

Japan's emperor abdicates throne

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Japan's Emperor Akihito abdicated his throne on Tuesday and his son Naruhito was installed as emperor the following day. Akihito's abdication has been interpreted as a rebuke to the policies of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his far-right supporters. The imperial transition, however, will not alter the extreme right-wing trajectory of the Japanese government or the attacks taking place on the working class.

At a ceremony Wednesday, Naruhito gave his first address as emperor. As his father had previously, Naruhito referred to his position as "the symbol of the state and the unity of the people of Japan" and pledged to "act according to the constitution." He added, "I sincerely pray for the happiness of the people and the further development of the nation as well as the peace of the world."

The media seizes on such remarks to portray Akihito and Naruhito as liberal and pacifist opponents of the Abe government's push for constitutional revision and remilitarization. By referring to the emperor as the symbol of the state and unity of the people, Naruhito adheres to the present constitution, which bans the emperor from intervening in politics.

Abe intends to revise Article 9 of the constitution, known as the pacifist clause, to specifically recognize the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), the formal name of Japan's armed forces. This is not the only change the far-right has its eyes on.

In 2012, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party released a draft constitution that returns political power to the emperor by making him head of state, while also exempting him or a regent from obeying the constitution. This would pave the way for the emperor to assume the dictatorial role that he held prior to the end of World War II as the linchpin of the state apparatus that waged imperialist war abroad and suppressed the working class at home.

Abe paid lip service to Naruhito at Wednesday's

ceremony, saying, "Emperor, we are looking up to you as a symbol of Japan and the Japanese people, and we are filled with hope for peace and prosperity, a bright future of Japan." He then added, "Everybody is uniting together in heart and building up our new culture in the future."

By a "new culture," Abe means a thorough going revision of history to cover-up the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s and a rejection of the nominal pacifism of post-war Japan.

Japan's ultra-nationalists, including Abe, desire a break with the current 1947 constitution, which was written by United States' occupation forces following the war. These layers complain that the constitution is filled with too many "Western concepts," including democracy and individual rights. They also complain that the constitution handcuffs their ability to pursue Japan's imperialist interests by military force if necessary.

In writing the post-war constitution, the US hoped to eliminate competition in Asia. It was meant to gut the militarist components of the 1889 Meiji constitution. The maintenance of the emperor system, however, was a key part of the preservation of the capitalist state in Japan, as even before the war ended the US saw Japan as an ally against the Soviet Union.

Abe made similar statements about a new culture after the government announced April 1 the name of Naruhito's reign, *Reiwa*, saying the name meant a "culture born and nurtured as people's hearts are beautifully drawn together." While meaning "beautiful harmony," *Reiwa* has drawn criticism. The character *rei* can mean cold or austere, as well as being found in words like *meirei*, meaning order or command. *Wa*, while meaning peace, is also part of *Showa*, the name of the wartime Emperor Hirohito's reign.

Reiwa is also the first name to be drawn from Japanese sources, rather than Chinese classics. Jeff

Kingston, director of Asian Studies at Temple University, Japan, commented in the *South China Morning Post*, “In explaining the choice and meaning of the ? *gengo* (reign), Abe engaged in some dog-whistling to his conservative constituency, extolling Japan’s glorious cultural heritage, natural beauty and proud history.”

The transition took place over nearly three years. In 2016, Akihito, then 82, first hinted at his desire to abdicate. His decision was not simply due to old age. Every move and word the emperor makes is carefully weighed. Because Japan’s legal system does not allow the emperor to step down, a special, one-off law had to be passed in 2017. Akihito exercised caution, lest he be accused of demanding such a law and thereby interfering in politics.

However, the emperor is not a neutral arbiter standing above classes or the state. He is a key component of the capitalist state apparatus, maintaining its unity even as contending factions of the ruling class disagree on tactical issues. Whatever Akihito’s immediate desire, his intrusion into politics, both in requesting a new law be passed and over constitutional revision, objectively lays the precedent for an emperor taking on more of a political role in the future.

While more liberal elements of the political establishment look towards the emperor for support in their disputes with Abe, all factions agree on two points: First, Japan should, in one way or another, be able to send its military overseas to fight for its imperialist interests. Second, that the capitalist state must have the power to suppress the struggles of the working class for its social and democratic rights.

The disputes in ruling circles have centered on secondary issues such as whether or not women should be allowed to become emperor. Far-right organizations like Nippon Kaigi, which count Abe, most of his cabinet, and numerous lawmakers as members, demand adherence to “traditional” positions. These include eliminating equal rights for women and dragooning men into military service.

The so-called liberals and left in Japan have postured as “progressive” on the status of women and royalty, and opposed any substantive revision of Article 9—the so-called pacifist clause of the constitution—in a bid to contain growing anger in Japan over widening social inequality and the dangers of war. None of this,

however, has halted the growing gulf between rich and poor, nor the build-up of the Japanese armed forces and their dispatch to US-led wars.



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