

Scandal exposes Japanese government's ultra-right ties

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is embroiled in a widening scandal over his alleged involvement with a private elementary school project in Osaka by Moritomo Gakuen, an extreme-right educational organisation. The allegations, which also involve Abe's wife Akie, have contributed to falling opinion polls for Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government.

In sworn testimony to the Japanese parliament last Thursday, Moritomo Gakuen head Yasunori Kagoike added further fuel to the controversy swirling around Abe. He confirmed he received a sizeable donation for the school from Abe via Akie in September 2015. "She said 'please, this is from Shinzo Abe,' and gave me an envelope with 1 million yen (\$US9,000) in it," he said.

Abe flatly denied making a donation. However, Kagoike declared: "Abe's wife apparently says she doesn't remember this at all, but since this was a matter of honour to us, I remember it quite vividly." Akie was named as "honorary principal" of the school until she abruptly resigned after the scandal broke.

Whether or not money changed hands, Abe and his wife are clearly in sympathy with Moritomo Gakuen's curriculum and methods. While the school project has been shelved, the organisation already operates a kindergarten in Osaka in which young children are required to recite the Imperial Rescript on Education—a 19th century edict issued by the Emperor calling for loyalty and filial piety and hailing the glory of the Japanese empire. The school has been accused of sending a letter to parents expressing hatred toward Koreans and Chinese.

The alleged donation is not strictly illegal, but the controversy first erupted in February over allegations that government influence was enabling Moritomo Gakuen to purchase land for the new school at a

fraction of its worth. Kagoike testified in parliament last week he believed some sort of political intervention took place as the process began to move more rapidly after he began asking for assistance.

Kagoike later told the media he believed finance ministry officials, whom he did not name, helped in the sale, but he did not think Abe was directly involved. His organisation bought the land for 134 million yen (about \$1.2 million) or about one seventh of its assessed value—supposedly discounted to cover waste disposal costs. Kagoike defended the discount, claiming it needed "a lot of money to take out the household waste in the land and replace it with good soil."

The scandal has drawn in other political figures close to Abe, providing a glimpse of the network of right-wing nationalist organisations connected to his government. Defence Minister Tomomi Inada was forced to apologise to parliament and retract a statement that she had never represented Moritomo Gakuen in court. As a lawyer, Inada appeared in court on its behalf in 2004, and defended other extremist organisations in high-profile cases.

Three other politicians—two from the LDP and one from the ultra-nationalist Nippon Ishin—denied assisting Moritomo Gakuen after being named in parliament last week. In Osaka, the organisation asked the prefectural government to relax the restrictions on setting up private schools, which was granted in April 2013 when Ichiro Matsui, a close political ally of Abe, was governor.

Abe and the overwhelming majority of his cabinet, including Defence Minister Inada, are members of Nippon Kaigi, an extreme nationalist organisation that seeks to re-establish Japan as a "proud nation." It promotes the necessity for a strong military, the writing

of the constitution to remove restrictions on the armed forces and patriotic education, whitewashing the crimes of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Moritomo Gakuen head Kagoike was a member of Nippon Kaigi but claims to have left in 2011. He boasted that the school he planned to establish would be the first Shinto primary school in Japan with a shrine housed on the grounds. The organisation claimed the shrine would help connect the school and “the roots of our country.” Shintoism was the state religion of the pre-World War II militarist regime in Japan that revered the emperor as a god.

The Imperial Rescript on Education was a key element of this militarist ideology, read in schools and enshrined alongside a portrait of the emperor until after the war. The document refers to the people of Japan not as citizens but “subjects of the emperor” and declares: “Should an emergency arise, muster your courage under a cause and dedicate yourselves to the good of the Imperial state.”

During the post-war US occupation of Japan, the parliament officially repudiated the rescript as incompatible with the country’s democratic constitution. Successive governments have held that the imperial edict was invalidated by the adoption of the Fundamental Law on Education. The promotion of the rescript is part and parcel of efforts by government-linked organisations such as Moritomo Gakuen and Nippon Kaigi to whip up patriotism and militarism.

Since coming to power in 2012, Abe has taken significant steps to remilitarise Japan. These include boosting the military budget, removing constitutional constraints on “collective self-defence”—that is, participating in US-led wars—and establishing a US-style National Security Council to centralise military strategy, planning and operations in the prime minister’s office (see: “Japanese imperialism rearms”).

Abe has also encouraged an ideological offensive designed to cover up the past crimes of Japanese imperialism and stir up militarism, particularly among young people. Significantly, Defence Minister Inada has repeatedly defended the use of the imperial rescript in schools. Asked about it in parliament in February, she declared: “I don’t agree with the education ministry saying that there’s a problem having students memorise the rescript by heart.”

The revival of Japanese militarism is another sign of

the deepening crisis of Japanese and global capitalism, which is fuelling geo-political tensions and the drive to war. The Abe government’s determination to rearm reflects the sentiment in ruling circles that Japanese imperialism must be able to use all means, including military, to prosecute its economic and strategic interests against its rivals.



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