

Japanese PM flags propaganda offensive to “restore Japan’s honour”

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13 December 2014

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has narrowly focussed his campaign for tomorrow’s national election on economic issues, claiming that his so-called Abenomics will lift the economy out of recession. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with the complicity of opposition parties, has been largely silent on its record of remilitarisation that has provoked widespread opposition.

There is no doubt, however, that if re-elected, Abe will accelerate his government’s drive to transform Japan into a “strong nation” with a “strong military.” A key element of this agenda is the whitewashing of the war crimes of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s. Buried in the LDP’s election program is a pledge to expand and intensify this effort to rewrite history.

The LDP platform commits the party to “categorically counter groundless criticism based on falsities and take action to restore Japan’s honour and national interests through such means as transmitting information to the international community.” Abe has already instructed the foreign ministry to request an additional 50 billion yen (\$423 million) in the next budget to mount this propaganda offensive, including the establishment of a “Japan House” in the US, Britain and other countries to conduct “public relations” activities.

The government has already been waging a campaign over the past two years to falsify the historical record. Abe signalled his intentions when he paid a formal visit last December to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead, including class-A war criminals. In the same month, he installed four right-wing nationalists on the board of governors of NHK, the country’s public broadcaster.

The new chairman Katsuto Momii immediately

declared that NHK’s programming would echo the government’s politics. “When the government is saying, ‘Right,’ we can’t say, ‘Left,’” he said. Momii provoked a public furore in January with remarks justifying the systematic abuse of wartime “comfort women”— a euphemism for tens of thousands of women, mainly from East and South East Asia, who were exploited as sex slaves by the Imperial Army in the 1930s and 1940s.

Since then the government has mounted an offensive on the issue, which has long been a touchstone for right-wing Japanese extremists who deny that the military forced women into sex slavery and insist that the women were willing prostitutes.

The campaign escalated in August after the *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan’s mainstream liberal newspaper, formally retracted articles written in the 1980s and 1990s on “comfort women”, which relied on the memoirs of a former soldier, Seiji Yoshida. His story was called into question by academics and, before he died, Yoshida admitted to changing aspects of what happened.

Abe and his ideological allies have seized on the *Asahi Shimbun*’s retraction to attempt to discredit the entire historical record on the Japanese military’s brutal treatment of “comfort women.” He told parliament in October that “erroneous reporting that Japan was involved in forced sex slavery has damaged our honour around the world.”

Two weeks later, the government dispatched a top diplomat to press Radhika Coomaraswamy, a former UN special rapporteur, to change her authoritative 1996 report on “comfort women” which confirmed that they had been forced into sexual slavery. Coomaraswamy refused, saying that Yoshida’s story was “only one piece of evidence” and that her report was supported by

first-hand testimonies of “a large number of comfort women” whom she had interviewed.

Within Japan, a vicious campaign is underway by extreme nationalists directed in the first instance against the *Asahi Shimbun*, but with the broader intention of silencing any opposition to the government’s historical revisionism. Yoshiko Sakurai, an author and key Abe supporter, declared that the “propaganda newspaper” should cease publication. The right-wing media has accused the newspaper of “treason”, being “anti-Japanese” and an “enemy of the state.” The newspaper’s president stepped down in early December.

A *New York Times* article this month explained that Takashi Uemura, the author of the *Asahi Shimbun* articles, has been targeted by nationalist fanatics. “Tabloids brand him a traitor for disseminating ‘Korean lies’ that they say were part of a smear campaign aimed at settling old scores with Japan. Threats of violence, Mr Uemura says, have cost him one university teaching job and could soon rob him of a second. Ultranationalists have even gone after his children, posting Internet messages urging people to drive his teenage daughter to suicide,” the article stated.

Already the historical record is being rewritten. In September chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga declared that the term “sex slave” was an inappropriate description. In early October the NHK set out guidelines for writers and translators preparing English-language material that banned the use of the words “sex slaves,” “brothels,” and “forced to” in relation to “comfort women.”

One of Abe’s key objectives is to revise or overturn a limited government apology over the Japanese military’s abuse of women issued in 1993, known as the Kono Statement. The government set up a review of the Kono Statement which was published in June. While Abe stopped short of declaring that he would alter the statement, the review called into question the testimonies of former Korean comfort women and was clearly aimed at undermining the apology.

The campaign by Abe and other right-wing nationalists to whitewash the war crimes of the Imperial Army serves very definite contemporary political objectives. Amid the worsening global economic breakdown and rising geo-political tensions, the Abe government is remilitarising in order to

prosecute the interests of Japanese imperialism through military means as it did in the 1930s and 1940s. The propagation of historical lies is aimed at combating widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth.

Over the past two years, Abe has successively increased the military budget—after a decade of decline—established a US-style National Security Council and “reinterpreted” the Japanese constitution to allow “collective self-defence,” that is, participation in US-led wars of aggression. This week, the government’s new state secrets law came into effect, closing off large areas of government from public scrutiny.

While these measures have all provoked widespread public concern and hostility, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and other opposition parties have been largely silent on these issues during the election campaign—indicating their own complicity in the agenda of remilitarisation. The DPJ is nominally opposed to “collective self-defence” but is split over whether to support Abe’s plans for legislation to support his constitutional “reinterpretation.”

Abe has also pulled the establishment media into line. Just after the snap election was announced, the LDP wrote to five major television networks calling for “balanced” coverage of its campaign—not only for its candidates, but in street interviews. It was a signal to an already tame media to further mute any criticisms and a sign that the Abe government will continue its ideological offensive in the likely event that it wins tomorrow’s election.



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