

Scandal surrounding Japanese prime minister deepens

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has become embroiled once again in recent weeks in the scandal over a land sale to a far-right private school in Osaka Prefecture. The affair could negatively impact Abe's chances of remaining head of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in a leadership vote this September and thus extending his term as prime minister.

The finance ministry, which oversaw the bureau involved in the land sale, admitted on March 12 to removing the names of figures, including Abe, his wife Akie, Finance Minister Taro Aso, and the right-wing extremist group Nippon Kaigi, from at least 14 documents last year related to the sale. The *Asahi Shimbun* originally reported in February 2017 that the ultranationalist school, Moritomo Gakuen, purchased public land from the government in 2016 at approximately 14 percent its market value.

In an indication of a broader cover-up, a finance ministry official was found dead on March 7, leaving an apparent suicide note expressing fear of being made the scapegoat for the scandal. According to the NHK public broadcaster on March 15, the note read: "Some parts of the documents were too detailed, and my boss forced me to rewrite it. If this continues, I will be forced to bear all the responsibility by myself."

Moritomo Gakuen operated a kindergarten in Osaka Prefecture until it lost its license last May. It intended to use the land supplied by the government to construct and operate a full elementary school. The school principal, Yasunori Kagoike, who has ties to Nippon Kaigi, and his wife, Junko, were arrested last July and remain in jail on charges of receiving illegal subsidies.

Kagoike implicated the prime minister's wife in pushing the land deal, according to lawmakers who visited him in jail on Friday. Akie Abe is alleged to

have lobbied on behalf of the school and was even made its honorary principal before resigning after the deal became public.

Masato Imai, of the conservative Kib? no T? (Party of Hope), said Kagoike had been "asked whether Akie Abe had praised the land and said to please go ahead with the project, a comment that had been deleted from finance ministry documents." Kagoike had said "there was 'no mistake' that she said something along those lines and that she received reports regarding negotiations to purchase the land."

Prime Minister Abe apologized for the scandal, but maintains he was both unaware of the discounted land sale or the removal of his and other names from the documents. His approval rating has fallen below 40 percent, down 9.4 points this month, and regular protests have taken place outside his office. In an attempt to deflect criticism, he claimed during an Upper House budget committee session to "strongly feel responsibility as the head of the administrative branch."

The investigation is ongoing. Nobuhisa Sagawa, who led the finance ministry's financial bureau, which oversaw the land sale and document falsification, will testify before lawmakers of the National Diet on March 27. He already resigned, on March 9, from his new position as head of the National Tax Agency.

While all the facts may not yet be revealed, the scandal again highlights the intimate connections between Abe's government and far-right extremist groups like Nippon Kaigi, to which Abe and most of his cabinet ministers belong. These extremists have long maintained that Japan must be able to pursue its imperialist ambitions using military force and that symbols such as the emperor and state-Shintoism should be promoted to encourage nationalism and militarism.

Such groups regard Japan as a victim in World War II and that war crimes like the Rape of Nanjing in 1937-38 or abuse of sex slaves either did not occur or were somehow justified by the nature of war.

The Moritomo Gakuen curriculum indoctrinates young children with these ultranationalist conceptions, including by forcing the students to recite the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education, which demands loyalty to the emperor and sacrificing one's life to the state when called upon. The school also has been accused of spreading hatred toward Koreans and Chinese.

The majority of the population opposes Japan's remilitarization and regards Article 9 of the country's constitution, known as the pacifist clause, as worth upholding. Article 9 bans a standing military and the use of military force overseas, but successive governments have claimed various loopholes, in order to build up Japan's military—the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

Abe and the LDP intend to revise Article 9 to formally recognize the SDF, but some within the ruling party are using the scandal to attack the prime minister, potentially paving the way for an even more militarist agenda.

The LDP's Constitutional Reform Promotion Headquarters, in charge of drafting a revision, approved Abe's proposal on March 22 to add language to the article recognizing the SDF but leaving the rest of the clause intact. The committee will draw up a final draft in the near future, but after the original deadline of the LDP convention, which took place yesterday.

Shigeru Ishiba, an Abe rival and former defense minister, opposed the constitutional change on the basis that it did not go far enough. He is using the land sale scandal to raise his own prospects of coming to power in September. He stated recently: "Unless we clarify who did this, trust for the Liberal Democratic Party will be shaken."

In a bid to shore up his position, Abe told the LDP convention he "would like to apologise deeply to the public" for the scandal. At the same time, he reassured the party that the government would press ahead with plans to amend the constitution, declaring "now is the time."

For the opposition parties, the scandal provides an opportunity to attack Abe without raising the underlying political issues or risking the prospects of

themselves forming alliances with his rivals in the ruling party.

Whether it is Kib? no T?, the so-called liberal Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, or the Japanese Communist Party, they have pushed the belief that if Abe is forced to resigned or can be removed through an election, somehow the rightward shift toward militarism will be halted. This will not be the case. Only the Japanese working class in conjunction with the international proletariat can put an end to the drive to war.



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