claimed it was "liberating" Asia from the Western colonial powers.

"It is wrong if Japanese define their own history in accordance with the set of values determined by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal," he said.

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was set up by the US after the war to prosecute the leaders of Imperial Japan for waging a war of aggression.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact