Japanese emperor cautiously resists constitutional change

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Japan's Emperor Akihito delivered a rare pre-recorded speech to the public on Monday, amid intense speculation that the 82-year-old monarch desires to abdicate. Without directly suggesting he be allowed to step aside, Akihito expressed concern that his age and health would limit his ability to be as active as in the past. Currently there is no legal provision for him to abdicate.

The speech, however, reflected broader issues. While the constitution and the law prevent him from publicly intervening in politics, Akihito's decision is a sign of conflicts in ruling circles over the efforts by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government to revise the constitution and remilitarize Japan.

Every word spoken by the emperor or his family members is carefully prepared and vetted by the imperial household and its officials. Akihito, rather than backing Abe's attempts to revise the constitution, instead cautiously implied support for the status quo.

Akihito declared that ever since his accession to the throne, he had contemplated "what is the desirable role of the emperor, who is designated to be the symbol of the state by the Constitution of Japan."

Akihito noted that, as emperor, he did not have powers related to government. He hoped that "the imperial family can continue to be with the people at all times and can work together with the people to build the future of our country, and that the duties of the emperor as the symbol of the state can continue steadily without a break."

His references to the emperor as "the symbol of state" are very deliberate. The phase was inserted into the post-war Japanese constitution by the American occupation forces, which had wanted to abolish the position, as a compromise with the Japanese establishment, which was determined to retain the emperor in some form.

The emperor had been the linchpin of the modern Japanese state since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the rallying point for militarism during the 1930s and 1940s. By reducing the emperor to "the symbol of the state," the constitution aimed to ensure that the emperor would never again play a political role.

By stressing that the emperor's present role should "continue steadily without a break," Akihito was not so subtly taking aim at Abe and his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is seeking a wholesale revision of the constitution. In particular, the LDP is proposing not only to change Article 9 that restricts the ability of the Japanese military to wage war. It wants to allow the emperor to play a far more active political role by altering his status from "symbol of the state" to "head of state."

The LDP draft also removes the present stipulation that the emperor "has the obligation to respect and uphold the constitution." The change would pave the way for returning the emperor to his pre-war role as a semi-divine figure, who was above the law and central to the militarist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. The amendment is of a piece with other constitutional changes to restrict basic democratic rights.

While treading very cautiously to avoid the appearance of stepping into political matters, Akihito's speech has been viewed as a rebuke to Abe and the LDP. An article on the *Daily Beast* website noted: "Media reports in Japan already are calling the consideration of abdication the current emperor's final act of resistance against the prime minister, a bid to halt the return to Japan's aggressive pre-war attitudes and policies."

While one should not overestimate Akihito's "resistance," his speech undoubtedly reflects broader

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concerns in the Japanese establishment that Abe's agenda of remilitarization and his confrontational stance toward China could damage Japan's economic interests and embroil the country in a disastrous war.

The speech has provoked significant public sympathy for Akihito's wish to be permitted to abdicate. Without elaborating, Abe responded by declaring: "Considering His Majesty's age, the burden of his official duties and his anxieties, we must think carefully about what can be done."

Abdication would require a change to the current Imperial House Law that holds no provision for abdication. However, Abe and right-wing nationalists have been cool to the idea of revising the law, believing that any changes could open the door for discussion on other changes.

Akihito's abdication would involve other complex issues of imperial succession. Naruhito, the Crown Prince, is next in line for the throne, but has only a daughter and no son. If he were to be installed as emperor, the issue of Japan having a female emperor would be posed, something to which Abe and his right-wing allies have been resistant.

Moreover, both Akihito and Naruhito have been indirectly critical of remilitarization in recent years. Last August, on the 70th anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender, Akihito stated: "Reflecting on our past and bearing in mind the feelings of deep remorse over the last war, I earnestly hope that the ravages of war will never be repeated." This choice of words went further than Abe, who simply repeated the carefully-crafted expressions of "sorrow" delivered by past prime ministers, and called for an end to even such limited apologies from Japan.

Naruhito has often used the occasion of an annual address on his birthday to speak out. He stated in February 2015: "I myself did not experience the war ... but I think that it is important today, when memories of the war are fading, to look back humbly on the past and correctly pass on the tragic experiences and history Japan pursued from the generation which experienced the war to those without direct knowledge."

The reference to a correct history was interpreted as an implied criticism of the Abe government's attempts to whitewash the crimes of World War II, including the Rape of Nanjing and the use of hundreds of thousands of so-called comfort women as sex slaves by the Japanese military. These concerted efforts by Abe and other right-wing nationalists to downplay or outright deny these events are part of the ideological preparation for future wars.

These criticisms do not alter the fact that the post of emperor of Japan is entirely anachronistic and reactionary. While he might be something of an obstacle to Abe, Akihito remains a representative and defender of the interests of Japanese imperialism. Akihito and the layers of the ruling class that he represents have no fundamental differences with the agenda of Japanese remilitarization and support for the US "pivot to Asia" and the preparations for war with China.

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