

Japanese protests denounce new military legislation

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Protests were held Sunday at different locations in the Japanese capital of Tokyo to denounce the government's new military legislation, currently being debated in the legislature. If passed, the bills would greatly expand the role and reach of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). They were submitted to parliament in May after receiving the backing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito.

Around 25,000 protesters surrounded the Japanese Diet, or parliament, to voice their opposition to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remilitarization agenda. Demonstrators carried signs reading, "Don't Destroy Article 9." This article of the Japanese constitution is known as the pacifist clause, renouncing war.

Young people conducted separate protests. In Tokyo's Shibuya district, youth and students denounced the legislation and war. Haruka Suzuki, a high school student, told the media: "We (students) have no right to vote in elections, but we are strongly against war."

Others also drew attention to the fact that constitutional scholars, including one hand-picked by the ruling party, recently declared the military legislation unconstitutional. Nobuyoshi Hatae, a university student, said: "People in younger generations are feeling a sense of crisis now that constitutional scholars said no to the bills."

Another protest was held Monday, in which 300 people gathered near the Diet, carrying similar banners as those on Sunday.

On June 4, the three law scholars selected by different parties each testified at the Diet that Abe's legislation was unconstitutional. "Paragraph 2 of Article 9 does not grant any legal standing for military activities abroad," Setsu Kobayashi, a professor emeritus of

constitutional law at Keio University, said. "Going to war abroad to help a friendly nation is a violation of Article 9."

Kobayashi, chosen by the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), is a longtime supporter of amending the constitution in favor of remilitarization, but opposes Abe's support for the US, backing a more independent stance from Washington. Much in the same way as the DPJ does, he proposes more of a fig leaf of constitutionality to legitimize his views, which are unpopular with the Japanese public as a whole.

The two other scholars, Yasuo Hasebe and Eiji Sasada, both constitutional law professors at Waseda University, were chosen by the ruling LDP and the Japan Innovation Party, another right-wing party, respectively. Hasebe testified in support of the legality of the anti-democratic state secrecy law in 2013, which went into effect last December, another component of Japan's remilitarization.

The government, however, simply brushed aside their current legal concerns. "Pointing out that the legislation is unconstitutional is off the mark," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said.

Almost two-thirds of the population opposes the military legislation, while 80 percent believe the government has not explained the bills satisfactorily. Abe's approval rating has fallen to 41.1 percent, the lowest since he became prime minister in 2012.

However, many of the protests are organized by groups with ties to the various opposition parties in Japan. The DPJ, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party have all ostensibly come out against the military bills.

In reality, these parties, in one way or another, have backed Japan's remilitarization. "Politicians must not

enact laws beyond the limits of the constitution,” the DPJ’s acting head Akira Nagatsuma said. The DPJ also spoke out in a similar manner against the state secrecy law. After its passage, however, the opposition party merely called for additional oversight, thereby legitimizing the anti-democratic law.

The JCP’s chairman Kazuo Shi said on Sunday: “We want to abolish the war legislation that is the worst in our postwar history.” Despite this rhetoric, the JCP has wholeheartedly supported Japanese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which are at the heart of the current tensions between Tokyo and Beijing. This issue has been whipped up by Japan and the US to paint China as an aggressor, in part to justify the military legislation and the US-Japanese build-up against Beijing.

Contrary to the government’s claims, the bills are not defensive in nature, nor would they “ensure peace.” The legislation would allow the Japanese SDF, the de facto military, to take part in wars of aggression, by codifying the cabinet’s reinterpretation of the constitution last summer to allow “collective self-defense.” So long as military measures are taken in step with an ally, namely the United States, Japan is legally able to go to war, according to Tokyo.

One of Abe’s bills would revise 10 existing laws, while a second bill corresponds to new “Defense Guidelines” between the US and Japan. The revised guidelines were drawn up last October, and Abe approved them during his visit to the US in April. The guidelines were initially implemented in 1978, aimed at the Soviet Union. They were revised once in 1997 and are now being further adapted to take aim at China as Washington aggressively confronts Beijing throughout the region in its “pivot to Asia.”

The new legislation would allow the government to dispatch the SDF anywhere in the world without a special law from the Diet, which is currently needed. Only Diet approval, a concession to the LDP’s coalition partner Komeito, would be required at the start of a new mission. The revisions would enable Japan to provide logistical support to the US military, as well as engage in other joint operations.

With the current Diet session set to conclude on June 24, the Abe government, the LDP, and Komeito are preparing to extend it until September in order to pass the military bills this summer.



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